

Gay Semiotics Revisited

Hal Fischer in conversation with
Julia Bryan-Wilson

In 1977, San Francisco photographer Hal Fischer produced his photo-text project *Gay Semiotics*, a seminal examination of the “hanky code” used to signal sexual preferences of cruising gay men in the Castro district of San Francisco. Fischer’s pictures dissected the significance of colored bandannas worn in jeans pockets, as well as how the placement of keys and earrings might telegraph passive or active roles. He also photographed a series of “gay looks”—from hippie to leather to cowboy to jock—with text that pointed out key elements of queer street-style. Begun as a series of large prints and then collected in a book published by NFS Press, Fischer’s project was both a serious study of vernacular queer behavior as well as an irreverent take on structuralism. For this issue, art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson spoke with Fischer about the origins of *Gay Semiotics* and how it has aged.

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Julia Bryan-Wilson: You initially trained as a photographer at the University of Illinois. What brought you to the Bay Area, and what impact did that move have on your work?

Hal Fischer: I came here for graduate school in photography at San Francisco State in 1975. I really wanted to study with Jack Fulton, but I didn't want to pay the money to go to the Art Institute. I figured that I could probably work with him as long as I was here. After I moved to the Bay Area, two pivotal things happened. One was that I began writing for *Artweek* three months after I arrived, so I immediately got into the fray, so to speak. The second pivotal thing was meeting Lew Thomas [cofounder of NFS Press]. That was incredibly critical.

JBW: What strikes me now about *Gay Semiotics* is how conceptual it is, how important the photo-text relationship is.

HF: When I applied to State, I applied with traditional photography, gelatin-silver prints mainly of the landscape. Then I got out here, and the first thing I started doing was crazy alternative work, predominantly 20-by-24-inch bleached prints with inked-on text and diagrammatic drawings. But I met Lew through my writing, because I reviewed a show of his, and he was at the center of a movement focused on connecting photography and language.

JBW: What was the Bay Area like in terms of a photography scene in the mid to late 1970s?

HF: There was a huge discourse here. You'd have an opening, and there would be two hundred people there. People talked about photography. They were really interested, and it was passionate.

JBW: *Gay Semiotics* is an attempt to map some of the discourse of structuralism onto the visual codes of male queer life in the Castro. How did you come to structuralism?

HF: Thanks to Lew Thomas, in graduate school I began reading things like Jack Burnham's *The Structure of Art* and Ursula Meyer's *Conceptual Art*. Those were two key texts. Of course, structuralism came late to photography, when you consider that Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* came out in 1966. Reading Burnham, going on to read Claude Lévi-Strauss, all that was crucial. I learned about signifiers, and thought, This is going on all around me.

JBW: In your bibliography for *Gay Semiotics*, you cite Walter Benjamin, but not Roland Barthes. Who else were you influenced by?

HF: I did read some Roland Barthes, but it's almost like I read just enough. The signifiers were the first pictures to come out of this thinking. It was like, Oh my God, these handkerchiefs... this is exactly what they are writing about. Of course, that made for five pictures, and then I had to figure something out from there.

JBW: You're doing several things in *Gay Semiotics*. On the one hand, you're parsing a signification system that arose out of a nonverbal, erotic exchange, and you're also deconstructing gay male self-fashioning and photographing "archetypes." It is thus a photo-project about the history of photography and its long legacy of ethnographic typing.

HF: I can't say I was conscious of it at the time, but one of the first photographers who influenced me was August Sander. I mean, I LOVED Sander. I still do. I probably was a fascist in an earlier life,

I'd say, as I did to my friend David, "Okay, I'm going to do this classical archetype; do you know anybody with a really nice ass?" Since David had slept with the entire city, he knew somebody.

because I'm definitely into types, and I'm definitely into archotyping. I don't really think it's that awful a thing to do; it can be very informative. I was also interested in the Bechers and the notion of repetition.

JBW: So the work is also about genre.

