Only Eye Candy? Original Plumbing Magazine’s Remodeling of the (Trans) Male Pin-Up

Citation for published version (APA):

Document status and date:
Published: 02/10/2021

DOI:
10.1080/00043249.2021.1947704

Document Version:
Publisher’s PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:
Taverne

Please check the document version of this publication:

• A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher’s website.
• The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
• The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

Link to publication

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

If the publication is distributed under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the “Taverne” license above, please follow below link for the End User Agreement:
www.umlib.nl/taverne-license

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at:
repository@maastrichtuniversity.nl
providing details and we will investigate your claim.

Download date: 15 Sep. 2023
Only Eye Candy? *Original Plumbing* Magazine’s Remodeling of the (Trans) Male Pin-Up

Eliza Steinbock


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2021.1947704

Published online: 27 Dec 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 56

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The visual genre of the pin-up picture formally seduces the eye. The pose is coy, knowing, humorous, and enticing: it is made to welcome the eye and alleviate shame. Leaning on the visual grammar of pornography, the pin-up covers up just enough to keep the image from the realm of obscenity. It is material that you might share with others, like trading cards, though you might also want to keep it hidden. The participation of transmasculine models and photographers in the visual economy of pin-ups is particularly evident across the ten years and twenty issues of *Original Plumbing* (*OP*), helmed by coeditors Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos.¹

I propose that as “eye candy” that serves up a visual treat and seems intellectually undemanding, these trans male pin-ups have sweet-talked their way into a hostile phallic economy. In doing so, the notable invisibility of the eroticism of trans men, FTMs, nonbinary masculine folks, genderqueers, and more has been reversed.² The pin-up, with its cheesy yet celebrity-chic conventions, I argue, has the power to upend what I summarize as the “phallic economy of the gaze,” which places value on the subject’s active/masculinized look rather than being passively gazed upon and feminized. Trans male models have much to teach visual culture scholars about arriving on the scene of visuality in ways that circumvent this binary. With an array of references to other image cultures, *OP* remodeled conventions of masculine posturing.

The visual culture of pin-ups is associated with color drawings and photographs presenting buxom women in tight-fitting clothing that circulated during the 1940s and 1950s, especially among US soldiers fighting abroad in the arenas of World War II and the Korean War. However, the notion of a “cheesecake shot” had already come about circa 1915 as a term for “publicly acceptable, mass-produced images of semi-nude women” that helped to redefine certain images, formerly categorized as obscene, as clean, healthy, and appealing to so-called normal (i.e., heterosexual) men and women.³ The visual grammar of *OP*, with its often cheeky, knowing forms of seminudity, certainly connoted healthy good fun; the magazine’s sexy, fun aesthetic appeared against the backdrop of trans people—women in particular—largely being represented elsewhere as hypersexualized if not pornographic, and therefore demarcated as obscene. As Maria Elena Buszek has shown in her study of 150 years of sexualized images of women, women consumers and models also participated in classifying certain images as respectable and even activist.⁴ This insight might be extended to the models and readers of *OP*.

Pin-up images of men dubbed “beefcakes” follow similar conventions for posing, costume, and consumption.⁵ As these food-based allusions make clear, pin-ups express the desire for ogling, fulfilling scopophilic pleasures through gorging the eyes.⁶ Plainly, women of this era were hungry, just as they are now, for images of men offered as sexual spectacle. The diverse readership of *OP* was no different. Pin-ups were the cheaper, perhaps sillier cousin of movie star publicity pics: both genres facilitated gazing upon the faces of the idealized. By including the portraits of trans male scenesters and celebrities, *OP*’s pictorials

---

¹ Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos, eds., “*Original Plumbing*: The Best of Ten Years of Trans Male Culture” (New York: Feminist Press, 2019).
³ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 10; see also ibid., 27n5.
mirrored these aspirational practices, which made its diversity in depicted ethnicity, class, and age that much more impactful. OP’s regular solicitation of the queer eye also harked back to salacious sport rags like Physique, which depicted male bodies and circulated among men.

