

Reading the Structure of a Subculture

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San Francisco

Hal Fischer's first solo exhibit is currently at the Lawson de Celle Gallery. For some time Fischer has been exploring approaches to structural levels in photography. He states that his idea for the current show came from his readings on structuralism, specifically Jack Burnham's *The Structure of Art*. Burnham uses the term "signifiers" to connote a surface structure which stands for certain deep structural ideas. Taking homosexuality as the basic structure of his photographic series, Fischer uses the sign language of this subculture as signifiers.

Using images of men in a large (16x20 format) size, Fischer has written on each photograph the meaning of various surface aspects of the gay culture as he interprets them. The information given is factual, but Fischer adds final "one-liners" that change the impact of the information.

The show is divided into five groupings that Fischer defines as surface aspects of the gay culture — signals (handkerchiefs, earrings, keys), street fashion (gay men's adaptation of conventional attire into a gay look), archetypal media images (prototypes often used in gay magazines — natural, classical, western, leather, urbane) and two final groups, sadism and masochism, and fetishes.

The first group of pictures — the signals, signifiers for a male response — shows a man, or

parts of a man, with lines drawn from the signifier — a key chain in the example I will use — to the identifying label, "key chain" in this case. The photograph simply depicts the hips of two men with large clusters of key rings. Across the bottom of the photograph is printed: "Keys are an understood signifier for homosexual activity. A key chain worn on the right side of the body indicates that the wearer wishes to play a passive role during sexual encounter. Keys placed on the left side of the body signify that the user expects to assume a dominant position. Keys are also worn by janitors, laborers and other workers with



HAL FISCHER: STREET FASHION: UNIFORM, black and white photograph, 20"x 16".

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PHOTOGRAPHY

no sexual significance wished."

The final comment makes the first information seem as open to chance as the latter. However accurate most of the given information is for the gay community, seen and read in an almost advertisementlike presentation — a better than average Sears catalog of wares — the exhibition for the most part becomes an art form that transcends its subject matter. Fischer could have used almost any other specific subculture, large or small. Consider the motorcyclist culture. Bikers have their particular signals: necklaces of human teeth, chaps, caps made of Doberman pinscher hide, brands of bikes used by each club.

At this level, Fischer's show is strong and fresh. If he had stayed with the signifiers for a male response, the street fashion series and the archetypal media images, he would have even better presented, in a new form, a photographic series that, while specific to gays, was universal in its application to subcultures.

In the few pictures in which Fischer becomes involved with sadism and masochism, and other fetishes, he loses the inventive quality that up to this point was more a statement of his art form than of a culture. By identifying every homosexual with specific fetishes, the emphasis of the show shifts. I disliked the feeling that gay men were being summed up in sexual terms, and very specifically the strong suggestion that leather, bondage devices and such are the natural preferences of all homosexuals.

No man's identity is conveyed by his sexual preference alone. The show's real strength lies in the photographs that are confined to surface signifiers and that could be seen in any culture.

Earrings are surface signifiers, subject to different translations as Fischer notes, "The earring or stud is often adopted by non-homosexual men, thus making it the most subtle of the homosexual signifiers." The apparatus used in a bedroom, however, is not a surface signifier. When meeting a man on the street, one does not see his private sexual deviations. When Fischer goes beyond his truly surface signifiers for a male response, he weakens his show.

The concept of the show is fresh and lively. Inevitably, though, it will be dubbed a homosexual show — precisely what it is not. Fischer's work is one translation of the meaning of structuralism in art, and it should be able to be seen as the unfolding of that concept, using the gay culture only as a means to that end. □