IN PLAIN SIGHT: QUEER SYMBOLISM ENCODED IN THE WORKS OF MARSDEN HARTLEY, ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, AND JASPER JOHNS

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ABSTRACT

Homoerotic images date back as early as 800 BCE in Persian art. Examples of homoeroticism in the arts continue in the works of the Greeks and Romans. A sharp decline in the subject coincided with the rise of Christianity and the demonization of homosexuality in Europe between 300-1000 CE. This notion of homosexuality as depraved and sinful behavior became embedded in European culture for over a millennium, and some parts of the world still believe this to be true. Criminalization of homosexuality forced most homosexual artists to hide any references to their own sexuality in their works, a practice known as "encoding," which allowed for symbols to be hidden "in plain sight" and without context. Among the most prominent mainstream artists to utilize homosexual coding in his work was the modern American artist Marsden Hartley. Through the hidden symbols in the 1914-1915 "War Images" of his "Amerika" series, Hartley expressed his grief for his likely lover Karl van Freyberg, who had passed away following the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. Following in the footsteps of Hartley queer artists working in later generations utilized similar methods of encoding to express their sexuality in a guarded fashion. Operating in the 1950s and 60s, the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns used varying methods of encoding to disguise references to their sexuality in their work. Such encoding would become a major theme of the "queer aesthetic," where queer artists encoded symbols through semiotic methods such as floating or dual signifiers to convey their homosexuality in a covert way. In pioneering the concept of encoding, Marsden Hartley gave several generations of artists a

means of expressing their sexuality in their works without being fully “out of the closet,” or revealing their sexual identity.

For my mother Carolyn

and grandmothers Aila and Annette.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The term "encoding" was first used by the queer art historian Jonathan Katz in his discussion of the hidden homoerotic and homoexpressive symbolism found in the works of the queer artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. These artists, living and working during a period in American history known as the Lavender Scare, where homosexuals were blacklisted from government positions for their perceived Communist sympathies, risked damaging their reputations and livelihoods, if they revealed their queer sexualities to the public at large. This method of queer encoding allowed for artists such as Johns and Rauschenberg to hide these symbols representative of their queer sexualities "in plain sight," so to speak. One of the ways they accomplished this was by utilizing semiotic instruments such as floating or dual/ambiguous signifieds. That is, they loaded the their works with symbols that either required the prior knowledge of their queer sexuality to fully understand, thus rendering these symbols inert to the average viewer, or with symbols that served a dual purpose, one that is understood by all who viewed the work, and another that is only understood by those who knew of the artist's queer sexuality beforehand. For example, in his *Monogram*, Robert Rauschenberg loads his combine with symbols that act as signifiers for several equally viable signifieds (fig. 2.3). While the work could be read as an allegory for homosexual intercourse and Rauschenberg's own feelings as a queer individual being the scapegoat for many of America's woes during the Lavender Scare, it could also be read as being representative of the ram sacrificed in the biblical story of Isaac, or as an allegory for gravity itself. I will expand upon these arguments in Chapter Three of my thesis, but I have provided a

brief overview of them here to show how Rauschenberg's work could exhibit or drive attention away from his own queer sexuality. In Chapter Three I will discuss the works created by Rauschenberg and Johns both before and during their romantic relationship from 1954-1961, as it is in these works that both artists' respective uses of queer encoding can be explicitly displayed. I will provide new readings for several of the works by these artists to further display their own utilization of queer encoding, taking previous interpretations utilized by scholars and using these readings to better examine the queer symbols within these works of art.

The main crux of this thesis, however, is tracing the history of the encoding methods Katz applied to Rauschenberg and Johns to the work of the modernist Marsden Hartley. Specifically, I will discuss Hartley's use of encoding found throughout the "War Images" of his "Amerika" series, which spanned from late 1914 through 1915 and saw the artist exhibit possibly the greatest artistic output of his artistic career in the sheer number of works created. Having relocated to Germany from the United States in 1913, Hartley befriended and fell in love with the Prussian Lieutenant Karl von Freyberg in a country where homosexuality was both a social taboo and a crime punishable by hard labor. Following von Freyberg's death in the Great War in October 1914, Hartley felt compelled to eulogize his fallen lover through his art. However, to avoid both legal and civil persecution, I believe that Hartley would utilize the same methods of encoding that Rauschenberg and Johns would come to use nearly forty years later. For example, in his *Portrait of a German Officer*, the number "24" appears at the bottom right of the piece, reflecting von Freyberg's age at death (fig. 1.4). This symbol is placed opposite of the letters "Kv.F," the deceased's initials. These symbols act as floating signifieds in the

work in that, to those who did not know of Hartley's sexuality or of his relationship with Karl von Freyberg, these symbols were utterly meaningless. While they might have suggested that there was some significance to these signifiers, without this prior knowledge mentioned earlier, casual viewers were unable to connect these signifiers to their intended singifieds. However, to the few that did know of Hartley's sexuality and his relationship to von Freyberg, such a connection would be easy to make, thus transforming these referents from floating to connected.

Examples of the dual signifieds within *Portrait of a German Officer* include the symbol of the Iron Cross, a medal von Freyberg would have worn on his uniform as an officer of the German Empire. Elsewhere in the work white tassels and a red spur flank the left and bottom of the previously mentioned "24" symbol, representing the ceremonial garb von Freyberg would have worn as a member of the Fourth Guard's Regiment in the army. These symbols act as dual signifieds in that, to those who lacked the knowledge of both Hartley's sexuality and his relationship to von Freyberg, these signifiers simply appear as celebrations of the pageantry of the Wilhelmine German military. However, to those few that did know of Hartley's sexuality and relationship, these symbols were clearly indicative of the rank that von Freyberg served in the German army, with Hartley celebrating the lieutenant's life through the regalia that he would have worn into combat on the day he ultimately fell. Such dual signifieds give meaning to the piece for those without prior knowledge of Hartley's sexuality, while also allowing for Hartley to fully express both his sexuality and emotions in an abstract way that allowed for him to avoid both legal and civil persecution.

My closing chapters describe the uses of encoding that followed Rauschenberg's and Johns' own use of this method. Jonathan Katz has written at length about the homosexual themes encoded in the works of pop artist Andy Warhol, whom, despite being deemed "too swish" by artists such as Rauschenberg and Johns, who could be considered "straight acting" gays by some critics, was equally guarded about his sexuality.[1] The artist "constantly warned people not to look any deeper than the surface of his art and life," a tell-tale sign that his works were connected to his sexuality, a topic he often avoided when possible.[2] Warhol was obsessed with fame and how celebrities, especially women, constructed their personas for public consumption, with one such example of this fascination in his works being his silkscreen *Marilyn Diptych* depicting famous actress Marilyn Monroe with her makeup emphasized by neon colors (fig. 4.1). Katz draws a line between this fascination and Warhol's own construction of a bizarre public persona. Indeed, society at this time demanded that homosexual men manufacture an image more in-line with the dominant cultural norms and mores of society, lest they face public persecution or blacklisting. While Warhol's image was bizarre, camp, and eccentric, it was not openly homosexual, as this would have likely hurt the artist's career, especially when he was making his start in the art world. In images such as his *Marilyn Dipytch*, Warhol connects himself to these celebrities in that both he and they felt it necessary to construct a public image to market themselves successfully.

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1. Alex Needham, "Robert Rauschenberg: 'He Was Just Something to be Around,'" *The Guardian*, November 19, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/nov/19/robert-rauschenberg-just-something-be-around; Jonathan Katz, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 1-2.

2. Katz, *Andy Warhol*, 1.

Overall, it appears that the Stonewall Riots, which took place on June 28, 1969, ultimately altered the course for queer individuals living in America. Following the spark of the riots, as well as the gay liberation movement that followed it, came a belief that queer individuals should not, and would no longer, maintain the status quo in upholding manufactured public images that would make them more acceptable to public consumption. As the famous Queer Nation slogan rang, "We're Here, We're Queer, Get Used to It" was very much the sentiments of the queer community at large following the riots and during the gay liberation movement. These sentiments were only strengthened by the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, where "Silence=Death" on the part of both queer individuals and on the part of the medical community at large. With all of these changes taking place, queer individuals began to move away from methods of encoding in favor of openly expressing their sexuality in order to establish themselves as queer individuals who were tired of hiding their sexual identities.

However, that is not to say that queer encoding has become totally obsolete. While American society has become more accepting of queer sexualities in the sixty years since Johns and Rauschenberg created works while living as a couple, other conditions exist that might restrict a queer individual's freedom to express their sexuality through their works of art without repercussions. For example, a queer artist might avoid openly expressing their sexuality in their art to avoid being ostracized by conservative family or friends who may be disapproving of such a lifestyle. We must also consider that there are queer artists living and working in societies that are antagonistic to their way of life. For example, the queer contemporary artist Alireza Shojaian attended school in Iran, where homosexuality remains punishable by death. While he found the courage to

express his sexuality through his works while attending school, and therefore risked punishment at the hands of the government in doing so, there is no doubt that many queer artists living in Iran or similarly conservative countries might not be willing to take such a risk in their art, and thus encode their sexuality within it to avoid such persecution. As long as stigma surrounding queer sexualities exist, so too will queer encoding exist to allow for artists to hide their sexuality in their works of art.

CHAPTER 2

MARSDEN HARTLEY AND THE ENCODED ELEGIES IN THE "WAR IMAGES" OF HIS "AMERIKA" SERIES

I would like to begin by offering a concise biography of the artist Marsden Hartley, which is crucial for understanding why the artist was so guarded about his sexuality. It seems as though Hartley was always searching for his place in society. This feeling was perhaps encouraged by a sense of isolation stemming from the experiences of the artist's childhood.[3] He was born Edmund Hartley on January 4, 1877 in Lewiston, Maine, to parents Eliza, a homemaker, and Thomas, one of the many millworkers at the Bates Sugar Mill. According to Hartley, he began to feel alienated following the death of his mother in 1885, remarking in his autobiography that "I was to know complete isolation from that moment onward."[4] Following Eliza's death, Thomas Hartley was unable both to care for his children and work his twelve hour shifts at the Bates Sugar Mill, and sent his younger children to live with their older siblings.[5] While two of Hartley's sisters moved in with family in Cleveland, he relocated only a few miles away to live with his

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3. Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 15-18; Bruce Robertson, *Marsden Hartley* (New York: Abrams, 1995), 11. The Bates Sugar Mill was founded in 1850 by Bostonian entrepreneur Benjamin Bates, and was one part of the larger Bates Mill mall that also included a large textile mill that became one of the largest manufacturers of Union army uniforms during the American Civil War (Bates Mill Store, n.d.). It is also worth noting that, for over thirty years after its creation, the Bates Mill mall was the largest employer in the state of Maine (Bates Mill Store, n.d.).

4. Marsden Hartley, *Somehow a Past – The Autobiography of Marsden Hartley* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 48. I would like to note here that, although this work is indeed an autobiography authored by Hartley, it was not published until well after his death, when Dr. Susan Elizabeth Ryan, an art historian at Louisiana State University, edited these autobiographical writings and publish them as a complete work in 1997.

5. Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 15-18. Hartley was one of nine children of Thomas and Eliza to survive past the age of five, with two sons and one daughter passing away before this, making Hartley both their youngest child to survive into adolescence, as well as their only son (Robertson 1995, 11-12).

older sister, Elizabeth, in the neighboring town of Auburn, Maine.[6] Such a short move allowed Hartley to regularly visit with his father, whom he ultimately resented for sending away his siblings and, thus, breaking apart the family.[7] Hartley was not receptive to this relocation, despite the close proximity between his old and new homes, and began to separate himself from both friends and family growing increasingly timid and weak over time.[8] In 1889, Thomas remarried an English woman eight years his junior, Martha Marsden, and relocated to Cleveland soon after to be near Hartley's three sisters in the city. This act only made Hartley resent his father more, as he was not invited to come live with his father and stepmother following the couple's nuptials.[9]

Hartley first began to take an interest in art during this period of separation brought about by his father's relocation to Cleveland. He experimented with drawing by coloring illustrations from magazines, and enjoyed visiting his cousin's theatre in Lewiston, where he was able to watch acts such as operas and vaudeville performances, both of which remained lifelong interests.[10] At the age of fifteen, Hartley dropped out of secondary school to work in the offices of the Auburn shoe factory, but remained there

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6. Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 12. The town of Auburn, Maine was well-known as an industrial powerhouse in the New England region, housing factories that produced such goods as: shoes, textiles, and iron goods (Ludington 1992, 15-18). It is also worth noting here that Hartley's sister, Elizabeth, was born in 1859, and would come to informally adopt Marsden after marrying her husband at the age of twenty-seven in 1886 (Ludington 1992, 15).

7. Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 17-18.

8. Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 12.

9. Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 18. Although Thomas would have his eleven-year-old son accompany him to fetch Martha from England, Hartley would ultimately reside with his sister in Auburn until 1893. However, Hartley took a quick liking to his new stepmother, referring to her as "the littlest thinnest part of the reconstructed family," which he had upon joining them in Cleveland in 1893 (Ludington 1992, 18).

10. Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 12. Hartley also enjoyed visiting the circus and attending pageants whenever they would come to Lewiston or Auburn (Robertson 1995, 12).

only a year before leaving Elizabeth's residence to join his sisters, father, and stepmother in Cleveland.[11] Hartley found work in a marble quarry soon after arriving in the city, and became fascinated with the varying veins of color found within the stone excavated at the site.[12] While in Cleveland Hartley's interest in art began to strengthen. He began visiting various art galleries in the city and his favorite was the collection of early Italian Primitive paintings in a gallery on the outskirts of the city.[13] He also started taking painting lessons from a local landscape painter by the name of John Semon, eventually losing his job at the quarry after arriving late to work one too many times after instruction in Semon's studio.[14] It was also during this time in Cleveland that Hartley unofficially took his stepmother's maiden name of "Marsden" as his own first name, honoring her for providing him with both motherly guidance and happiness.

While studying under Semon, Hartley won a year's scholarship to attend the Cleveland School of Art, now the Cleveland Institute of Art, where he trained with artists

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[11.] Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 18. While working at the Shoe factory in Auburn, Hartley would only make approximately three dollars per week, enough to provide the young man with spending money until his next paycheck (Ludington 1992, 18).

[12.] Hartley, *Somehow a Past*, 55-56.

[13.] Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 13. This collection of early Italian Primitive paintings favorited by Hartley was the only such collection outside of the East Coast of America (Robertson 1995, 13).

[14.] Ibid, 14. John Semon (1852-1917) was a moderately successful landscape painter of the Barbizon style, which can more specifically be described as "a sort of self-invented cross between [the styles of] Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Théodore Rousseau" (Ludington 1992, 19). Hartley would later credit Semon with planting "the art virus in my soul," as he both educated and encouraged Hartley in his artistic endeavors (Robertson 1995, 14).

Nina Waldeck and Cullen Yates.[15] The latter saw such promise in Hartley that he convinced a friend and trustee of the Cleveland School of Art to provide the young artist with a stipend to study in either New York or Cincinnati for four years, with Hartley choosing the former.[16]

In 1900, at the age of twenty-two, Hartley relocated to New York City and enrolled in the National Academy of Design under the direction of the Neoclassical painter Francis Coates Jones, whom Hartley would later describe as his "only influence for he showed me much about the way of painting."[17] While living in New York, Hartley began to truly find himself for the first time in his life. He recalled: "I began somehow to have curiosity about art at the time when sexual consciousness is fully developed and as I did not incline to concrete escapades, I of course inclined to abstract ones."[18] In this passage Hartley reveals much about both his art making process and his life itself. Knowing now that Hartley was in fact a homosexual living in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century when, despite its illegality, there was a large gay subculture, we

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[15]. Ibid. These two artist educators were Hartley's favorites from his time at the Cleveland School of Art. He would describe Nina Waldeck (1868-1943), a landscape painter whose style somewhat resembled Semon's, as both his "first German," and his "lucky star in art" (Robertson 1995, 14). Waldeck would also be the one who introduced Hartley to the Transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, gifting him a collection of Emerson's essays and sparking an interest in the Transcendentalist movement that would follow Hartley throughout his life (Robertson 1995, 14). Cullen Yates (1866-1945), was another landscape painter, although his style would more closely resemble that of Impressionism than the Barbizon school (Ludington 1992, 19).

[16] Ibid.

[17]. Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 22. It is worth noting that Hartley was actually enrolled in the New York School of Art, now the Parson's School of Design, before ultimately enrolling in the National Academy of Design (Robertson 1995, 14). At the New York School of Art, Hartley would study under the American Impressionist painter William Merritt Chase, whom Hartley claimed taught him that "fine performance is the major part of good painting," and "the majestic privilege of being an artist" (Robertson 1995, 14).

[18]. Hartley, *Somehow a Past*, 56.

might understand these "concrete escapades" as referring to his non participation in such a group that ultimately subverted the conservative American culture at this time.[19] Perhaps stifled by his upbringing, which caused him to experience such crippling isolation and insecurity, Hartley was either unable or unwilling to participate in this queer subculture for one reason or another, and instead devoted his time and energy into the "abstract" escapades of art creation.[20] This was indeed not the last time that Hartley would divert his isolated and stifled sexual proclivities into his art making process, a diversion that I address in greater detail later in this chapter.

It appears that Hartley began to search for a means of expressive encoding during this time in New York. For example, consider his work of approximately 1905, *Walt Whitman's House, 328 Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey* (fig. 2.1), with the added knowledge that Whitman was openly homosexual to those who knew him and his work. With this in mind, some scholars have made the case that in painting such a subject, Hartley was searching for a homosexual creative lineage within American history.[21] The artist took a keen interest in the works of the transcendentalists after being gifted a copy

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19. Ibid. At the center of this "gay subculture" in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century was the gay bathhouse, where homosexual men could go to engage in sexual relations in both a friendly and discreet manner. These gay bathhouses were covert, posing as normal bathhouses that functioned as places of relaxation and hygiene for the city's men, and were often the subject of vice raids at the hands of the New York Police Department. The first such raid took place on February 21, 1903 at the Ariston Hotel Baths, which ultimately resulted in over thirty arrests and sixteen charges of sodomy (Donovan 2016, 150-151).

20. Ibid. I would postulate that perhaps Hartley, highly private about his sexuality, refused to participate in the gay subculture in New York City out of fears of being involuntarily outed, whether by fellow members of this subculture or arrested in vice raids by the New York Police Department against the gay bathhouses of New York City that provided the backbone of this gay subculture. However, it is entirely possible that perhaps Hartley was not totally forthcoming in his memoirs with information regarding his participation in New York City queer culture.

21. Patricia McDonnell, "Essentially Masculine: Marsden Hartley, Gay Identity, and the Wilhelmine German Military," *Art Journal* 56, vol. 2 (1997): 68.

of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays* by an instructor at the Cleveland Institute of Art, carrying the work around for "at least five ensuing years."[22] While there is little doubt that Hartley was partial to Whitman because of his participation in the transcendentalist movement, it is also likely that Hartley would have been attracted to the poet for the homoerotic elements in his works. For example, Whitman makes mention of the "manly love of comrades," and "adhesiveness," a term closely linked to same-sex relationships, throughout the "Calamus" chapter of his larger work *Leaves of Grass*.[23] As scholar Jonathan Weinberg states, "for many homosexuals at the turn of the century, coming to terms with Walt Whitman was part of a process of coming to terms with their sexuality."[24] The case could be made then that Hartley's interest in Whitman and creation of the work *Walt Whitman's House, 328 Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey*, was part of the Hartley's mediation of both the poet's and, in turn, his own sexuality.

On the surface, the painting appears to be a somewhat straightforward rendering of the famous poet Walt Whitman's house, hardly a subject of controversy. Such safe subject matter allowed for any casual viewer of the piece to take it as simply a depiction of a famous poet's home and nothing more. However, I believe it was Hartley's intent to both celebrate Whitman as a famous homosexual in American history as well as a means of reconciling his own sexuality. In creating this work, I believe that Hartley

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22. Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 14.

23. Walt Whitman, "For You, O Democracy," in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Jim Manis (State College: Electronic Classics Series, 2007), 137; Gary Schmidgall, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 190-191.

24. Jonathan Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 134.

experimented with expressing his sexuality within his works, a process that he further refined in the “War Images” of his “Amerika” series.

However, Hartley’s sense of isolation grew while in New York City, as the artist found himself living on his own for the first time in his life without any family or friends to share his lodgings. Hartley remained enrolled in the National Academy of Design until he graduated in 1908, spending all of his holidays and breaks in Auburn. After graduating, Hartley relocated to an abandoned farmhouse in the town of Lovell, Maine, allowing him to live rent free and to spend as much money as possible on art supplies.[25] Hartley began to experiment with his artistic style during this time, moving away from the muted academic approach drilled into him at the National Academy of Design in favor of a more modern, abstracted aesthetic. He also began to show his works at a small gallery in Lovell owned by Irish immigrant Shaemas O’Sheel, who took a liking to Hartley’s experimental works, praising them for their emotional content and unique nature.[26] As luck would have it, O’Sheel happened to be an acquaintance of the famous photographer and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz, who he convinced to travel to Maine to view these novel works by the young artist Hartley.[27] After viewing them, Stieglitz offered Hartley a solo exhibition, believing that he might have just found the next great modernist painter. In his eagerness to appear nonchalant about the exchange, Hartley

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25. Norma G. Berger “Oral History Interview with Norma G. Berger Regarding Marsden Hartley, 1973 June 28”, interview by Robert Brown, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, June 28, 1973, transcript, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-norma-g-berger-regarding-marsden-hartley-12829#transcript.; Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 55. Lovell, Maine is a small town that is located approximately forty miles west of Hartley’s sister’s residence in Auburn, Maine. Situated near the Vermont border, Lovell was and still is a fairly rural area, a stark contrast to the industrialized Auburn.

26. Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 55.

27. Ibid., 58.

nearly bungled the deal enraging Stieglitz to a large degree.[28] Despite this tenuous first meeting, Stieglitz and Hartley became lifelong friends, sharing hundreds of letters over the years.

