IS THE NAMES QUILT

I
T IS BEAUTIFUL, powerful, and inspirational. But is it art? The NAMES Project Quilt started in San Francisco with one cloth panel to commemorate one AIDS victim. In a little more than a year it has grown to over 5000 panels from every region in the country. For each person who has taken up needle and thread, paint, and mixed media to create a piece of the Quilt, there are many more who have walked among its connected grids, often in tears. No one with this experience would deny its force and magic as a national symbol of the AIDS tragedy. But from where does this power derive? Why has the NAMES Project Quilt captured our hearts and minds like no other project to come out of the gay community? One answer lies in the Quilt’s power as art: art that lives and grows outside established art channels.

The NAMES Project organizers promote the Quilt as the “largest community arts project in the nation.” They are aided by a national media that is surprisingly willing to report on events surrounding its display.

The art world, however—that ivory tower that is reported to us via a handful of glossy national art magazines—has overlooked the Quilt. The art critics who write in these magazines are not rushing to interpret the Quilt’s significance in the history of art.

Art is important, most people agree, but the reasons why are sometimes elusive. There is nothing elusive, though, about the NAMES Project Quilt; it is extremely concrete as visual communication. This accessibility is exactly what throws the Quilt’s status as “real art” into question. Unlike much of what we find in galleries and museums, the Quilt has a connection to our daily lives that seems unrelated to the remote world of “high art,” or “fine art”—art that is promoted by critics, museum curators, and art historians. To understand the source of discrepancies about how our culture defines art, it helps to look at some of the assumptions made about art and who makes them. Art, in Western culture, is first and foremost made by the artist—that individual genius whose work and life we come to recognize through a network of museums, media, dealers, and historians. Despite the fact that a myriad of people make art, a very select few are promoted in a way that grabs our attention. This process works like any good marketing strategy: we are told which art is hot, and why, by those who seem to know best. As a result, our taste is inevitably influenced by what appears to be an objective window on aesthetics. It is very hard to regard art found outside these institutional channels as serious. We don’t go to the local craft fair to find serious art. It is not the needlepoint your grandmother did, nor the sketches you do in your spare time. And it’s not a project like the NAMES Quilt that thrives entirely outside the art world.

“Real art” is a luxury item for sale in an elite marketplace that takes it away from the artist’s hands, and any community connection we might relate to.

Critics argue a bit about art, trying to maintain the illusion of democratic options, but they

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essentially define "good art" around a fairly narrow set of assumptions. It is virtually impossible to understand most modern mainstream art without the translation of these intermediaries. They generally promote obscurity as a desirable feature, and cast accessibility in an untrustworthy light; art we can too easily understand is more like entertainment. And, if you want to include a social message, make it vague at best.

Given this milieu, it is no wonder that potential art fans often feel suspicious of famous artists, seeing them as con-artists instead who try to fool us into thinking their enigmatic puzzles are great art. In contrast, the Quilt seems trustworthy partly because we are the artists. Although not for sale on the art market, it generates important funding for local AIDS services networks. It is not the offspring of a famous artist, yet its scale is monumental and attention grabbing. And it isn't found where most important art is found; the "museums" where we view the Quilt are convention centers, pavilions, gymnasiums, and the Capitol Mall—hardly the retreats of high art. Yet one thing is clear: the Quilt has succeeded in creating a visual metaphor for the tragedy of AIDS that transcends individual grieving to communicate beauty and hope. What more could be expected of a great work of art?

If the establishment art world places the NAMES Quilt outside the holy realm of high art, other art traditions do not. In the early seventies, feminist artists working within the art world successfully revived an interest in the folk art of quilting and sewing bees—"low art" historically associated with women. New materials explored during this period gained acceptance as legitimate fine art ingredients: cloth, clay, and rope, for example. Many artists, both male and female, started to inject more personal and autobiographical content into their work. In general, the division between high and low art melted a little.

Several large-scale projects were also organized that introduced the idea of bringing together many people's labor into one artistic vision. Judy Chicago attracted hundreds of craftpeople to her "Dinner Party" project. The end result was a huge and complex installation illustrating the lives of specific women throughout history with china place settings around a huge table. In a very different project, the artist Christo engaged the help of hundreds of people to set up a "Running Fence" of fabric that wound for miles through northern California countryside, focusing attention on the land and its natural contours. In both cases, people skeptical about the initial vision were drawn in and became enthusiastic through participation.

