

Lust and loss

Cruising the landscape of gay world-making

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Many dedicated faggots have made the comparison between cocksucking and prayer, especially when knees are planted in the ground, eyes closed because of something too powerful to look at. But **Christopher Russell's** *Landscape*, a book of black-and-white photos of men cruising San Francisco's Buena Vista Park, at first appears to take this assertion one step further — with the trees towering above and light cascading onto shirts, hands, exposed asses, it's almost as if these men have stumbled into heaven. If so, they appear unaware — in one early photo, someone crouches forlorn in the shadows between trees; above him beckon three perfectly crafted beams of light. There's an eeriness to many of these photos, as the sumptuousness of the foliage and the brashness of the sunlight render the sex acts comparably mundane: white T-shirts pulled up and white briefs pulled down like on a porn set; the spooky silhouette of a face pressed against a waiting crotch; baseball caps and dark sunglasses holding distance.

It's when the images become fractured that they reveal depth of feeling — faces merging with leaves and light, heads blending into trees awaiting sky, the motion of hands and arms and legs conjuring a certain type of flight. When the camera pulls back, it's the sky that's shimmering, a brightness between branches and leaves with just a tiny figure below. We see a face turned, or the back of a head — yet the action is not where the figure is gazing but above and around, leaves swaying in the breeze and branches shaking underneath the glow of the setting sun. It's here that we can truly appreciate the complex landscape of lust and loss, adventure and longing.

In one photo, the silhouette of someone's coat blends so neatly with that of a tree that it resembles a sagging branch, and it brings to mind an image reproduced in the French writer Tony Duvert's *Good Sex Illustrated*, a scathing 1974 critique of a five-volume "liberal" sex manual published the previous year in France. The photo, taken from the handbook in question, shows a park somewhat more groomed and far less picturesque than Buena Vista, but we see light reflecting off trees and a man in an overcoat standing to the side of a path, his back to us. Unlike in Russell's photos, however, it's the man who seems monumental and the trees a backdrop as a child gazes up from several feet away, apparently immobilized by what he sees. The image, from the volume aimed at 10- to 13-year-olds, is meant to illustrate the dangers of pedophiles who apparently lurk in parks. But Duvert indicts the motives of parents who warn their children about such violence, declaring, "What they are really trying to do isn't to protect the child but their own exclusive right to do whatever they want with him."

In *Good Sex Illustrated*, published in English for the first time this month, by Semiotext(e), Duvert skewers the emerging field of sex education as nothing but "science taking charge of the old moral order." With a savage glee, he dissects the volumes of the manual allegedly geared toward helping young adults discover their sexual selves but instead intent on "libidinal dismembering" and centered on a "pro-birth obsession." Duvert is most hilarious when he compares what the handbook calls a "feeling of total fulfillment" from pregnancy to that of a teenager getting fucked in the ass: "Jean scrubbed his ass pensively: is this what they call a feeling of total fulfillment?" In a related footnote he brilliantly comments, "It goes without saying that as soon as the pleasure of having a cock inside your body stops being depreciated, the honor of having a fetus there won't be over-emphasized." But if this is one of Duvert's most skillful reversals, it also illuminates a gap in his analysis.

After all, he's comparing a woman's alleged feelings during pregnancy to a man's response to getting fucked (we hear nothing about a woman's sexual pleasure). While Duvert incorporates a nuanced gender critique into many of his readings, he prioritizes male sexuality throughout the book, which ends up thwarting him in his overall mission of subverting the social order by encouraging the sexual freedom of all children.

David Halperin's *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* has a similar aim of moving conversations about sexuality (and sexual safety) away from standards of "healthy functioning" and "rational" or "irrational" behavior. Halperin seeks to champion queer cultural traditions over the judgments of psychology and the false dichotomy between risk and safety. (In a homophobic culture, what gay sexual behavior, after all, isn't risky?) In searching for a more comprehensive approach to gay male sexual splendor, Halperin revisits a vulnerable and challenging 1995 essay by Michael Warner in the *Village Voice*, "Unsafe: Why Gay Men Are Having Risky Sex," in which Warner at one point states that "abjection continues to be our dirty secret." If Warner talks about abjection as a sense of "dirtiness" due to societal condemnation, Halperin describes it as "an experiment with the limits of both destruction and survival, social isolation and social solidarity, domination and transcendence." In other words, "the more people despise you, the less you owe them, and the freer and more powerful you are."

Halperin proposes, "Instead of worrying about the appeal of abjection to gay men, ... what we really should be doing is trying to think concretely about ... how to make it work for us."

It's a provocative idea, but unfortunately Halperin here departs from his methodical (and meticulously footnoted) analysis of safer sex strategies to endlessly circle around Warner's essay and certain passages from the writing of Jean Genet, resulting in a repetitive rhetorical jumble. To be sure, Halperin provides a few illuminating examples (including the writing of porn star Scott O'Hara and the brilliant and short-lived zine *Diseased Pariah News*), but *What Do Gay Men Want?* could certainly have benefited from an analysis of the wealth of queer world-making in the era of AIDS that has centered on the possibilities (and perils) of an embrace of outsider status — the work of David Wojnarowicz, Samuel Delany, Derek Jarman, Gregg Bordowitz, Justin Chin, or Essex Hemphill, to name a few among innumerable possibilities. Or, perhaps, an analysis of Christopher Russell's photos, where the messiness of desire becomes landscape.

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LANDSCAPE

By Christopher Russell

Kolapsomal Press

70 pages, \$49.95

GOOD SEX ILLUSTRATED

By Tony Duvert; translated by Bruce Benderson

Semiotext(e)

184 pages, \$14.95 paper

WHAT DO GAY MEN WANT? AN ESSAY ON SEX, RISK, AND SUBJECTIVITY

By David M. Halperin

University of Michigan Press

176 pages, \$22.95

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