Stieglitz went so far as to arrange for funding to send Hartley to Paris to live and study, as many wealthy art students did during this time.[29] Upon arriving in the City of Lights in 1912, Hartley was introduced to the German modernist Arnold Rönnebeck, another acquaintance of Stieglitz's who exhibited periodically at 291. Hartley also became acquainted with Rönnebeck's younger cousin, the Prussian Lieutenant Karl von Freyberg, who happened to be visiting Paris at the time of Hartley's arrival.[30] It is unclear when exactly Hartley and von Freyberg began their romantic relationship and whether this was Hartley's first serious homosexual relationship. The three traveled to Berlin together in January 1913, and Hartley fell in love with the imperial city almost instantly,

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28. Ibid. As the story goes, Stieglitz was so enraged by Hartley's behavior, which he took for arrogance, that he wrote the artist three scathing letters immediately following their first meeting, berating Hartley for not acknowledging the "significance of 291," and insisting that he was only giving Hartley a show because he "believed in you and your work" (Ludington 1992, 58). It cannot be understated just how influential 291 was in helping Hartley find an art style that was uniquely his own. For example, in his *Red Tree* from 1910, Hartley experiments with a Fauvist color palette that he would have encountered during his visit to 291 the previous year, when he attended an exhibition focusing on Henri Matisse (Ludington 1992, 64-65). We see this again in his *Abstraction* from 1911, a work made in an Analytical Cubist style that he would have viewed at a 1910 exhibition at 291 that was headlined by a young Pablo Picasso (Ludington 1992, 70).

29. Ibid., 55. To accomplish this, Stieglitz arranged for his wealthy colleague, the American art collector and patron Lillie Bliss (1864-1931) to provide the money for Hartley's travel, while New York gallery owner Newman Emerson (N.E.) Montross (1849-1932) provided the artist with a monthly stipend while he studied in Europe (Ludington 1992, 55).

30. Patricia McDonnell and Marsden Hartley, "Marsden Hartley's Letters to Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky, 1913-1914," *Archives of American Art Journal* 29, no. 1/2 (1989): 35. Karl von Freyberg was a member of the House of Freyberg, a noble family from the region of Mecklenberg in northern Germany (Lüdeke von Weltzien 1989, 103). Born to the Prussian Major Paul von Freyberg, the family was well-known for recruiting their boys into the officers corps of the Prussian military, although Karl would be Paul's only son and the last male born in the House of Freyberg, which died off completely by 1940 (Lüdeke von Weltzien 1989, 104).

considering it "without question the finest modern city in Europe."[31] The artist began planning his relocation to the German city, although he would need to return to Paris for several months before he could do so. On one of these trips back to Paris, Hartley encountered a Wassily Kandinsky exhibition in Munich that proved pivotal in further developing Hartley's art style.[32] He was fascinated by Kandinsky's works almost instantly, calling them "the most constructive element in modern art."[33] Upon his return to Paris, Hartley began to personally correspond with both Kandinsky and his fellow *Blaue Reiter* artist Franz Marc.[34]

Hartley officially moved to Berlin in May 1913, when he and von Freyberg were likely involved romantically, lived in a small apartment near the city's center.[35] Between May 1913 and July 1914, Hartley was at his most prolific, producing works that blended a Fauvist color palette with *Blaue Reiter* subject matter to be displayed in Steiglitz's 291 and Gertrude Stein's Paris gallery, 27 Rue de Fleurus.[36] Some believe Hartley's "Amerika" series began with works such as his 1913 *Portrait of Berlin* (fig. 2.2) and his

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31. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, February 1913, in *My Dear Stieglitz – Letters of Marsden Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz 1912 – 1915*, ed. James T. Voorhies (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 55. Although Hartley and Stieglitz remained both friends and pen pals for decades after meeting, their most active correspondence occurred while Hartley was abroad between 1912 and 1915, with Voorhies' book providing nearly all of the letters the two shared during this time.

32. McDonnell and Hartley, "Marsden Hartley's Letters," 35.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 46-47, 49.

36. Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 103-104. Barbara Haskell commented that Hartley's military pieces of 1913-1915 combined "the pictorial energy of the Blaue Reiter Expressionists with the tightly knit, collage format of the cubists" to achieve a "remarkable synthesis of the expressive with the structured" (Ludington, 106). The artist himself referred to the style of the pieces made during this time as "Cosmic Cubism," "Intuitive Abstraction," and "Subliminal Cubism" (Cooper 1986, 122). Hartley would even exhibit and sell six of these pieces at the 1913 New York Armory Show (Ludington 1992, 103-104).

1914 *Indian Fantasy* (fig. 2.3), both of which combine the spirituality of the Blaue Reiter movement with Hartley's love of the city of Berlin.

Assistant Curator of Modern Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Lauren Bergman, splits Hartley's "Amerika" series into two distinct categories.[37] The first is his "City Images," done prior to the passing of von Freyberg. They combine the *Blaue Reiter* spirituality of European Modernism with Hartley's understanding of the visual language of Native American art, celebrating Hartley's love for both Berlin and the German Empire as a whole.[38] The second category of Hartley's "Amerika" series is his "War Images," created following von Freyberg's death that feature symbols representative of the pageantry of the Wilhelmine German military and, therefore, are representative of the Lieutenant Karl von Freyberg as well.[39] I agree with using such a distinction, as classifying Hartley's entire "Amerika" in any comprehensive way is hard due to the differences in both subject matter and style between the early and later works.[40] However, it is no coincidence that Hartley engaged in his "City Images" as World War I drew closer, as the Lieutenant von Freyberg was forced to work longer

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37. Lauren Bergman, "Navigating Marsden Hartley's Symbols," *Unframed*, September 10, 2014, https://unframed.lacma.org/node/1433.

38. Bergman, "Navigating Marsden Hartley's Symbols." It is believed that Hartley's interest in the culture of Native Americans was influenced by his fascination with the Blaue Reiter movement. However, little is known about what research Hartley conducted about Native American tribes in North America, although we do see several references to Native American culture in Hartley's letters to Alfred Stieglitz, writing to him in early 1915 about "wanting to be an Indian – to paint my face with the symbols of that race I adore go to the west & face the sun forever – that would seem the true expression of human dignity" (Luddington 1992, 124).

39. Ibid. It seems to make even less sense to refer to the later works of Hartley's "Amerika" series as such due to the fact that the series takes its name from the blending of European Modernism and Native American spirituality only seen prominently in the works of this series that pre-date the death of Karl von Freyberg. From here on out, I will refer to these works made following von Freyberg's death as Hartley's "War Images."

40. Bergman, "Navigating Marsden Hartley's Symbols."

hours to prepare for the war that loomed on the horizon.[41] Hartley travelled alone to Paris and London where he peddled his paintings to any gallery owners he could, perhaps fleeing from the impending sense of isolation that the artist had escaped while living in Europe.[42] Little did he realize that, within a year's time, his entire world would be upended by tragedy.

The year 1914 marked a series of great personal losses for Marsden Hartley. On August 4, 1914, Thomas Hartley passed away suddenly, although it is unclear how this death affected the artist, since he did not mention it in any of his correspondence from around this time.[43] However, about three months later, Hartley learned of the death of his best friend and soulmate Karl von Freyberg, who was killed fighting in the Battle of Arras against French troops on October 7, 1914.[44] Devastated by the loss of his lover, Hartley was outspoken about his grief, writing to Stieglitz that no one was "more beloved & more necessary to the social well-being of the world – in every way a perfect being – physically – spiritually & mentally beautifully balanced – 24 years young – and of all things – necessary."[45] Just as he had done while living alone in New York, Hartley again

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41. Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 116-117.

42. Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 53.

43. Ludington, *Marsden Hartley*, 122. I would surmise that it is likely due to that Hartley never truly forgave his father for breaking up his family following the death of his mother in 1885.

44. Ibid. The Battle of Arras, also known as the First Battle of Arras, took place between October 1-4, 1914, with small skirmishes breaking out for several days following the battle until completely ending on October 9, 1914. A part of the German "Race to the Sea," the Battle of Arras would ultimately conclude indecisively, as armies from both sides would move north to act as reinforcements for the Battle of La Bassée, which took place between October 10-November 2, 1914. Writing about von Freyberg's death, Hartley described that he felt "eternal grief," "unendurable agony," and referred to von Freyberg's death as "the most pathetic sacrifice of our time" (Robertson 1995, 56).

45. Ibid, 123.

channeled his inner strife and emotion towards the creation of artwork, this time with the intention of lamenting and eulogizing the death of his fallen lover.[46]

It was not Hartley's aim to only lament the loss of Karl von Freyberg in the works following his death in 1914. Instead, this series also served to eulogize the fall of the Germany that so enamored Hartley upon visiting Berlin in early 1913. Hartley watched as his new home that he so admired fell to the destruction of war, just as his lover had fallen to this same destructive nature. This dual lament fueled Hartley's "War Images" of his "Amerika" series: he worked on it following von Freyberg's death in October 1914 up until January 1916, when the artist returned to America permanently, gradually shifting his painting style to a more regionalist aesthetic. Such a dual meaning allowed for those in Hartley's inner circle, who knew of the artist's sexuality, to view the works as grieving and honoring Van Freyberg, while simultaneously allowing others to view it similarly in relation to Germany as a whole. While Germany may have been more liberal in regard to homosexuality than America was at this time, at the very least it was still considered a crime that threatened to publicly out whomever was charged with acting in a homosexual manner.[47] It is understandable that Hartley would need to conceal his sexuality as well as his relationship with von Freyberg in these works. Weinberg explains that, in order to avoid falling prey to these accusations or indictments, Hartley created a mask or method of concealment that was decorated with symbols of the Wilhelmine German military on the surface, while ultimately acting alluding in a veiled fashion to his true relationship

46. Jonathan Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 159.

47. Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 14-15. Hartley would arrive in Germany only several years after homosexuality had first become a national issue in the country following the Harden-Eulenberg affair, which took place between 1907-1909 and saw several of Kaiser Wilhelm II's cabinet members face accusations of homosexuality at the hands of prominent German journalist Maximilian Harden.

with von Freyberg.[48] Hartley ultimately fashioned a method of encoding his sexuality within these works that allowed for him to fully express his feelings toward von Freyberg without risking accusations of being a homosexual in an ultimately anti-gay society.

I would like to first examine what is perhaps the most well-known of the "War Images" of Hartley's "Amerika" series, his *Portrait of a German Officer*, done just after von Freyberg's death in 1914. I approach it from a semiotic perspective, to aid in uncovering what I believe are the true meanings, or signifieds, behind the symbols, or signifiers, of Hartley's work. The work itself is laid out like the cuirass of a ceremonial Prussian Royal Guard, the personal bodyguards of the Emperor of Germany, of which von Freyberg was a member. It appears as if we are looking down at the deceased or dying body of the lieutenant himself, which has transcended from its natural state and into a more abstract one.[49] The piece is dominated by various flags representing both the German Empire and several regions within it, which signify the country that both von Freyberg and Hartley loved, the one that the former gave his life to defend. The number "24" appears at the bottom right of the piece, reflecting von Freyberg's age at death. This is placed opposite of the letters "Kv.F," the deceased's initials. In the center, the number "4" can be seen, representing the Fourth Guard's Regiment in which von Freyberg served at the time of his death. Above this is a symbol of the Iron Cross, a medal von Freyberg would have worn on his uniform as an officer of the German Empire. White tassels and a

48. Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 157.