Chicago and Christo are the rare mainstream artists whose work and vision have crossed out of the exclusive art world to be accessible. The Vietnam War Memorial, designed by an architectural student named Maya Ying Lin, set a precedent for the simple naming of victims of a tragic war instead of merely...
immortalizing the warmer leaders.

Tribal art from all ages has influenced Western artists interested in introducing ritual to their work. The holistic integration of art with the spiritual and survival needs of a community, characteristic of tribal art, appeals to many of us brought up on the doctrine of “art for art sake.” Many artists have also been influenced by ancient art like the prehistoric Stonehenge. Monuments like this reveal a very different set of assumptions about art and the artist. No one knows exactly who created them—theyir massive scale obviously required the labor and creativity of many people, over many life spans. It seems as though the individual artistic ego was not important here, and that art had a function in society beyond visual aesthetics.

The contemporary art that is perhaps most similar to the NAMES Project Quilt are the *arpilleras* created by anonymous Chilean women resisting the fascist junta ruling their country. Pieced together from scavenged factory remnants, these patchwork pictures use decorative imagery to protest specific government policies or to commemorate “disappeared” political prisoners, often relatives of the artists. They are smuggled out of the country to communicate the conditions in Chile to the rest of the world. The *arpilleras* are also the only surviving indigenous Chilean visual art, now that murals have been destroyed and artists of all kinds murdered and imprisoned.

What the NAMES Project Quilt has in common with feminist, environmental, ancient, tribal, and Chilean art is a tradition of collaboration, a mixing of media, and an emphasis on process that makes the reason for the art just as important as the finished product. In art like this, the individual artist’s identity is less important than the purpose of the art in the life of a community or people. This purpose might be the need to remember a part of history in a visual way, a means of marking time, or a tribute to the dead created not by a government, but by those who mourn. The NAMES Project Quilt started as one panel, one person’s need to commemorate a dead friend. It soon expanded to a collaborative vision with a plan for how the Quilt could grow: panels approximately the size of a human body or a casket; panels to remember people who are most often cremated and leave no grave plot to visit; panels sewn together into grids—individual lost lives stitched together, woven into an enormous picture of the effect of AIDS.

This vision is dependent on the contributions of a growing number of individual artists who work alone or with others to stitch and paint a memory of someone they loved. They do this in the best tradition of quilting, using pieces from the person’s life, articles of clothing, teddy bears, photographs, messages to the dead from the living who mourn them. People who have never before felt confident about making art testify about the healing nature of this participation in a larger artwork—one that also allows them to “come out” around AIDS. Instead of mourning alone, they link their grief to others both visually and organizationally. Finally, in keeping with the unifying principle of the whole Quilt, they stitch or paint the person’s name who died, committing that name to an historical document that physically shows real people, not mere statistics.

Art needs an audience. The NAMES Project Quilt has an unusually large one: hundreds of thousands of us across the nation who have walked amidst the panels, stood in the sea of colorful memories, cried, found panels of people we’ve known, hugged strangers—in general been awed, moved, and inspired by the power of the total vision. We, the audience, have received much of the healing communicated by the artists through the ritual reading of names and physical beauty of the quilt. It is a rare work of art that can transcend its material components to communicate this kind of collective power. A political demonstration could not have done the same. Neither

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Tangible evidence of individuals who lie outside of society’s favored status gets woven into a domestic metaphor.
THE TOUR: The NAMES Project Quilt is touring cities throughout the US through the summer. In October it will return to Washington, DC for the first anniversary of its original unfolding at the 1987 National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights. This year the Quilt is expected to reach 10,000 to 15,000 panels, more than twice the size of its original display. The remaining tour dates are:

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We should be proud of the Quilt, but we should also stand back and reflect on its process as often as necessary. The NAMES Project is growing at an overwhelming pace, one that demands a look at how centralized the vision can remain. The power of the Quilt is fully communicated when people walk among the squares, physically becoming part of the vast grid, feeling tiny in scale compared to the whole. Its power also lies in its capacity to educate about AIDS in the universal language of quilting. I am concerned that continuing centralization will make the Quilt unwieldy, both in organization and in size. Will continuous expansion make it impossible to display in one location? Will people have to see it only in pictures, or only in its home resting place of San Francisco?