Investigating images of men offered as sexual spectacle (presumably to women), Richard Dyer’s article “Don’t Look Now” argues that there is a gendered instability in the model becoming feminized and a sexual instability in the possibility that another man might be looking. The potential passivity of being looked at is counteracted by the male model flexing muscles, depicted as being in physical motion, the lack of a smile, and preoccupation with other matters. In considering the portraits of trans men in OP, it is striking that on the whole these models largely return the viewer’s look, as if inviting us to step into the position of admirer. The conventions of an active, muscular guy are also followed in OP’s photographic history, but the models are often shot in softened light and colors that redirect our reading toward a camp rendition of consciously embodied, straight male energy toward the end of eliciting queer visual pleasure.

An example of “muscularity as the sign of power” (not the flaccid penis) is represented by the career of the tattooed white American Buck Angel, who in the commercial porn world has been most successful with gay cis-male audiences. His publicity shots follow the conventions for “Muscle Mary” hard bodies: tightened, flexed arms and stomach, hands at the ready, staring into the lens. Prior to OP’s launch in 2009, Buck Angel’s online popularity in the 2000s meant his pin-up mug, coded for transmasculine erotics, was one of the few images available. It is striking that the Black and trans men of color who performed in Angel’s line of pornographic films did not meet with the same popularity as he enjoyed. OP more closely resembles the full range of transmasculine folks, with nine cover pictures among the twenty total depicting transmasculine men of color. These covers reveal roughly equal numbers of nude white and nonwhite models, and sensuality and sex appeal are not ascribed exclusively to skin color.

Dyer points out that within male pin-ups, activity is operationalized differently in relation to the model’s ascribed ethnicity. Whereas whiteness follows the split in Western society “between leisure and work activity,” when it comes to Black men, “even though they are in fact American or European, [they] are given a physicality that is inextricably linked to notions of the ‘jungle,’ and hence ‘savagery.’” Nonetheless, the theme of sporting activity seems to erase class lines for all racialized subjects. The only sport-related issue of OP was number 14, “Board Stiff,” which celebrated “skateboarders, snowboarders, long boarders, surf boarders. . . . You get it. Gnarly,” as stated on the OP website. Though the cover went to a white skateboarder with striking blue eyes and piercings, inside the issue the pictorials and interviews included a robustly diverse set of profiles that spoke to the ethos of counterculture board-related sports. It seems to me that the pin-up might be an opening for changing sexual codes to accommodate a fuller range of trans men in the twenty-first century.

Part of the charm of pin-ups is how they seem intellectually undemanding, innocuous, and even wholesome, which makes it all the more fun when they actually smuggle in some critical ideas about sexuality and gender. A recent example is a 2015 nude pic of trans male bodybuilder Aydian Dowling by Jason Ballard for FTM Magazine, a remake of an image shot for Cosmopolitan in 2011 of

---

8. Ibid., 68.
Adam Levine, the Maroon 5 singer, who posed nude in an awareness campaign for prostate and testicular cancer. Both images were titled Nothing to Hide.12 Dowling’s and Levine’s crotches are each covered by their female partner’s red-varnished hands cupped over their genitals. In their analysis of the image, Tobias Raun and Cáel M. Keegan write that the portrait of Dowling, which was circulated often next to Levine’s for close comparison, “demands we recognize” how the ideal heterosexual masculinity of all men actually rests on being cloaked by the desire of a woman, since there is always the gap between the man and the phallus.13 In contrast, OP’s staging of “desirable male objects” did not rely on the prop of heterosexuality via their cloaking by a femme/woman. Rather the sexiness elicited derives from the models mugging for the camera and toward the transmasculine photographer, the gender-indeterminant viewer’s eye, or other trans men in the frame. It is key to stress that other trans folks shore up the model’s desirability, as the discussion of trans people loving other trans people (trans4trans) has long been a taboo.