49. Emmanuel Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West* (London: Routledge, 1986), 122. Upon declaring war in August 1914, the Prussian Royal Guard would be broken up into several regiments to serve as officers corps on the frontlines of the war. Von Freyberg would be a member of the Fourth Guard's Regiment, which itself was one of the several regiments created from the larger group of the Prussian Royal Guard. As a member of the Prussian Royal Guard, von Freyberg would have worn a cuirass to signify his status as one of the elite officers in the Prussian army as a whole.

red spur flank the left and bottom of the "24" symbol, representing the ceremonial garb von Freyberg would have worn as a member of the Fourth Guard's Regiment. To the right, above the "Kv.F" symbol, we see white feathers hanging downwards, which would have adorned von Freyberg's helmet as a member of the Prussian Royal Guard. As a whole, the piece appears to act as a celebration of von Freyberg's life through the pageantry of his Fourth Guard's Regiment uniforms, with these symbols perhaps best representing von Freyberg's masculinity, idealized here as a member of the elite regiment of the Prussian Royal Guard.

These symbolic representations of von Freyberg in *Portrait of a German Officer* appear throughout the "War Images" of Hartley's "Amerika" series. In *Painting No. 47* (fig. 2.5) dated either late 1914 or early 1915, Hartley placed the "Kv.F" symbol at the bottom right of the composition beneath a "24" that this time reads vertically. These symbols are just to the right of an Iron Cross, which is itself placed below the same "4" from his *Portrait of a German Officer*, and the new numeral "9." As mentioned earlier, Hartley took an intense interest in the spiritual after viewing the works of Kandinsky at the exhibition in Munich in early 1913. Numerologically, "8" and "9" can represent "cosmic transcendence and regeneration."[50] Perhaps Hartley included these numbers to suggest that Freyberg is not conventionally deceased but has instead elevated to a plane that is more abstract. While mourning his death through this series, Hartley displays a

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50. Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective*, 122. It is unknown exactly how Hartley became interested in numerology, as none of the Blaue Reiter artists utilized numerological symbols within their oeuvres. Still, numerology is a belief in the spiritual connection between numbers and events that dates back to the teachings of Pythagoras, although the term "numerology" itself would not be coined until the early twentieth century, perhaps suggesting some sort of resurgence in the interest in this esoteric system during this time ("Numerology," n.d.). Regardless, it is more than likely that Hartley came across numerology after becoming involved in the spiritual and its applications in art after his encounter with Kandinsky's work in early 1913, buying a copy of his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* shortly after that.

sense of optimism that von Freyberg's soul has rose to a higher plane of being, one that Hartley might attain upon his own death, where he could finally be reunited with his long-lost lover. In his *Portrait* (fig. 2.6), again dated to either late 1914 or early 1915, we again see the "4" representing von Freyberg's membership in the Fourth Guard's Regiment, here placed at the bottom right of the composition beneath the right and bottom facets of the Iron Cross. At the center, the number "8" again references "cosmic transcendence and regeneration," here placed beneath a bundle of white tassels that are carried over from his *Portrait of a German Officer*.

As Hartley progressed through the "War Images" of his "Amerika" series, he seemed to have used these numerological and initialized symbols less frequently in favor of the more abstracted flag forms that represented the different states of the German Empire at this time. In his 1915 work, *The Iron Cross* (fig. 2.7), the only symbols that have persisted from his earlier "War Images" are the "4" and the Iron Cross medal. There are other symbols here: the blue and white diagonal checkered flag seen to the right of the Iron Cross represent the states of the German Empire at this time, in this case Bavaria, and the various tassels, insignias, and patches indicate adornment on von Freyberg's uniform. Hartley's "War Images" continue in this manner until ending this series in January 1916, when the artist left Germany for the United States. Upon returning to America, Hartley discontinued the German War Images that had engrossed him for the previous one and a half years because of anti-German sentiment rampant in America at this time.[51] Instead, Hartley embraced a more neutral style, depicting landscape and

[51]. Ibid. Upon returning to America, Hartley would move in with the American journalist John Reed, whose home was a common meeting place for such popular artists, writers, and actors from the Greenwich Village neighborhood as Carl Sprinchorn and Charles Demuth, both of whom Hartley would befriend after meeting (Cooper 1986, 125).

portrait subjects similar to the one seen in his "Amerika" series, albeit with less identifiable emotion.

I would like now to offer a semiotic interpretation of the symbols in Hartley's "War Images" in order to demonstrate that Hartley used a method of encoding that prominently utilized "floating signifiers," or signifiers without any tangible signifieds, to covertly embed his sexuality within his "War Images."[52] First, we will consider Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer*, keeping in mind that, due to the guarded nature of Hartley's homosexuality at this time, it is likely that viewers, apart from Hartley's closest confidants, would have been unaware of the artist's sexuality. With the benefit of hindsight, we see that the "24" symbol at the bottom right of the composition represents the age of von Freyberg at his death. In other words, the signifier, "24," signifies von Freyberg's age at death, with this concept acting as the signified. However, without knowing von Freyberg's identity, the average viewer would be unable to connect the signifier with the signified, thus transforming it into a floating signifier, or one whose meaning cannot be established without further information. In this case, such further information was held only by Hartley and those who knew of his attachment to von Freyberg, implying that they would have been able to uncover these meanings behind these floating signifiers. Such is the method of encoding that Hartley applies throughout the "War Images" of his "Amerika" series, one that forces the viewers to assume that the signifiers such as "24," "4," and "Kv.F" have either no meaning or that their meanings cannot be established by simply viewing the work of art itself. Hartley's use of letters and initials in his "War Images" could have been influenced by works by Cubist artists such

52. Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2001), 78.

as Pablo Picasso, whose Synthetic Cubist collages often contained words cut out of journals or magazines. As mentioned earlier, Hartley was no stranger to Picasso's Cubist works, having viewed them while visiting 291 years earlier. Hartley leaves no clues for the viewer to uncover the true meaning behind these floating signifiers; for example, if we consider the name of the piece itself, we see that it is not *Portrait of Lieutenant Karl von Freyberg*, as it indeed was, but is instead *Portrait of a German Officer*, thus making the fallen von Freyberg anonymous to the average viewer.[53]

Looking at the other symbols found throughout Hartley's "War Images," we see that these signs do not act as floating signifiers, but rather as symbols that are open to a variety of equally correct interpretations. Hartley's "War Images" eulogized both the death of his lover as well as the war tearing apart the country Hartley had come to know and love. If we look at the flag of the German Empire that dominates the lower portion of Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer*, we see a signifier that signifies both the country that von Freyberg gave his life to defend in World War I, as well as a symbol of the country that Hartley had come to admire in the year and a half he lived there prior to von Freyberg's death. Behind this, we see the blue and white argyle-patterned flag of Bavaria, a signifier of both an area of Germany to which Hartley and von Freyberg loved traveling, as well as an area of natural beauty within the German Empire that World War I threatened to destroy.[54] The Iron Cross medal, white tassels, and white could all signify either von Freyberg' s garb as a member of the Fourth Guard's Regiment, or the

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53. Despite the fact that the painting's title suggests that it is meant to reference a specific individual, I have been unable to find any sources that explain how audience's contemporary to the painting's creation and exhibition received this work.

54. Bergman, "Navigating Marsden Hartley's Symbols." Hartley and von Freyberg would travel to Munich, the capital of Bavaria, in 1913. It would be during this trip that Hartley would come across the Kandinsky exhibition being held at the Moderne Galerie Heinrich Thannhauser in Munich.

vestments of the elite soldiers of the German Empire as they entered combat. Obviously, those who knew of Hartley and von Freyberg's relationship would have made the connections between these symbols and the memorialization of this fallen soldier. However, those who did not know of this relationship, rather than assuming these signifiers were floating as they would have done with the symbols just, would have simply assumed that the latter signifieds were the ones intended to be used by Hartley. Indeed, they would not have done so incorrectly, as I believe both signifieds tied to each signifier are equally correct in their applications. To utilize this method of encoding with these symbols, Hartley created a diversion, so to speak, in imbuing each signifier with dual signifieds, one relating to his relationship with von Freyberg, and one relating to either the German military to the German Empire itself.

Hartley's use of numerological symbols in the "War Images" are also present in several of his later works. His 1933 work *Eight Bells' Folly, Memorial to Hart Crane* (fig. 2.8) uses similar numerological symbols to represent the fallen poet. Hartley would meet Crane, a homosexual who was as similarly guarded about his sexuality, while visiting Mexico, where Crane was studying on a Guggenheim Fellowship. The two immediately became fast friends, although this friendship would be short-lived as Crane died in 1932, committing suicide by throwing himself from a steamboat enroute to New York.[55] This work presents an abstracted rendering of a sailboat at sea, the masts of which read the numbers "33," Crane's age at death. Here, however, the audience is given a means of linking signifier to signified as indicated by the title, *Eight Bells' Folly, Memorial to Hart* Crane and by the "33," the poet's age at death. In the abstracted

[55.] Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective*, 122. It is unknown whether Hartley and Crane shared a romantic relationship or one that was purely platonic.

mountains in the background, the number "8" appears, representing the same concept of "cosmic transcendence and regeneration," present twenty years earlier in several of his "War Images." Although these symbols are not necessarily encoded in this later work, it is clear that Hartley again used numerological symbols to represent the memorialized.

Several later works in Hartley's oeuvre that can more readily be considered homoerotic deserve mention here too, such as his 1940 work *Madawaska*, *Acadian Light-Heavy, Third Arrangement* (fig. 2.9), done at the age of sixty-three. The piece depicts a man nude from the waist up, his hairy, chiseled torso dominating the bottom half of the piece in a homoerotic fashion that seems out of place for Hartley. After all, he felt the need to abstract any allusions to his fallen lover von Freyberg nearly twenty-five years prior. This work makes more sense once we consider that Hartley produced it as a commission for a local gym in the town of Madawaska, Maine.[56] The man depicted is unknown, though the title provides some information about the subject. Acadian refers to the descendants of Frenchmen who settled America in the 18th century, of which Canada has the largest population. Light-Heavy indicates that the man pictured was a boxer fighting in the Light Heavyweight class. Although we can explain away some of the homoerotic elements of this piece by contextualizing its location and subject, one matter cannot so easily be dismissed. Hartley has depicted the man clad in only a jockstrap, an odd addition that seems unnecessary given the subject. While a boxer might wear a jockstrap during a fight, it would almost certainly be worn beneath a pair of shorts at this

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56. "Madawaska – Acadian Light-Heavy," Art Institute of Chicago, accessed February 8, 2019, https://www.artic.edu/artworks/70028/madawaska-acadian-light-heavy. Madawaska, Maine is a small town located on the border of the United States and Canada in northern Maine. It is worth noting that, in a letter to his friend Adelaide Kuntz, dated to February 1940, Hartley makes note of the fact that the model he used for his *Madawaska, Acadian Light-Heavy, Third Arrangement* was the first time he used a live nude male model in nearly twenty years, describing the man as a "magnificent young feller," and that his "body is so fine and dear I could work almost without end from him" ("Madawaska – Acadian Light-Heavy," n.d.)

time in history.[57] Such an addition seems to have been made solely for the artist's own enjoyment, an obvious homoerotic element that is a far cry from the methods of encoding that he felt that he needed to incorporate in the "War Images" of his "Amerika" series. Perhaps in his advanced age Hartley no longer felt constrained to hide his sexuality, as society had not yet progressed to the point that allowed for such overt depictions to be permissible, a point that I will expand upon in the next chapter. All we can surmise is that Hartley felt less compelled to encode his sexuality as he aged.

