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Hal Fischer, *A Salesman*, 1979/2017, ink-jet print on vinyl, 6' 10" × 14' 10" × 2".

A Salesman, 1979/2017, the central work that took up the entire back wall of the gallery in Hal Fischer's exhibition "Gay Semiotics," was originally installed as a billboard at the gateway to San Francisco's Castro district, famously the center of gay pride activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Commissioned as part of a billboard exhibition organized by the Eyes and Ears Foundation and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, it shows a naked man on a bed sporting a moustache. He is lying on one side, in white sheets, in a pose that recalls such iconic female nudes as Manet's *Olympia*, 1863. But in its original context, the billboard also played off a familiar advertisement for the men's clothing store Hastings that featured a sexy male model and was displayed all over San Francisco at the time, and the photograph was also inspired by the famous 1972 Burt Reynolds centerfold in *Cosmopolitan*. A visible tan line crosses the model's pelvis. His eyes are blocked out with a bold black censor bar. Above and below his naked body, two lines of black lettering read: h. fischer ©1979 /a salesman. ph: 767-2676. We don't know precisely what

the man is selling, but the overt eroticism of the image suggests that the object of the potential transaction might be his body. The artist explained to me that when the billboard was displayed, a small group of men recognized the model, who really was a salesman at a bookstore on Castro Street.

In addition to being the original site of this project, the Castro district was also one of the places where Fischer conducted his research on gay iconography. His essay for the resulting publication *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men* (1977), argued: “The gay culture’s new visibility has exposed a subculture developing its own myths, cultural heroes, stereotypes and sign language (semiotic).” Fischer’s investigation went beyond the street fashions of the Castro to encompass depictions of masculinity in American folk traditions, the arts, pop culture, and gay magazines. At Project Native Informant, the book’s photographic illustrations, which form the series “Gay Semiotics,” 1977, were on display: male archetypes and popular street looks, explained in concise descriptions in white lettering superimposed on the photographs.

The images decoding the “signifiers of accessibility,” such as keys or handkerchiefs, used by gay men in the 1970s to signal their sexual preferences are possibly the most famous part of this series. Each sign is depicted in a separate photograph and features a description of its meaning. As Fischer pointed out in an interview, this language, understood only by insiders, was a crucial way of communicating in a world where homosexuality was still prosecuted.

Also on view was a later work, *Boy-Friends*, 1979, displayed in a more intimate corner of the gallery, near the office. It consists of ten photographs of different men, each juxtaposed with a description of the photographer’s private encounter with him. Fischer writes about platonic and sexual fascinations, nights spent together, and more or less dramatic partings. It was noticeable that some of Fischer’s “boyfriends” also featured in “Gay Semiotics.” What transpires from this series is a sense of sexual freedom that marked the brief moment between the legalization in 1975 of homosexuality in California with the Consenting Adult Sex Bill and the pandemic of AIDS that erupted in the 1980s. Coincidentally, this show opened not long after the release of Australian pop singer Brendan Maclean’s controversial music video *House of Air*, directed by Brian Fairbairn and Karl Eccleston “with apologies to Hal Fischer.” This renewed interest in Fischer’s project is not only a nod to the wit and candor of the work itself, but may also reflect a certain nostalgia for those heady days past.

—*Sylvia Serafinowicz*