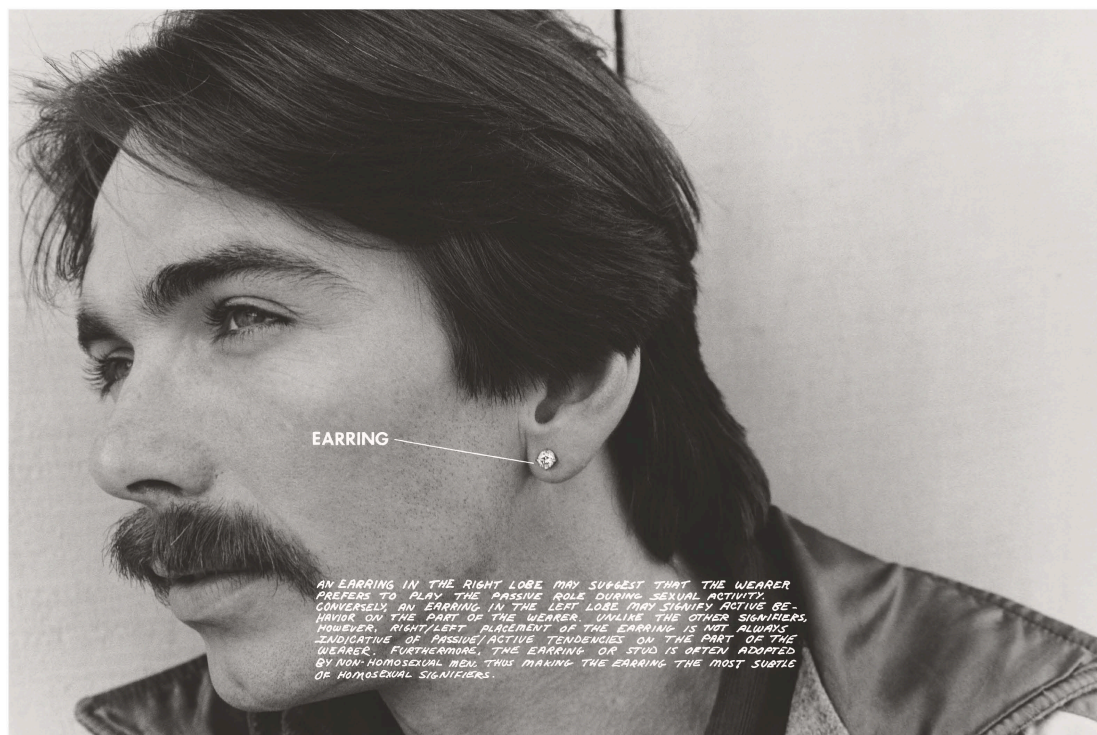
HF: Yes. It's also about personal desire; it's a lexicon of attraction. And there's a huge amount of artifice, which was also very deliberate.

JBW: Who were your models? They all are about the same age. They're all white. They're all fit. They seem to be mostly of a certain class. There's definitely a fairly homogenous milieu that's being cataloged.

HF: This was my world, and there was no pretense about being encyclopedic. You did not see a lot of lesbians out there. You did not see men of color. I don't have drag queens in there. In no way was it meant to be comprehensive, all-inclusive. For both the good and the bad, it actually represented gay male masculinity in the Castro in this time, which was not diverse. It was about the white male and it was about this very particular way of being.

JBW: Even though the book has had wide circulation, it's important that these photographs were first prints meant to be hung on the wall, as components of a serial project.

HF: That's exactly what it was. I was into the fine print, but my own definition of the fine print—the extended gray range, the use of glossy, non-artsy RC paper. But these prints are not



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indifferent. A lot of the people who were doing photography at the time didn't make good prints. It wasn't that they didn't have the capacity; they didn't care. It is important to me that the text is not a caption but integral to the image.

JBW: Some of this material is very funny. There's a submissive leather figure incongruously sitting on cardboard boxes in what looks like an office. Where was that taken?