[57]. While it would have been uncommon for a boxer to wear such revealing clothing in the 1940s, Hartley's boxer seems to be wearing a jockstrap that most resembles the attire worn by the subject of Thomas Eakins' 1898 piece *Salutat*. Perhaps Hartley was referencing this more romantic depiction of the sport in his work.

CHAPTER 3

THE HIDDEN SEXUAL ELEMENTS WITHIN ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG'S AND JASPER JOHNS' CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS

The queer artists and lovers Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were introduced to each other by a mutual friend in 1954 while Rauschenberg was browsing for books at the Marboro Book Shop, where Johns worked stocking shelves.[58] By this point, Rauschenberg had already made a name for himself in the art world, only three years removed from his *White Painting (Three Panel)* (fig. 3.1), a series of all-white-canvas panels that created a stir in the art world for their seeming lack of subject matter, made while studying at the experimental arts school Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina.[59] The two became fast friends, and Rauschenberg went so far as to convince Johns to quit his bookstore job to help in doing some window display work. As business partners, they worked under the name Matson-Jones and earned up to five

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58. Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Picador Publications, 2005) 99. Johns worked at the Marboro Book Shop located on the corner of Madison Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street in the Midtown East section of Manhattan (Tomkins 2005, 99). The 106-year-old company, which specialized in selling publisher's overstock at a fraction of their retail price, was sold to Barnes and Noble in 1979, with the latter company converting all five of Marboro's Manhattan locations into Barnes and Noble stores.

59. Helen Molesworth, "Before Bed", *October* 63 (Winter 1993): 68. Black Mountain College was founded in 1933 by the arts educator John Andrew Rice, his colleague Theodore Dreier, and several other educators and artists. The school was experimental in its structure, placing students and educators on equal footing and emphasizing art production and manual labor in addition to education. Black Mountain required all students, regardless of their field of study, to participate in art-making classes and manual farm work. Students were also put in charge of all aspects of their education, eliminating grades and course requirements and allowing for students to decide when they wanted to graduate. The school is now famous for its illustrious alumni, including: architect and founder of the Bauhaus school Walter Gropius; New York School painter Robert Motherwell; modern artist Cy Twombly; avant-garde dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham; avant-garde composer and musical theorist John Cage; the Abstract Expressionist artist Franz Kline; New York school painters Willem and Elaine de Kooning, and of course Rauschenberg, to name just a few. For more information on Black Mountain College see Helen Molesworth and Ruth Erickson, *Look Before You Leap: Black Mountain College 1933-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

hundred dollars each per job.[60] Although it cannot be determined exactly when they began a romantic relationship, by the end of 1954 the two were living together, moving first into Johns' apartment on Pearl Street in the Financial District neighborhood of Manhattan, and later several blocks away into an apartment on Front Street in the same neighborhood.[61] During this time, both Rauschenberg and Johns began to accelerate their respective artistic outputs. Katz has suggested that the two collaborated creatively, bouncing innovative ideas for works off of one another.[62]

Both artists were very guarded about their queer identities: Rauschenberg remained so until his death in 2008 and Johns remaining so to this day. Such guardedness makes sense when we consider that the two homosexual lovers lived in an American society that by-and-large forbade them from being open about their sexuality as gays who especially feared persecution during the Lavender Scare of the McCarthy era in the early 1950s.[63] The McCarthy era, named after the Republican Senator from Wisconsin who instigated it, signalled a resurgence of anti-Communism following the First Red Scare

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60. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 101. At a time when department stores such as Macy's and Lord & Taylor grew more popular, it was not uncommon for struggling artists to work for such companies designing and constructing large window displays used to entice customers into their stores.

61. Ibid, 101, 110. At the time Rauschenberg and Johns were living together in either their Pearl Street or Front Street apartments, the Financial District of Manhattan was, ironically, an economically depressed neighborhood in the city. This area of lower Manhattan was not revitalized into the bustling historical neighborhood it is today until the construction of the World Trade Center in 1973, with the area now experiencing a "renaissance" according to several journalists (Gordinier, 2015).

62. Jonathan Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," *Frauen, Kunst, Wissenschaft* 25 (June 1988): 19-20. We cannot say for sure what kind of art Jasper Johns created prior to living with Rauchenberg in 1954, although Rauschenberg apparently recognized Johns' interest in art, which lead him to convince Johns to quit his bookstore job to collaborate on designing department store window displays (Tomkins 2005, 100-101).

63. Moira Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," *Artforum*, November 1977, https://www.artforum.com/print/197709/the-aesthetic-of-indifference-37263.

after World War II.[64] During this period of right wing zealousness, anyone straying from the norms of society could find themselves labeled a communist and blacklisted, unable to live any semblance of a normal lifestyle.[65] Homosexuals were one of several groups targeted by this anti-Communist witch hunt. Many participants believed that homosexuals were more likely to be Communist sympathizers and were therefore a risk to American national security. Known as the "Lavender Scare," this intense wave of homophobia brought on by McCarthy's Second Red Scare saw many homosexual government employees lose their livelihoods at the hands of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Executive Order 10450, which explicitly banned homosexuals from working for the federal government and subsequently led to homosexuals being banned from working in state governments as well.[66] As Katz writes in his article "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialogue in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," this had a chilling effect on art within the queer community, since "expression, self-exposure, wasn't refused so much as sequestered."[67] That is to say, queer artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns did not need to forego expressing themselves, and in turn their sexualities, in their work, but instead had to hide such qualities that could be read as homosexual and, therefore, pro-Communist, within the symbolism of their work. In a similar fashion to Marsden Hartley, Rauschenberg and Johns encoded their

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64. Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," 47.

65. Ibid.

66. "Executive Order 10450, Security Requirements for Government Employment," Executive Orders, National Archives, last modified August 15, 2016, https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/10450.html. This executive order remained active until being rescinded and replaced by the United States Military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy for homosexual admittance by President Bill Clinton in 1995.

67. Katz, "Lovers and Divers," 16.

sexualities within their works to keep their sexuality hidden from the public at large while engaged in artistic expression. This makes more sense when we consider that Rauschenberg and Johns both claimed to be colleagues and friends while carrying on their romantic relationship, never talking about their relationship openly until after their breakup in 1961.[68] It is unknown exactly why Johns and Rauschenberg chose to remain so guarded about their sexualities, perhaps to avoid queer readings of their art or to avoid being labeled “queer artists” rather than simply “artists.” Nevertheless, both expressed their queer sexualities in their art made while living together as romantic partners, which is important in the understanding of their works of art as a whole. Throughout this chapter, I will consider how their sexuality operates in their art during this time period.

Robert Rauschenberg’s Queer Early Works

I would like to reiterate that, for the sake of brevity, I will only be discussing the encoded queer symbols found in the works of Rauschenberg and Johns done shortly before and during the time the two artists were living as romantic partners. This is not to say that neither artist included such encoded symbolism in works produced after this partnership. I would like to begin by discussing the queer symbols encoded in the combines of Robert Rauschenberg created between 1951 and 1961, discussing at length the symbols found within the artist’s major works of this time. To start, I will briefly discuss Rauschenberg’s biography to provide a background for the artist.

[68]. Melissa S. Geiger, “Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns” (class lecture, The Visual Arts After 1945, East Stroudsburg University, East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, October 15, 2015). Either given the bitter nature of their breakup or their naturally guarded behavior, or perhaps both, neither artist has ever discussed their partnership in any detail, while still acknowledging their romantic relationship. While Johns and Rauschenberg often told people they were simply friends, those close to them knew the true nature of their partnership, similar to Marsden Hartley’s close friends’ knowledge of his homosexuality.

Biography

Rauschenberg was, by and large, a transplant into the metropolitan lifestyle. He was born on October 22, 1925 in the rural eastern-Texas town of Port Arthur to Dora and Ernest Rauschenberg, devout Protestants who owned and operated a small cattle farm.[69] In 1941, at the age of sixteen, Rauschenberg enrolled in the pharmacy program at the University of Texas, and studied at the school for two years before being drafted into the United States Navy.[70] He served in the Navy for two years, mostly working as a medical hospital technician in California, before being discharged in 1945. After his discharge, Rauschenberg spent the next four years attending various art schools, including the Kansas City Art Institute and the Académie Julian in Paris, France.[71] It was while studying in France that Rauschenberg met fellow art student Susan Weil, and shortly after meeting the two fell in love.[72] In 1948, Rauschenberg followed Weil to Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina, although he remained here for only a year before

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69. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 13, 16-17.

70. Patricia Burstein, "In His Art and Life, Robert Rauschenberg is a Man Who Steers His Own Daring Course," *People*, May 19, 1980, https://people.com/archive/in-his-art-and-life-robert-rauschenberg-is-a-man-who-steers-his-own-daring-course-vol-13-no-20/.

71. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 16-17, 19. While in the Navy, Rauschenberg attended boot camp in Farragut, Idaho before being assigned to the hospital corps and sent to the San Diego Naval Hospital for training (Tomkins 2005, 16-17). Rauschenberg spent six months training here before being assigned to work at Camp Pendleton, a military base about an hour's drive north of San Diego, for the rest of his time in service (Tomkins 2005, 16-17).

72. Ibid, 20-21. Rauschenberg likely had the opportunity to study at these various schools due to the GI Bill, more formally known as The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which subsidized Rauschenberg's education in exchange for his service in World War II.

travelling to New York to study at the Art Student's League.[73] Despite this distance, Rauschenberg and Weil wed in October 1950, and had a son, Christopher, less than a year later in July 1951.[74]

Rauschenberg met the artist and fellow student Cy Twombly soon after arriving at the Art Students League of New York. It is unknown how soon after meeting that the two began a romantic relationship, although Katz asserts that their relationship started while Rauschenberg was "still married to his then pregnant wife."[75] At this point, Rauschenberg and Weil were living apart, as he and Twombly left the Art Students' League to return to Black Mountain College, while Weil and their son remained in Manhattan.[76] Rauschenberg sporadically visited his wife and child during breaks, much to the chagrin of Weil's family who felt that he was absent both as a husband and a father.[77] During this

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73. Ibid, 23, 31. Founded in 1875, the Art Students League of New York is an art school that has provided art students with a more relax environment to nurture innovation and creativity. It is similar to Black Mountain College in that it does not have any course requirements or grades, nor does it offer any degrees. Notable alumni of the Art Students League of New York include: Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei; painter and muralist Thomas Hart Benton; abstract expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler; art critic Clement Greenberg; abstract expressionist painter Lee Krasner, and pop artist Roy Liechtenstein, just to name a few.

74. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 48. Katz, "Lovers and Divers," 22. Christopher Rauschenberg went on to become both a renowned photographer, with works currently in the collections of twelve internationally recognized museums, and an arts educator, teaching art at Marylhurst University in Lake Oswego, Oregon from 1982 to 1996.