What about communities deeply affected by AIDS but not yet familiar with the NAMES Project Quilt? In New York City, for instance, women of color and their children form a growing percentage of victims, yet I wonder how many panels reflect this. A continued centralization of the Quilt could stand in the way of the outreach that makes the Quilt’s vision so powerful. One possible solution would be regional quilts that are more accessible to people. Smaller cities have already created their own quilts and displayed them locally before sending them to join the larger work. This link to something larger is an important part of the Quilt process, and it could easily continue with local areas concentrating on new outreach before joining together regionally. Stores in areas where there are many AIDS deaths could be organized to hang quilt grids in their windows. People could get involved who would never travel to Phoenix, or Baltimore, or other places on the tour, people who would never hear about the Quilt through existing channels.

It must be hard to think about giving up control of a project that has been so successful so quickly—especially in an age of media co-optation of art and social movements. But one of the most important roles the Quilt has played is as a tool for organization: individuals networking to make panels, groups networking to form local quilt tour organizations. A central vision has been important and may be for some time to come. But AIDS is unfortunately with us for longer than that, and the vision could become stronger by branching out. The ritual unfolding of the panels and reading of names might change from region to region. New cultural influences would add new dimensions. The Northeast’s Quilt might take on a very different character from the Southwest. These differences would be exciting and would expand the Quilt’s dimensions as art. It would reach more people. And the inevitable difficulties of large organization would be strengthened by more autonomy at the local level. People could still feel part of a larger-than-life whole, yet not be subsumed by an abstraction out of reach. If four football fields of panels are overwhelming, is ten necessarily better?

These are questions and reactions I have amidst my own emotions about the power of the Quilt and its significance as art in an age when the institutions of art can be so devoid of spirit. Art and artists survive regardless of art market trends, and most art will never be seen in a museum or gallery. It is the art made by your neighbor or your lover, the art that someone is compelled to make for reasons other than money. I hope the Quilt will never be a commodity on the art market, never owned by an individual or corporation, never laid to rest in one museum. The NAMES Project Quilt is a living, breathing, changing work of art, one that was inspired by grief and grew to communicate hope. Let it continue to live in good health.

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Review Essay:
Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies

Richard Dyer

Vito Russo’s The Celluloid Closet is the first book to offer a history of how gays have been portrayed in the cinema. There have been series of articles in gay magazines presenting chronologies of gay characters in films, and two books—Parker Tyler’s characteristically elusive, suggestive critical ruminations in Screening the Sexes (1972) and the British Film Institute publication Gays and Film (Dyer 1977), which raised some of the theoretical problems involved in thinking about homosexuality and film. The Celluloid Closet is the first survey/history book on the subject. It is clearly, fluently written, marvelously illustrated, and very informative; a more or less essential book for anyone concerned with the way that our century has constructed and reflected the notions of sexuality and homosexuality and the roles of the heterosexual and the homosexual.

Just because it is such an important book, it deserves more than the rather too easy praise it has generally received. What follows is in two sections: one, a relatively conventional “review,” concerned with what the book is about and how it works as a book; the other, an attempt to draw out some of its implicit issues. In the rush to be comprehensive, Russo has never quite pulled out and fully explored many of the controlling ideas of the book. This is a pity—it makes the book look less intelligent and less political than it is. At the same time, many of these ideas seem to be taught at a transition point in current developments in theories of sexuality, and of gayness in particular, so that many unresolved problems remain.

The Celluloid Closet shares the problems of some other pioneering works dealing with the representation of social groups, such as those by Molly Haskell (1974) and Marjorie Rosen (1973) on women; Donald Bogle (1973), Thomas Cripps (1977), and Jim Pines (1975) on blacks, and Ralph and Natasha Friar on Native Americans (1972). It is not easy to write such a book, and one of the major difficulties is organization. Russo is trying to do three things at once, each important and each necessary. First, he is providing a survey of what have been the main ways in which gays have been represented in films, a catalog of types and images. Second, this basically synchronic enterprise is crossed with the diachronic aim of providing a history of gay filmic representation, relating the development of the images to changes in both the situation of gay people and the institutions of the cinema. Third, Russo offers a critical perspective on the films, at once aesthetic and political. Partly because of pressures of space and the need to produce something easy to read, he has not entirely satisfactorily worked out a way of combining these three different elements.

To put it simply, I often found it quite hard to work out where the book was going (which is not to deny that it is very easy and pleasant to go along with the book’s effortless readability). Thus the first section of the book, “Who’s a Sissy?,” focuses on the homosexual man represented as effeminate. Russo has uncovered a mass of unfamiliar material and he presents it well. But then the chapter rather falls apart as he tries to examine both the persistence of the sissy in later periods and what else was going on in the earlier period, and somehow that brings us round by the end of the chapter to a survey of gays in horror films. In between we have a rather thinly informed excursion to German films of the seventies and eighties. None of this deals with the historical specificity of the films except in the vaguest way.