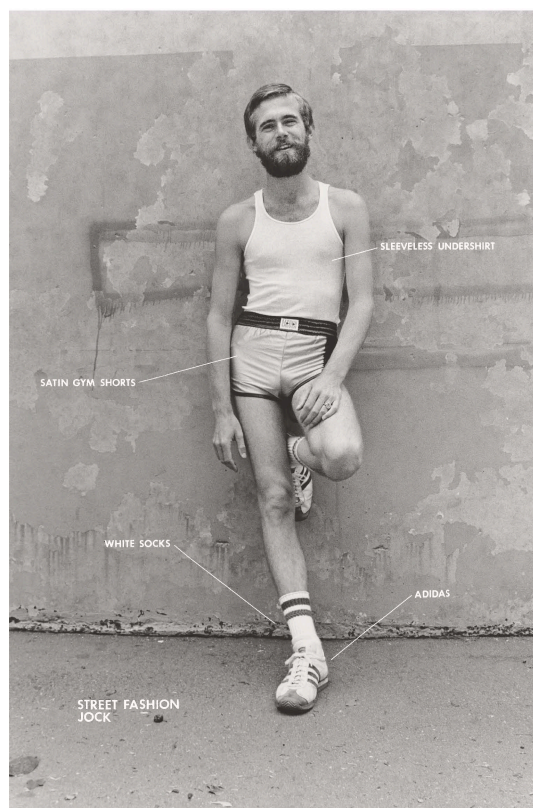
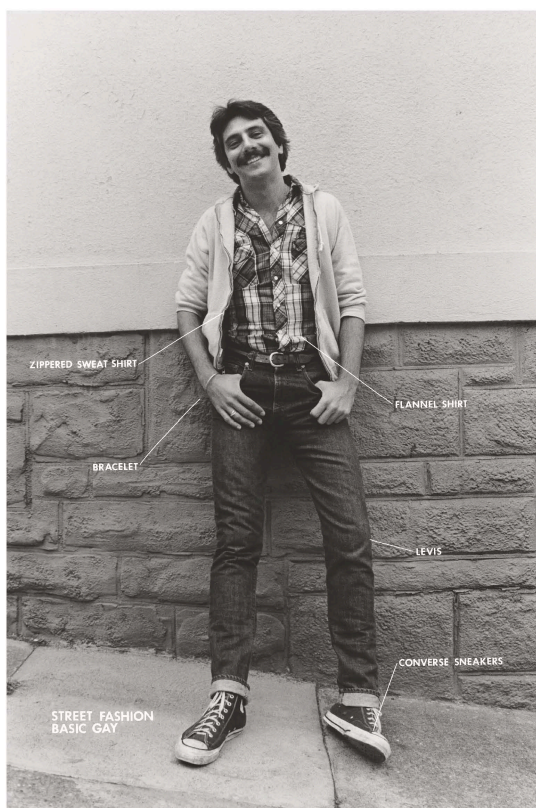
HF: Those pictures were taken at the Trading Post, which was an S and M emporium, and it was very makeshift in those days. It wasn't the industry it is today.