Though OP was mailed all over the world, the fact that it originated in the sex-radical culture of San Francisco seems indelibly imprinted on the pin-up in each issue, starting with the first, “The Bedroom Issue.” The title for the project—“original plumbing”—derives from vernacular for naming the status of a trans man’s genitalia that is used for finding hookups online. On the cover of this first issue we see a graduated, soft pink background, and placed squarely in the foreground is a short-haired guy of mixed ethnicity looking up toward the camera. Wearing a thin, gold chain, an ace bandage around his chest, and fitted white boxer briefs with a massive dark bush and cock depicted on them is Cyd Nova, a community organizer, writer, and sex worker. As for all of the covers and most of the interior artwork, Mac produced the image, which was taken in Cyd’s bedroom. Being lit exclusively from above means that the shadow falls from the chest downward, casting the ironic (or aspirational) boxer briefs as a darkened detail that might require a second look. Through the framing and lighting, the viewer’s gaze is directed to Cyd’s alluring eyes and slightly open mouth decorated by two silver studs on the lower lip. With its cute aesthetics signaled by the use of cotton-candy pink, the pin-up style seems far from intellectually demanding. Yet the combination of coverings across the chest and groin give a lesson in the added value of concealed presences and cloaked absences. Do we viewers want this printed version of a cock, or someone willing to wear such a jocular piece of clothing?

The image connotes that masculinity is worn, carried, an activity unto itself. The cover’s visual statement colludes with the opening editorial statement that “surgery and hormones don’t necessarily make the man. . . . It’s more than just that. Maybe it’s an attitude, a swagger, a limp wrist or just an awareness of one’s self.”14 This is a wholly self-aware portrait: Cyd hoisting a massive dong that might be printed and out of proportion with his body size but that seems convincingly claimed as his. The seriality of Amos Mac’s pin-up and portraiture practice are important to note, for cover to cover, shoot for shoot, the collected images create space for aesthetic remodelings, a dedicated cultural space to be seen and to look at trans male culture.15

Every issue invited its readers to get to know the models, who were interviewed by Rocco Kayiatos and guest writers. The combination of “real talk” interviews about identity and sexual habits served to ground the images in the
Further, the personality of each model centered the imagery—evident in their props, attire, accessories, location or setting, lighting, and color schemes. Use of the term “model” further signaled their labor in working with a photographer; it underlined their consent to be in the pictures and highlighted their creative input. Interestingly, the direction of OP changed as a result of how models responded to questions, as Mac explains: “It was a lot cheekier and lighthearted at the beginning, on purpose. Conversations shifted as people being interviewed wanted to speak about deeper things.”

Given that depictions of trans people have predominantly been framed by discourses of medicine and pathology, the models’ relaxed and varied poses show that, as a photographer within the community, Mac elicited creativity as well as trust. The pin-up genre allowed for the cover images and portraits to remain just this side of silly while carrying out serious community-formation work to redress histories of dehumanization while being erotic; and to redo art historical grammars of the nude, workers, and heroes (centered in themed issues) while maintaining a fully queer aesthetic of camp, appropriation, and parody, particularly toward masculinity.

The eye-popping magenta pink heft of the four-hundred-page book “Original Plumbing: The Best of Ten Years of Trans Male Culture” is an incredible visual time capsule. It shows that trans men exist, yes, but also that trans male culture has changed: it is thriving and in flux. It also highlights how trans masculinity has been in conversation with templates for masculinity such as butch culture, gay culture, and dude or bro cultures. With a strong field of Black and BIPOC men on its cover, it insists on an ethnically diverse understanding of trans life, bucking the whitewashing trend and instead offering an acceptance of trans faces in popular culture.

17. Amos Mac quoted in Goodman, “Over 10 Years.”