75. Katz, "Lovers and Divers," 21-22. Katz's reasoning behind this assertion lies in the birthdate of Christopher, July 1951, which he backtracks to reveal that Rauschenberg and Weil must have conceived their son in either September or October of 1950 and their wedding was perhaps a product of this pregnancy. Rauschenberg met Twombly at the Art Students League soon after arriving at the school in late August 1950. While he does make a bit of a presumption to assume that Rauschenberg would have even known about his wife's pregnancy before beginning his relationship with Twombly at some point in September 1950, it stands to reason that this scenario is most likely accurate.

76. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 59-60.

77. Ibid, 60.

time Rauschenberg made one of his first pieces of note, his plain, white panels known as his *White Painting (Three Panel)*, famous for its lack of visible subject and form.

The White Paintings

One of the men that was perhaps the most inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting (Three Panel)* is the avant-garde composer John Cage. Rauschenberg first met Cage while the latter was visiting the Betty Parsons Gallery in the spring of 1951.[78] Thirteen years Rauschenberg's senior, Cage was transfixed by the younger artist's work, which was being exhibited and sold by Parsons at this time.[79] One of the pieces Cage saw the day they met was the three large swaths of purely white canvas, devoid of any subject, form, or even brushstroke, known as Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*. In these boldly bland canvases, Rauschenberg encodes the overbearing wishes of conservative 1950s society and the power these elements had over queer individuals living in America during the Lavender Scare. Rauschenberg's *White Painting (Three Panel)*, composed of three white canvases, each roughly two feet wide and nine feet tall, is meant to be displayed on a wall and lit by a bright frontal light that allows for the shadows of the viewers in front of the piece to be projected onto the work itself. These shadows become the forms that the work itself lacks, creating an ever-changing piece composed of ephemeral elements rather than paint. Scholars have interpreted this piece as Rauschenberg's "thumbing his nose" at the Abstract Expressionists by purging it of any

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78. Ibid, 59.

79. Ibid. Cage was so fascinated by Rauschenberg's works that he asked Parsons to have one despite being unable to pay for it (Tomkins 2005, 59). The gallerist obliged, giving Cage an unknown pink and white collage created by Rauschenberg, which the artist later took the liberty of covering in black enamel while waiting for Cage to return to his home sometime later (Tomkins 2005, 59).

raw emotion, which was key to much Abstract Expressionist art.[80] I believe that, while this is likely the case, Rauschenberg also encoded his own message that, if a queer individual such as the artist cannot be open about their sexuality, then they are forced into roles put onto them by others. Thus, the viewer's own shadows are thrown into the canvas by light, making their shadows the subject of the piece.[81]

It seems possible that Rauschenberg was commenting here on his own feelings as a queer man, forced by society into the role of husband and father to avoid accusations of homosexuality when, in reality, the artist had no desire to be married to a woman or have children.[82] What at first may appear to be vast expanses of plain white canvas, it becomes clear after viewing the work that this is not the case, as the shadows created by those who view the work impede such a reading. John Cage credited Rauschenberg's *White Painting* with inspiring him to create his own musical version of this artwork, *4'33"*, an experimental three-movement piece for piano that had the pianist play no notes, allowing for the random and awkward ambient noises created by the audience to become the

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80. Robert S. Mattison, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 42-43.

81. Tom Folland, "Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration," *The Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (December 2010): 350.

82. Rauschenberg biographer Calvin Tomkins writes that the artist was likely pressured into marrying Weil by her family, most especially her father, who worried that "when two people were constantly together, as they were, without being married, there was bound to be talk" (Tomkins 2005, 48). He goes on to state that "on the spot, Rauschenberg proposed that they get married…It just had not occurred to him to ask before" (Tomkins 2005, 48).

composition itself.[83] Just as the ephemeral shadows became the subject of Rauschenberg's empty *White Paintings*, so too does the ephemeral silence become the subject of Cage's *4'33"*. Such an action allowed for the art making process to become democratic in a way, because the viewer participated in the reception of the work of art, rather than simply view or listen in the traditional sense.

Many art historians have discussed the possible meanings behind Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*; many believe that the artist was challenging the definition of fine art in a piece with no conceivable forms or subjects. Rauschenberg alluded to such a challenge in a letter to Betty Parsons in 1951, where the artist stated "it is completely irrelevant that I am making them—Today is their creater [sic]."[84] Interestingly, his *White Painting* have been routinely repaired and repainted by hands other than his own, enlisting the help of assistants and even his own lover Twombly in maintaining the flawless white surface of his *White Painting*. This further emphasizes how Rauschenberg acted as a sort of vessel for a creative output rather than the sole and definitive author.[85]

Art historian Tom Folland provides a queer reading of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, asserting that the artist was "mapping the limits of representation of

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83. Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with John Cage* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 71. "Actually what pushed me into it was not guts but the example of Robert Rauschenberg. His white paintings [...] when I saw those, I said, 'Oh yes, I must. Otherwise I'm lagging, otherwise music is lagging.'" Cage claims that another motivation behind his *4'33"* came from visiting a sound-proof anethoic chamber at Harvard University in 1951, where, upon entering the room, the composer was able to hear two sounds, one high-pitched, and one low-pitched (Stein, 2004). When he asked the sound engineer what these sounds might be, he was told that the high-pitched sound was his nervous system in operation and the low-pitched sound was his blood in circulation (Stein, 2004). The composer realized that silence, much like the invisibility of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, was an impossibility.

84. Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston: Houston Fine Arts Press, 1991), 230.

85. William McGee, "Some Memorable Personalities," in *Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds—An Anthology of Personal Accounts*, ed. Mervin Lane (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 316.

homosexuality in the cold-war 1950s." Folland believes that Rauschenberg was emphasizing the impossibility of queer expression in the conservative American society of the 1950s. Folland is not incorrect in such a reading. It does seem, however, that the artist is actually pushing this message further in these paintings: the shadows of the viewers projected onto the canvas they are viewing, make up for the lack of forms on the canvas itself. Should Rauschenberg have demanded that the piece not be lit from the front, and therefore not allowed for the shadows of the viewers to be displayed on the canvas exhibited before them, I might agree with Folland fully. With this in mind, the canvas cedes control over the forms placed onto it. Ever changing, non-permanent ephemeral auras are projected onto it from an outside source, leaving no trace behind as they enter and leave the flat plane of canvas. I believe that Rauschenberg did indeed mean for the plain white canvas to embody the queer individual living in conservative 1950s America. It represents the wish to live invisibly but the inability to do so, as society projects its cultural heteronormative norms and mores onto the queer individual, morphing them into something they never wished to be. To conform to the norms of the McCarthy era, Lavender Scare America, Rauschenberg felt forced as a queer individual to become a husband and father when he had no real desire to become either. Just as a queer individual's will was not their own in McCarthy era America, with the idea of living invisibly an impossibility at this time, neither is the subject the canvas' own in Rauschenberg's *White Painting*.

Critical reception of Rauschenberg's *White Painting* focused more on the blankness of the canvas itself than on any tangible meanings. Having viewed the work at New York's Stable Gallery in 1953, critic Hubert Crehan wrote that the piece was "con-

ceived [sic.] as a work of art, is beyond the artistic pale. If anything, it is a tour de force in the domain of 'personality gesture,' concluding that the work was nothing more than "dada shenanigans."[86] After seeing the piece in 1953, Clement Greenberg commented in his 1967 article, "Recentness of Sculpture," that Rauschenberg's *White Painting* was one of the works most responsible for "the advent of minimalism (against which Greenberg was principally arguing), but also for the rise of pop, op, assemblage and all those other manifestations of "Novelty art" that disavowed the role of taste and "aesthetic surprise" in legitimate artistic production."[87] Given the fact that Rauschenberg's sexuality was largely a secret at this time, it is no surprise that none of the critics or scholars who viewed the work following its inaugural exhibition in 1953 picked up on such a meaning. Instead, these critics focused on their bold and apparently bland whiteness and emptiness, unaware and unreceptive to any homosexual connotations or commentaries. Just as the homoexpressive symbols encoded in Hartley's "War Images" went undetected by those who lacked the knowledge of his homosexuality, so too did the possible social commentary of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* go undetected by contemporary scholars and critics.

The Combines

Rauschenberg, Twombly, Weil, and the infant Christopher traveled to Black Mountain College in 1952, although mother and child departed after only a few weeks.[88] Rauschenberg biographer Calvin Tomkins asserts that "Rauschenberg's bisexual nature

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86. Branden W. Joseph, "White on White," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (Autumn 2000), 92, 94.

87. Joseph, "White on White," 95.

88. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 60.

was apparent to everyone concerned by now," perhaps making it clear that Weil did in fact know of Rauschenberg and Twombly's relationship at this point.[89] However, he also makes mention that husband and wife were still very much in love with one another, and that, only at the urging of her family did Weil file for divorce in the autumn of 1952.[90] Rauschenberg and Twombly remained romantically involved for a short time following the divorce, briefly traveling around Europe and Northern Africa before Twombly was drafted to fight in the Korean War.[91] During Twombly's absence Rauschenberg met and began a romantic relationship with Jasper Johns. Rauschenberg encouraged Johns to create art, convincing him to quit his job at the Marboro Book Shop, where the two originally met, in favor of working with Rauschenberg designing window displays for department stores around Manhattan, a vocation Rauschenberg picked up to make ends meet while Twombly was away.

While living in Italy for a brief time with Twombly, Rauschenberg became interested in combining various forms of media into one cohesive work of art, thus birthing the artistic medium of the combine.[92] Rauschenberg further experimented with combines upon returning to America, producing *Charlene* and *Minutiae* in 1954. However, the first combine he made during his relationship with Johns was *Bed* (fig. 3.2) in 1955. As Tomkins states, the story of Rauschenberg's *Bed* begins as the artist awoke one morning:

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89. Ibid, 69.

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid, 73, 99. Following his service as a cryptographer in the Korean War, Twombly relocated to Italy in 1957, where he married Tatiana Franchetti of the wealthy Franchetti family in Venice, his wife until his death in 2011 (Tomkins 2005, 73).

92. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 72.

> …wanting to paint, but with nothing to paint on – no canvas, and no money to buy any. His eyes lit on the old quilt that had come up with him from Black Mountain College… The colors and the patchwork pattern interested him. He made a stretcher for it, just as though it were a canvas. He tried painting on the quilt, but something was wrong. The pattern was too strong. He attached his pillow and part of a sheet to the top of the stretcher. This solved the problem – the quilt "gave up and became a bed, stopped insisting on itself"…[93]

In a similar fashion to Jackson Pollock, who painted canvases on the floor, Rauschenberg painted his bed on the floor, then tacked it to the ceiling, thus elevating the painted quilt, pillow, and sheet into the realm of high art just as Pollock had done with his oversized canvases, a technique known as the "90 degree shift."[94] The piece was not exhibited publicly until 1958, when it was received rather poorly, as some critics likened the work to the scene of a "bloody axe murder."[95] So horrified were those who viewed Rauschenberg's *Bed* that the piece was banned from display when it traveled to Italy to be a part of the first Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto.[96]

Though many contemporary commentators objected the mixing of such unorthodox media and the rejection of artistic convention, *Bed* may have troubled spectators in the 1950s for another reason as well. Critics who likened the piece to murder scenes felt it was too grotesque to exhibit publicly. This could be evident in Rauschenberg's own coy interpretation for *Bed*, stating later "I think of *Bed* as one of the

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93. Ibid, 125.