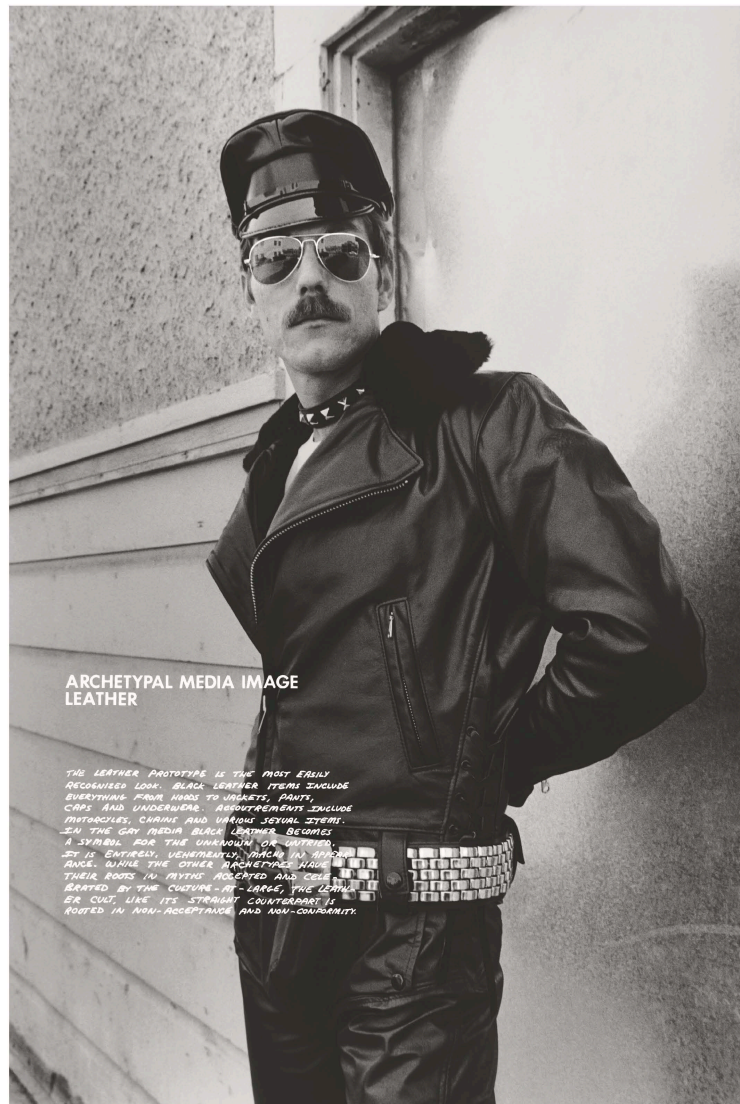
JBW: Queer sex accessories weren't coming from a polished manufacturing industry.

HF: No. And I certainly didn't own that kind of stuff. And I don't know if the work is actually self-deprecating, but there is certainly a level of Jewish humor underscoring this.

JBW: You explain, in a deadpan manner, that the red handkerchief could mean an interest in anal sex, but that red hankies are also "employed in the treatment of nasal discharge and in some cases may have no significance in regard to sexual contact." Hilarious.

HF: Yes, none of them are threatening. A lot of the photographs are deliberately banal. The whole point is getting people to go up to the picture. Then the viewer gets to a certain distance and





reads the text. There's a funny duality at play, particularly when it's an older viewer, because they lean in, read the text, and then think, Oh my God, this is about anal intercourse or fisting. That was all incredibly deliberate.

JBW: The humor, and the banality, are inroads to the pictures; their everydayness is contrasted by the text. This ties back to Sander and types, because deviance is presented as ordinary.

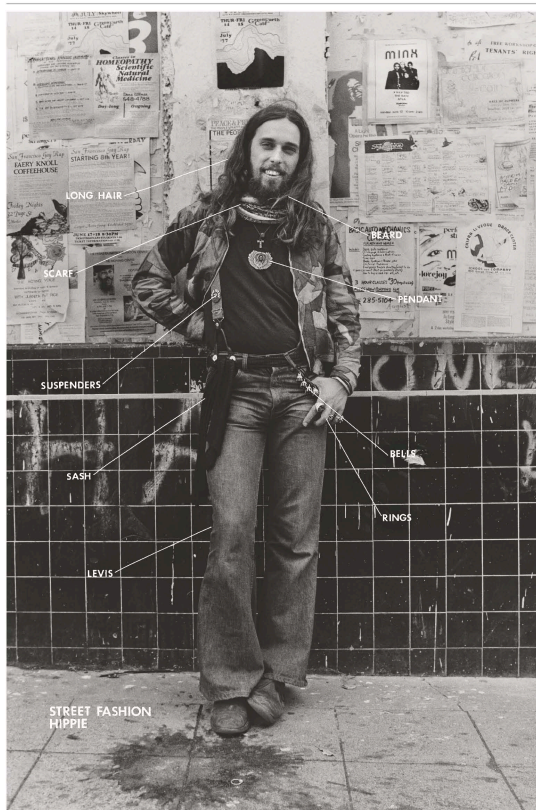
HF: Particularly if you look at the street-fashion part; that's my own little Sander project. Nobody is costumed. That's how people dressed. I've been thinking a lot about Diane Arbus lately and why I don't like Arbus—she was a trophy hunter. In my pictures, I let people take the pose that is natural to them, which is what I'm sure Sander did.