The same sorts of problems plague the other chapters. Each chapter covers a period, Chapter 2 deals with the Hays Code—dominated Hollywood production; Chapter 3 with the gradual emergence of “adult” “sexual” themes in the fifties and sixties; and the last chapter with the relationship between cinema and movements for sexual liberation. Admiringly, Russo does not want to remain within the somewhat suspect straitjacket of periods, his method of extending outward from a given period to show how a character type produced in one historical moment has a life beyond that particular moment is potentially a very useful one. The problem is that his procedures are not always clear, and the book reads muddled.

Then there are questions of interpretation and evaluation. The book slips between saying what a film means, what its value is from a sexual political standpoint, and whether it says it well. In each case, Russo does not have space to make a full argument and does not always make a very clear one. When one knows something about the films in question, one finds his remarks sometimes (not often) factually inaccurate, or questionable interpretations, or controversial judgments—and that then begins to make one wonder about the accounts of films with which one is not familiar. European cinema is given a bit too easy a ride; there is a lingering sense of the old critical equations of Hollywood is fun but trash and European cinema is Art. Russo does, moreover, seem to have a category of film “quality” separable from ideological meaning, and while aesthetic questions cannot be collapsed into ideological ones, equally notions of “quality” are highly problematic and a well-made film does not make up for reactionary politics. Finally, in terms of coverage the book is really about Hollywood and mostly about male gay representation. There are
surprising omissions, and the filmography in particular is oddly selective, without an explanation of the principles of selection. None of this alters the fact that Russo has produced a book of major importance, mapping out the territory of gay representation and uncovering much forgotten material and many hitherto unsuspected titles. The question is what to do with this information, what sense to make of the territory.

One of the difficulties in thinking about anything to do with homosexuality, and sexuality in general, is determining whether the object of one’s thought is what society has done with homosexuality at a given point in time or how homosexuality has been socially constructed at a given point. The distinction is crucial, but hard in practice to keep in focus. In the case of this book, we are talking about something we assume exists before society gets hold of it, whereas in the latter we assume that homosexuality is itself socially produced. It is a question of degree. Where there are essentialist positions that see (homo-)sexuality as a given human quality that is the same the world over and throughout human history, most would agree that how any society thinks and feels about (homo-)sexuality, and so lives (homo-)sexuality, is socially constructed. Equally, while many current theories of sexuality emphasize it as a social construction, the appearance of meaning that it is a category of discourse entirely invented and produced over the past two or three centuries, the theorists must posit some kind of raw material, of human physical activity, out of which ideas of sexuality, homosexuality, gayness, friendship, and so on, are fashioned. We need to develop a way of thinking which recognizes the human body and its potentials as theoretically separable and relatively autonomous from the social/cultural/human and yet also encompasses the understanding that we can have very little knowledge or experience of that body except through socially, culturally, and humanly specific ways of conceptualizing and feeling it. At present the difficulties of thinking through and holding together in one’s mind this relationship between the biologically given (always remembering that “biology” is itself a particular way of making sense of the body) and the ineluctable practices of social construction tend to be too great, and it is hard not to put too great an emphasis on one or another dimension, falling back into essentialist or pure social constructionist conceptualizations. Where one puts the emphasis is crucial, however, and politically so. (For further consideration of these issues see Barrett 1980, Chaps. 2, 3, and Plummer 1981, especially the articles by McIntosh and Weeks.)

Both conceptualizations may issue in forms of radical politics, and I would like to characterize the difference in the gay context as between “gay liberationist” and some other kind of gay politics that has not yet acquired a name but that I would want to claim is a social materialist politics (see discussion in Watney 1980, 64–76). “Gay liberationist” politics was based on a conviction that gayness has certain inherent qualities that straight/bourgeois/patriarchal society had buried; they needed releasing; and the very act of releasing them was an act of revolution against the society that had repressed them. The other kind of politics starts from the assumption that homosexuality is a social category forming part of a general system of regulating sexuality, whose broad function (and the trouble with this approach is that the function is so broad) is to keep people in their (social) place by assigning them a sexual place—that is, by assigning them a social place (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, frigid woman, rapist, masturbator) through the regulation of what appears to be the most intimate and urgent arena of human experience, sexuality (see Foucault 1976). A politics that starts at this point is both more negative and more positive than a gay liberationist one. It is more negative partly because it does not have one vivid, inspiring focus (“gay is good”) and because it deals with and on behalf of a category which it itself defines as socially constructed (and thus arbitrary and limiting, and probably to be moved beyond). But it is more positive because it insists on a recognition of social construction, on the fact that most everything in human affairs has been constructed and therefore that most anything can be: it returns to politics the utopian project of what we want to construct rather than what we want to release. (It also, but this is a further argument, frees us from the tyranny of sex, whereas gay liberationism was in danger of reinforcing that tyranny.) It will be clear where my own convictions lie, but this does not mean that the gay liberation movement was not, and is not, enormously progressive; nor does it mean that gay people have to abandon organizing around a gay identity. Quite apart from the continued need to defend our gay practices from oppression, we can work only within the social categories that exist; we cannot just “become” something other than “gay.” But we can be working to establish a society in which the possibilities of the body are radically, differently understood and cherished.