94. Folland, "Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism," 353-354.

95. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 125.

96. Ibid. The Festival of Two Worlds, or *Festival dei Due Mondi* as it is known in Italy, is an annual summer music and opera festival founded by Italian-American composer Gian Carlo Menotti in 1958 and held in Spoleto, Italy. First intended to function as a festival that occurred in both Spoleto and its twin city, Charleston, South Carolina, concurrently, growing disputes between the city of Charleston and the Menotti family caused a separation in 1973 and Charleston ceasing to hold its portion of the festival thereafter.

friendliest pictures I've ever painted … My fear has always been that someone would want to crawl into it."[97] It is possible, however, that, in dirtying his bedroom linens in such a way, Rauschenberg provides a unique commentary on the public opinion of homosexuality at this time. Rauschenberg depicted his bed, where homosexual acts with Johns took place, as a putrid mass of filth, mirroring right-wing conservative opposition to homosexuality and the location of homosexual acts. Given America's conservative views at the time, much of what occurred in Rauschenberg's own bed was considered dirty and vulgar by the public at large; Rauschenberg's use of his own sheets, pillow, and quilt in this piece only heightened this theme. The artist utilized encoding so well in this piece that, without prior knowledge of Rauschenberg's sexual identity the social commentary could not be understood by those who viewed it. Many critics were disgusted by the piece, likening it to a visual representation of a rape or murder instead of recognizing allusions to public opinion regarding homosexuality.[98] Such a reading seems to have escaped the many art historians who have written about Rauschenberg's *Bed*, whom place more emphasis on the artist's use of non-traditional media such as nail polish and toothpaste, not to mention the used quilt and pillow, likening the work to a modern version of Duchamp's *Fountain* in its challenge to the definition of fine art.[99] But there may be more than one purpose for Rauschenberg's *Bed*. Rauschenberg was both challenging modern definitions of fine art as well as commenting on current public opinions about queer culture.

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97. Ibid, 125-126.

98. Ibid, 125.

99. Folland, "Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism," 350.

It appears that Rauschenberg's interest in combines ultimately led to one of the greatest periods of artistic output in his career. Sometime during or after *Bed*, Rauschenberg was walking down a Manhattan street when he came across a secondhand office supply store with an oddly placed taxidermied Angora goat on display in the window.[100] The artist immediately entered the store and inquired to buy the goat, bartering with the shopkeeper, who originally wanted thirty-five dollars upfront for the piece.[101] The artist convinced the shopkeeper to part with the goat for fifteen dollars down, promising to return with the remaining twenty he owed when he could afford it, although the store went out of business shortly afterwards.[102] This taxidermied goat went on to form the basis of Rauschenberg's *Monogram*, worked on between 1955 and 1959 (fig. 3.3). Originally intending to place the goat on a wooden platform to function solely as the work of art, Rauschenberg was ultimately dissatisfied with the lack of artistic quality of this first iteration of *Monogram*, saying that the goat still "looked too much like itself."[103] To rectify this, Rauschenberg put a car tire around the goat to make it appear less normal and, in his mind, more artistic.[104] He mounted the tire-encircled goat onto a

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100. *Robert Rauschenberg: Man at Work*, DVD, directed by Chris Granlund (Chatsworth: Image Entertainment, 1997).

101. *Robert Rauschenberg: Man at Work*.

102. Ibid.

103. Graham Smith, "Rereading Rauschenberg's *Monogram*," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 85, no. 4 (2016), 273.

104. Rauschenberg has given different explanations for including the tire around the goat's midsection in his *Monogram*, at times claiming that it was added so the animal had "something to do during the day," while at other times claiming that it added a sense of fantasy to the artwork, and that, without it, the goat would appear to be too realistic (Stenström 2007, 48-59).

platform, which is often referred to as the goat's "garden" or "pasture," decorating it with various media and objects amalgamated into one work of art.[105]

In the first major interpretation of Rauschenberg's *Monogram* art historians Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis in 1981 attach sexual connotations to the work. In their article "Re-Reading Rauschenberg," Cranshaw and Lewis assert that "the goat inside the tyre [sic] can be read as a sign of sexual penetration."[106] However, they only briefly discuss the tire's function as an anus, making it clear that they believe Rauschenberg is referencing homosexual intercourse most specifically, and do not provide any tangible evidence in the work to support this rather bold claim.[107] Around the same time, the art critic Robert Hughes discussed *Monogram* in his eight-part BBC television series, "The Shock of the New," stating that the combine was "one of the wittiest images of sexual

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[105]. Smith, "Rereading Rauschenberg's *Monogram*," 274. The platform is decorated with several cutouts from popular publications of this time. There are cutouts of four right footprints from an article titled "Air Force uses footprints for identification," from the January 12, 1959 issue of *Life*, placed on the front center of the piece, perhaps establishing the presence of four separate figures in front of the goat (Smith 2016, 283). On the left of the platform, towards the rear of the goat, Rauschenberg puts the cutout of a photograph from the August 25, 1958 issue of *Life* depicting a tightrope walker high between the peaks of the Zugspitze in the Bavarian Alps (Smith 2016, 285-286). Near the rear of the goat, a tennis ball is pasted to the platform of the piece, perhaps representing a toy the goat might play with in its "pasture," or it could be that the ball's proximity to the goat's rear-end represents the creature's own excrement (Smith 2016, 284-285). Other cutouts of photographs on the platform include: a crowd from the Ohio State vs Iowa college football game on November 16, 1957 with white circles behind their heads adjacent to the footprints; the opulent lobby of the Morgan Guaranty Trust building in the front left corner of the platform; three executives from Guaranty seated at a conference table for a meeting near the left rear of the platform; Tennis player Earl Buchholtz standing dejected following his loss to Ashley Cooper in the finals of the New South Wales championship on November 29, 1958 near the previous cutout on the left side of the platform; an astronaut posing with a space capsule in the far rear left corner of the platform, and a snapshot of the calamity following an Army exercise that left five members of the 101st Airborne Division dead after many were dragged along the ground while parachuting in high winds placed on the rear of the platform (Smith 2016, 283-287). Rauschenberg loaded the left side of the platform with cutouts. The right side is painted brown, grey, and black, perhaps referencing the goat's shadow, which would obfuscate any cutouts placed within it. The right rear side of the platform, which would not be covered by the goat's shadow, is painted white, perhaps referencing the light that would lay along the platform in this area.

[106]. Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, "Re-Reading Rauschenberg," *Artscribe* 29 (June 1981), 45.

[107]. Cranshaw and Lewis, "Re-Reading Rauschenberg," 45.

penetration ever made by an artist," and acknowledging that most of the works throughout Rauschenberg's oeuvre contain some sort of sexual reference or motif, a claim with which I do not necessarily disagree.[108] However, Hughes does not discern between references to heterosexual or homosexual intercourse in Rauschenberg's work. The paint splatters on the goat's nose supports Hughes' argument this argument as well, as Rauschenberg often lampooned the Abstract Expressionist group in his works. Art historian Kenneth Silver explained that Rauschenberg "turned the high seriousness of abstract New York painting into 'low' comedy," producing works of art that both lampoon the often masculine solemnity of the New York School and ironically conceal the artists' own sexualities.[109] If we see these splatters of paint on the goat's nose as a jab at Abstract Expressionist macho gesturalism personified by Pollock, whose techniques have been called "ejaculatory," then perhaps we could read them as mocking hypermasculinist action painting in *Monogram* as well.[110] These splatters of paint on the goat's face might be read as the ejaculatory splatters of paint used by the Abstract Expressionists, adding another layer of sexual reference to this work.

It is unlikely that Rauschenberg was simply and solely thumbing his nose at the Abstract Expressionists with *Monogram*. I would first like to mention some of the other interpretations of Rauschenberg's *Monogram* before circling back to this point. While some scholars have interpreted this work as having sexual connotations, with the goat's

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108. *The Shock of the New*, DVD, directed by David Lewis Richardson (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1980).

109. Kenneth Silver, "Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art," in *Hand Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 181.

110. Helena Reckitt, *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 65.

penetration of the tire alluding to sexual intercourse, others find more religious foundations, believing that the goat instead references the ram in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac.[111] Kenneth Binder argued in his 2006 article "The Sins of the World" that Rauschenberg's Angora goat is meant to represent the scapegoat discussed in Leviticus 16:22. In this passage, a goat has the sins of all man placed upon it by a Jewish priest before being banished from the realm; tire encircling the goat may then refer to the wreath the Jewish priest would have placed on the goat's head to represent the sins of the village being placed upon it.[112] One could even take this argument further by positing that Rauschenberg himself felt like a scapegoat while living as a queer man during the Lavender Scare in 1950s America. During an era when queer individuals were being inanely labeled as Communists, and President Eisenhower's Executive Order 10450 legitimizing such accusations one can understand why Rauschenberg might have felt like a scapegoat at this moment. Rauschenberg connects himself to the damned creature, as fully outing himself would have led to being ostracized from society like the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:22.

As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, the piece itself contains a litany of equally viable interpretations, none seeming more correct than the other, which Rauschenberg probably intended for the artwork. Just as Marsden Hartley's "War Images" contained symbols that could represent both Karl von Freyberg and the German Empire as a whole, so too does *Monogram* contain symbols that could represent both the artist's homosexuality as well as a slew of other equally viable ideas, such as the ram in

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111. Smith, "Rereading Rauschenberg's *Monogram*," 280.

112. Kenneth Bendiner, "The Sins of the World," *Apollo* 164 (October 2006), 56-59.

the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, the scapegoat from the book of Leviticus, or the notion of gravity itself.[113] While Hartley utilized dual signifieds in his "War Images" to divert the average viewer away from reading any homosexual elements in his works, so too does Rauschenberg utilize many equally viable signifieds in his *Monogram* to divert the average viewer away from interpreting the piece as a tongue-in-cheek reference to anal sex. It may seem that Rauschenberg was not quite successful in this diversion, as one of the first major interpretations of *Monogram* in 1981 by Cranshaw and Lewis uncovered the signified sexual connotations of the piece, but only decades after the work was first exhibited. Critical reception to *Monogram* following its first exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery in April 1960 made no mention of the work's sexual, or homosexual, connotations. Rauschenberg was indeed successful in masking the homoerotic and homoexpressive elements of his *Monogram* for over twenty years; these symbols were only first uncovered when open homosexuality was more accepted and no longer equated to accusations of anti-American, Communist sympathies.