JBW: You're practicing semiotics but you're also satirizing that discourse, with jokes about nasal discharge and little sly moments. You also spend quite a lot of time talking about ambiguity, because the hanky code isn't definitive or set in stone. There is a measure of ambivalence in some of these signs.

HF: Again, that's part of the disarming quality that was very deliberate.

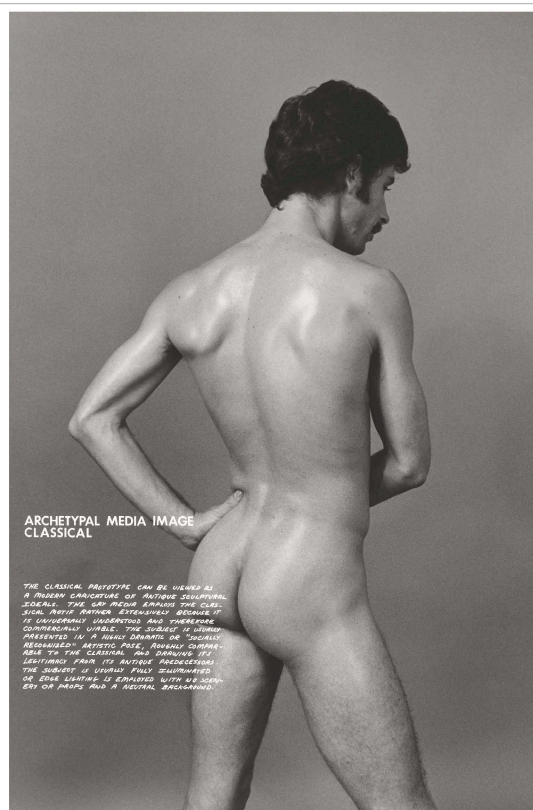
JBW: What were your interactions with the people you photographed?

HF: One of them, the natural archetype, is my best friend—still is. I lived in the Haight, and when I moved here in 1975, it was still pretty hippie. I would go down to Gus's Pub, the



All photographs by
Hal Fischer from
Gay Semiotics, 1977
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and Cherry and Martin,
Los Angeles

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only bar I've ever liked in my life because it was a neighborhood place; the hippie was from there. Some of these people were from the neighborhood, and then, as I started to build it out, I'd say, as I did to my friend David, "Okay, I'm going to do this classical archetype; do you know anybody with a really nice ass?" Since David had slept with the entire city, he knew somebody.

JBW: These archetypes (you also call them *looks*), though they were real people in their real clothes, dovetail with stereotypes that have the potential to become somewhat derogatory. For instance, the Village People debuted in 1977, the same year as *Gay Semiotics*, and they embodied but also parodied gay archetypes. How strange it is to remember what a crossover hit they were.

HF: Yes. I think, too, my work crossed over. Heterosexuals were not afraid of my work.

JBW: How did you feel about decoding and making legible what was a subcultural language for a bigger audience? Did it raise questions for you about policing or surveillance, or how that translation might compromise the code?

HF: There was some criticism that I was exposing something with the signifiers, but it was minority criticism. I was myself, at that point, very critical of the gay photographers who were working in the city. I might be a little more charitable now.

JBW: What are your feelings about Robert Mapplethorpe, as someone who also worked with the male nude and leather culture?

HF: I had a little bit of a history with Robert. I reviewed his first shows here, particularly the one that was at 80 Langton. I liked his early work, the edginess of it. I liked it in the way that I like Larry Clark's *Tulsa* (1971). We parted ways after I wrote an article called "The New Commercialism" for *Camera Arts*. Robert didn't speak to me after that. I really objected to the aesthetic direction in his work. To me, Robert Mapplethorpe is the Bouguereau of the twentieth century. You take this black male nude, and you do it up with high tonality, and then you put it in an ornate frame, and guess what? People back in the day on the Upper East Side could hang it up and think that they were being really daring. There's nothing daring about it.