Vito Russo’s book seems to be caught between the two perspectives outlined above. This can be seen in his treatment of three key areas—the relationship between sexuality and gender, the nature of male-male friendship, and the question of the gay sensibility. Russo rightly stresses the role of the sissy image in relation to gay male characters. He points out that the tomboy image is far less a focus of derision and implied homosexuality, since it expresses an aspiration toward things manly and is therefore understandable, whereas the sissy is reaching for womanly attributes. Implicit in this analysis is both the idea that womanliness is regarded as weak or despicable (and there-
fore demeaning for a "real" man) and the idea that the male role is particularly narrow and rigidly defined, so that its preservation (and male power along with it) is peculiarly precarious, because it is so unattractive, allowing even less leeway than the female role. (The point here is not that the female role is not also narrow, but rather that it is understood to be properly narrow, and therefore something that a girl might try to get away from even if she should learn restraint eventually—the structure of numerous films centered on spunky heroines, but the narrowness of the male role is not acknowledged, and hence anything which draws attention to it—like sissiness—must at the same time be ridiculed out of court.) Russo has, then, a complex, flexible, and original model of the interplay between gender and sexuality, between how to behave like a man and the imputed sexuality of people who behave like men, and he applies this model sensitively and productively to the film.

The model of a sexuality-gender nexus gives homosexuality a kind of "in-between" status, homosexuality as a refusal of, and therefore a threat to, traditional gender roles. But is this the case? What clearly is the case is that, at the level of public discourses on sexuality, homosexuality has been understood as in-between, and this is as true of much progressive gay thought (e.g., Edward Carpenter, Magnus Hirschfeld, Charlotte Wolff) as of antigay thought. At this level Russo is describing an indisputable aspect of the social construction of homosexuality. Many of the illustrations in his book clearly show that a play on the significance of masculinity and femininity is what allows a figure to be read as gay. The assumption of a gender in-betweenism that is then taken to indicate a specific sexuality was equally made quite explicit in a sequence of photographs produced by the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in 1903 in Germany, illustrating the heterosexual male, the heterosexual female, and the nonmale, nonfemale homosexual in-between (see Lautens and Thorst 1974 and Steakley 1975).

What is not clear—in current sexual theory no less than in Russo’s book—is whether this in-betweenism, even if no longer biologically conceptualized, is true in the sense of homosexuality’s being, inherently, most, a refusal of gender roles. While at the macrolevel of mass-circulation discourses the construction of homosexuality is offered on the model of gender in-betweenism, the actual histories of lesbians and gay men seem as often to involve constructing their sexuality out of, and within, the models of traditional masculine/feminine psychology that are offered them.

Why a model of homosexual biography—gay men and lesbians as the most rather than the least masculine and feminine practitioners of sexuality, respectively—has not got into the mass media and the dominant discourse on homosexuality is not a question I know the answer to. But pointing to it does mean that we have to be a bit more careful about our assessment of the sissy.

Russo seems to want to have it both ways with the sissy. He wants to point out its ideological role of shoring up heterosexual gender roles; but he also wants to say it carries within it the seeds of revolution because it does not fit those gender roles. In charting the former, the operations of gender ideology, he is on firm ground, but on the latter he is near to going along with the model of in-betweenism.

If they see themselves as profristext, gay men can choose to use the sissy as some sort of model of how not to be "masculine"—this is our historical legacy, as it were, which may help in finding styles of fighting gender roles. But gender roles are not so invariably and rigidly decisive in the construction of homosexuality in the way in-betweenism suggests. Gay struggle against gender roles relates only to homosexuality itself insofar as, at the level of public representation, the two have been brought together, and this misses many other ways in which homosexuality is constructed (and oppressed) through the categories of male and female sexuality.