JBW: Well, you two were working in such different modes. Your anthropological angle puts you in a conceptual realm, while he was increasingly bidding, with his refined aesthetics, to be a Fine Artist. Now, in retrospect, it's clear that you were also participating in a groundswell of not just artistic interest but academic interest in queer life. For instance, Gayle Rubin starts her work in 1978 at the Castro, studying and theorizing leather subcultures.

HF: My awareness was certainly limited at that point, in terms of what was out there.

JBW: You never faced censorship in the way Mapplethorpe did. Was there any threat of censorship? Those images in which you show S and M equipment but no physical bodies and instead have drawn outlines of bodies, are interesting moments in terms of absence and modesty.

HF: There never was any censorship; the work was shown widely. People ask, "Why didn't you use a real body in the bondage equipment?" It's because it would have been too real. That was part of the envelope I wasn't pushing.

JBW: Do you think you provided titillation to a straight audience, too, as in "Look at this whole foreign world?" Maybe the work also functions as a cautionary lesson: "Look at how not to be," or "I shouldn't wear my earring on that side."

HF: I think the only titillation was that the work afforded people access to a hip community and made them feel like they knew about a certain scene.

JBW: You made a few projects after *Gay Semiotics* but then stopped taking photographs. Why?

HF: A confluence of several factors: One, the balance shifted to being a critic and it hurt the work, and the Overthinking Jew part of me kicked in, in a bad way. But I also had an awareness that I had done something historically significant, and I thought, As an artist, to even do this once is really lucky; it's not going to happen again. I think most photographers have about a three-year shelf life.

JBW: How do you feel about the way *Gay Semiotics* has been received more recently?

HF: In 1991, *Outlook* magazine wanted me to update it, but I didn't want to. You couldn't even begin to do it now. It would have no meaning.

JBW: It does function like a time capsule, or a glimpse back to something that doesn't exist in quite the same way anymore. I sometimes think about how brief the flourishing cruising scene really was. There were only about ten years between the Stonewall rebellion and the beginnings of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The gay utopia that seemed to beckon in 1969 lasted only a decade, but it must have been wild to be part of it in the 1970s.

HF: It was like a restaurant with an all-you-can-eat buffet. In my local bar in the Haight, there was an incredible range of people, from activists and doctors and lawyers to people who were half a step above homeless, and it had this wonderful energy. (The Castro was more uniform in its population.) On the other hand, I wouldn't say it was the most fabulous thing in the world. When you consider the prejudice and the narrowness, it seems that the culture may have picked up a certain hyper-maleanness that, in retrospect, was not all that attractive.

JBW: Let's go back to how *Gay Semiotics* has been revisited. It was included in the *Under the Big Black Sun* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 2011, and it is clear that the project not only has significance within queer history but also within art history.

HF: I felt very comfortable in that show, because I saw how I fit into a larger narrative of West Coast conceptual photography. I walked away from it and thought, This was really an amazing period.

JBW: You're having an exhibition in Los Angeles this winter, so you've been reprinting this work. What is it like for you, now in 2014, to come back to it?

HF: Periodically, over the years, people would ask me to reissue the books. I didn't imagine the reemergence of the prints. The first thing I thought when I pulled everything out was, How could I do so much in five years? Particularly when you think about how much partying there was going on.

JBW: Has *Gay Semiotics* become a record of loss and grief regarding HIV/AIDS?

HF: No, not at all. Most of my friends who are in the photos are still around. But what is sad, today, about looking back to these images is reflecting on what this city has become. The people who historically have come and made San Francisco creative can't afford to live here anymore. So the project has a melancholy cast for me because of that.

Julia Bryan-Wilson is associate professor of modern and contemporary art at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include queer theory, photography, feminism, and performance. She is the author of *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (2009).