A perennial theme in gay film criticism has been the question of male-male friendships on screen, the buddy image. Are such images implicitly gay or a denial of gayness? Should we see Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid as "really" a gay relationship or as a relationship in which gender has been deliberately suppressed? Or is it not gay at all in any sense?

One set of problems in relation to this has to do with procedures of textual criticism. Gay criticism has to deal with the fact that it is not always easy to know with any certainty whether a character is to be read as gay, because gayness is not something that is visible; it does not "show" as gender or race does. (This is in any case more complex than it appears—gender and race are less hard-and-fast as categories than we are generally led to suppose. Most representation of people of different genders or races involves a mass of signifiers in excess of the very limited and largely ambiguous signifiers of difference given by nature, but with gays, as with class, there are no given signifiers of difference whatsoever. See Perkins 1979.) Russo is very careful in his treatment of this problem. He does not get involved in the kind of reading-in of gayness that many critics go in for. This is partly because he argues from the film texts, clearly showing what the evidence is for reading a given character or sequence as gay/homosexual.

Eyebrows may be raised at his inclusion of Laurel and Hardy as a gay couple in several of their films, but the argument is supported by evidence from the films themselves. In addition, Russo is arguing from a definition of gayness as a recognizable cultural
form—the signs of gayness are those produced to define gayness, whether by dominant or gay subcultural practices, and it is from these that he is producing his readings. In this way he is very different from those critics, largely psychoanalytic by persuasion and heterosexual by implicit self-definition, who do see homosexuality represented where there are no such signs of it. What this implies is that gayness as subcultural sexual practice and homosexuality as a description of a given human relation are not co-termi- nous—not all people who have same-sex sexual contact are, or identify themselves as, gay. (Let me leave for now the ambiguity over whether one can be gay without identifying oneself as gay, a problem which is yet another road back to the essentialist/social constructionist divide.)

These problems of textual interpretation themselves derive from a second set of problems that are focused on the question of male-male friendships. Critics, gay and otherwise, often make the assumption that intense male-male friendship, in life as in movies, is always and necessarily sexual. This is a thorny question, but it would seem that it is at least dangerous to assume a priori that same-sex friendship is by definition sexual. This is the rub of the problem that Michel Foucault’s influential work raises in relation to psychoanalysis, which has been the main route through which the idea of the sexuality of human relations hitherto not considered sexual has come to us. Freud’s recognition of the crucial role of intense physical relations in childhood (in the child itself, between the child and others) seems like a real gain, a real departure from attempts to deny the body; but securing it, as Freudianism has, so inexorably to notions of sexuality seems part of a tyranny whereby sexuality is the explain-all of life.

Lillian Faderman’s Surpassing the Love of Men (1981) argues very clearly the difficulty of necessarily assuming that we must call intense female-female relationships in earlier periods, or even our own, lesbian (see also Clark 1982 for a recent discussion of the use of the term lesbian in the women’s movement). It would be wrong to make a simple transfer of this female experience to the male one, partly because awareness of sexuality seems more constructed into male experience generally in the periods Faderman covers. Equally, however, we need to resist the temptation to put it bluntly, of seeing everything in terms of sex. That the intensity of friendship has a bodily di- mension is one thing that we need to recognize, but the body cannot be reduced to “sexuality,” which is a very specific concept of genital determination. Bringing these textual and conceptual sets of problems together, we might argue in analyzing a buddy film that it operates with a concept of male-male friendship as sexual through its deployment of signif- fers that indicate this. But it would be a different ar-
Russo’s desire to hang on to a distinctive gay difference underpins many of his judgments. As a protest against blandness, I feel with him—the gay sensibility is much more fun, much more alive than the straight one. As a basis of action on the basis of a sense of shared feeling, this is good politics. But we should recognize that we have produced this sensibility in history and that we choose to promote it for what is good about it (recognizing, too, that many things about it are sexist, snobbish, and self-oppressive). It seems like freedom to assert the right to express a pregiven gay sensibility, but it is another and perhaps greater kind of freedom to assert the choice of constructing a kind of sensibility and determining the form it takes.

The importance of Vito Russo’s book is that it both allows one to see clearly many of these difficult issues and gives one much-needed information and evidence with which to think them through. The problems of the book are not problems unique to Russo; on the contrary, they are the central problems of sexual political debate. In trying to outline some of them, I wish to emphasize the problems I share with him rather than suggest an intellectual distance from him.

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