[113]. In his 1981 article "Rauschenberg Re-Evaluated" art historian Michael Newman provides a more religious reading of *Monogram*, connecting it to the ram Abraham sacrificed in place of his son Isaac in Genesis 22. Newman compares the tire around the goat's midsection, which would greatly inhibit the goat's ability to move, to the thicket that hinders the ram in the biblical story, an obstacle that allows Abraham to capture it, and ultimately leads to the ram's death (Newman 1981, 7-8). Rauschenberg possibly is referencing the sacrificial ram in Genesis 22 in *Monogram*, although it does seem to be a bit of a stretch, especially since a ram is a type of sheep, also known as a "big horn sheep," and is not a goat like the one in this combine. In her 2010 chapter "A Conflict in Stockholm: The Rise and Fall of Monogram" from her book *The Great Migrator: Robert Rauschenberg and the Global Rise of American Art*, art historian Hiroko Ikegami believes that *Monogram* is structured around the conflict between gravity, which acts as a physical principle, and the artist, who actively seeks to fight against this force. However, this interpretation seems to relate more to the cutouts on the platform surrounding the goat, rather than the goat itself. Ikegami connects the tennis ball and cutout of four footprints to things that are inherently "earthbound," or found on the ground due to the forces of gravity (Ikegami 2010, 102-151). She believes Rauschenberg identifies three separate groups in the cutout images that surround his *Monogram*, one of objects that are grounded, one of objects that attempt to fight gravity, and one of objects that have freed themselves of gravity altogether. This interpretation seems plausible, although it raises the larger question of the purpose of the goat and tire, considered the centerpiece and subject of the piece. She does not discuss these elements, which in my opinion seems a gross oversight.

Although I have only discussed three of the works created by Rauschenberg during his relationship with Jasper Johns throughout this chapter, I would emphasize that I do not believe these are the only pieces that contain encoded references to Rauschenberg's own queer sexuality in the artist's oeuvre. However, for the sake of time, these three main bookmarks that most evidently display Rauschenberg's use of ambiguous signifieds suggest a persistent effort to divert attention away from his own sexuality from this time. Similar analyses could be applied to the hidden sexual and homosexual themes throughout his entire oeuvre, such as his 1955 *Rebus*, his 1968 *Soundings*, and his 1969 *Carnal Clocks*, to name a few, an undertaking too large for this thesis alone. However, the use of encoding is most evident in the pieces made while in his relationship with Johns. During this time, when the effects of the Lavender Scare still lingered, public outing of their relationship or sexual identities could have resulted in being ostracized and unable to lead a normal life.

The Early Queer Constructions of Jasper Johns

A brief biography of Jasper Johns is in order to aid in understanding his later works of art. A southern boy like Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns was born in Augusta, Georgia in 1930, making him five years Rauschenberg's junior.[114] Following his parents' separation soon after his birth, he lived between his grandmother's house and his aunt's house in Allendale, South Carolina.[115] His grandmother taught him how to paint and draw, and eventually Johns attended art school at the University of South Carolina, although he only completed three semesters of coursework before traveling to New York City to attend the

114. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 99.

115. Ibid, 110.

Parsons School of Design in 1949.[116] Johns's time at Parsons was short-lived, and the artist was drafted into the United States Army to fight in the Korean War in 1952.[117] He was first stationed in his native South Carolina before completing a tour of duty in Japan Upon returning to New York City in early 1954, Johns "destroyed every artwork he had made that he could find, so that nothing remained to provide evidence of his paintings' evolution or put them into a context."[118] The artist later stated that he did this to provide himself with a fresh start in art making, although he admits that he was perhaps egged on by the negative reception many of his early works received from his colleagues.[119] Lacking the funds to return to Parsons, Johns instead got a job at the local Marboro bookstore in Manhattan and spent his free time educating himself on the history of art, studying works by artists such as: Paul Cézanne, Marcel Duchamp, René Magritte, John Frederick Peto, Pablo Picasso, and Leonardo da Vinci.[120] As stated earlier, it was while working at the Marboro bookstore that Johns eventually came to meet, befriend, and fall in love with Robert Rauschenberg, who encouraged him to quit his job and pursue a more creative and lucrative job decorating department store windows with Rauschenberg.[121]

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116. Nan Rosenthal, "Jasper Johns," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, last modified October 2004, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/john/hd_john.htm.

117. Riva Castleman, *Jasper Johns, a print retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986), 48.

118. Castleman, *Jasper Johns*, 48.

119. Ibid.

120. Ibid.

121. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 100-101.

Sometime after meeting Rauschenberg in 1954, Johns claims he decided to "stop becoming and to be an artist."[122] The first work Johns did while living with Rauschenberg was his 1954-55 *Flag* (fig. 3.4). Using the somewhat unorthodox medium of encaustic, or beeswax mixed with pigment and applied to canvas while hot and melted, Johns has always been somewhat coy in explaining his motivations for creating *Flag*. Initially, Johns insisted that he made the work simply because he "intuitively liked to paint flags."[123] Later, Johns amended this statement, saying instead that he "dreamed one night of painting a large flag and afterwards began to paint one."[124] Johns shared with Rauschenberg a penchant for sometimes aggravatingly simple explanations for their works of art. Nevertheless, Johns saw some artistic potential in probing the image American flag in his art.

As scholar Moira Roth points out, 1954 was a year of "hysterical patriotism," in the United States in more ways than one.[125] Between April 22 and June 17, 1954, Republican Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, then the Chairman of the Permanent Investigations Sub-Committee held the "Army-McCarthy Hearings," which examined the supposed Communist infiltration of the Army and State Department.[126] For the first time in history, a Senate investigation was broadcast to the nation on television, allowing for millions to witness the anti-Communist witch hunt perpetrated by McCarthy against

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122. Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns* (London: Reaktion, 1994), 95.

123. Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, 98.

124. Ibid.

125. Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," 43.

126. Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, 101.

groups deemed to be "subversive," including homosexuals.[127] Prominently displayed during these hearings was the American flag, a reminder to the television audience watching at home that these individuals accused of Communist sympathies were working against the patriotism that the flag symbolized. Although congressmen from both sides of the aisle began to turn against McCarthy by the end of the hearings, going so far as to pass a vote censuring the Senator in December 1954, the anti-homosexual rhetoric of his hearings continued to reverberate.[128] Even after McCarthy passed away while in office in 1957, his legacy haunted the United States government for decades, including President Eisenhower's Executive Order 10450, which banned homosexuals from holding federal or state office until 1995. Coincidentally, the McCarthy-Army Hearings concluded three days after the inaugural Flag Day on June 14, 1954. President Eisenhower's Flag Day proclamation of June 4, 1954 urged citizens to "honor their colors by displaying them … and by giving prayerful consideration to their duties as well as their privileges under this glorious banner."[129] November 11, 1954 marked the dedication of Felix de Weld's sculpture at the Iwo Jima Marine Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, based on the famous Associated Press photograph of American soldiers raising the flag on Mount Suribachi in Iwo Jima almost ten years earlier[130] With all of this in mind, one

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127. Ibid. In his testimony during the McCarthy-Army Hearings, former Director of Central Intelligence Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter stated "The use of homosexuals as a control mechanism over individuals recruited for espionage is a generally accepted technique which has been used at least on a limited basis for many years" (Barrett 2009, 708).

128. Ibid.

129. Ibid. It is worth noting that on the inaugural Flag Day on June 14, 1954, President Eisenhower would sign into law the legislation that added the words "under God," to the Pledge of Allegiance as a way of "reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America's heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country's most powerful resource in peace and war" (Orton 1994, 101).

130. Ibid, 103.

might see why Johns might have had a dream about a large American flag sometime in 1954, as this symbol seemed so prominent during this time.

In considering President Eisenhower's words on the proclamation of the inaugural Flag Day, I found myself wondering what privileges did queer individuals such as Rauschenberg and Johns have to honor on such a day? They and individuals like them were unable to reveal their sexuality publicly for fear of being blacklisted and ostracized by society, as even those who were friends of suspected homosexuals often risked being fired for "guilt of association."[131] Johns is perhaps representing this impossibility, as much of the general public felt during this time, of being both homosexual and patriotic. Is his "Old Glory" a sloppy, dirty symbol of the anti-homosexual ideologies so rampant in the country during this time, and not a pristine symbol of American patriotism? In *Flag*, the wax is applied unevenly, producing a plane of shades alternating from dark to light rather than consistent tones of color, such that the white bars of the flag look especially dirty and dingy, as if dust had been rubbed into these areas. The stars in the upper left corner of the work appear uneven and imperfect, likely executed to the best of Johns' ability while remaining imprecise due to the limitations of the medium itself. The flag, often appearing bright and clean when swaying on flagpoles, here appears dull, sloppy, and dirty by comparison, as if Johns' *Flag* has been corrupted by the anti-homosexual ideologies of the American government. *Flag* is very much a product of the time in which it was created and may well be Johns' own commentary on how those who do not fit into the cookie-cutter roles of heterosexual, Christian, Caucasian men might view such a symbol as indicative of a system that oppresses minorities. Johns's

[131]. James Gleason, "LGBT History: The Lavender Scare," National LGBT Chamber of Commerce, last modified October 3, 2017, https://www.nglcc.org/blog/lgbt-history-lavender-scare.

alternative depiction might be expressive of the flag as a symbol of oppression, (often in the name of "patriotism"), a view shared by the disenfranchised—homosexuals, African-Americans, and Muslims, and other minorities. While matters may have improved, American today is still riddled with troubling homophobic, anti-Muslim, ant-Semitic, and other hateful attitudes.

The perception of Johns's *Flag* as possibly anti-patriotic must have been evident when the piece was first exhibited at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958. Alfred Barr, then the director of the Museum of Modern Art, intended to purchase the painting, but ultimately could not, fearing that it could be viewed as unpatriotic.[132] Initial critical reception seemed to center around the debates regarding the nature of the work itself: is it merely a painting of a flag, or is it a flag itself? Can the piece be understood as a flag, or does its status as a piece of fine art interrupt the inherent meaning contained within a flag? Is it a sign or a referent? And these debates frame scholarly interpretations of *Flag* to this day. Still, we must consider that *Flag,* made while Johns and Rauschenberg were a couple, might be commenting on the impossibility of being both a queer man and a patriot in America and about fears of outing himself or being outed. In other words, Johns' piece is divisive on purpose, diverting viewer's attention away from any commentaries the artist is making on queer individuals and their views of America at the time the work was created.

Johns' first foray into the realm of the combine is his 1955 *Target with Plaster Casts*, in which he placed hinged boxes containing plaster cases of his own body parts:

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[132]. Catherine Wagley, "Jasper Johns Wanted His Retrospective to Appeal to Young People. The Broad Complied – and Now It's a Hit," *Artnet*, February 22, 2018, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jasper-johns-wanted-young-people-to-see-his-art-the-broads-retrospective-has-pulled-it-off-1228133.

foot, ear, face, hand, nipple, penis, and heel, atop a painting of blue and yellow circles, or targets, on a red background.[133] This piece, despite appearing as a row of kitschy amusement park prizes, is rife with homosexual references that go unnoticed by the average viewer.[134] The plaster casts of the artist's various body parts are placed inside of hinged boxes, symbolizing how the artist had to hide his sexuality behind closed doors to avoid becoming a target during the Lavender Scare.[135] The arrangement allows for the viewer to open these compartments, revealing the parts hidden inside, or literally "opening the closet" to view the pieces fully. In his psychoanalytic interpretation of Johns' work, Weinberg hypothesizes that these targets are, in fact, abstract representations of anuses, claiming that "the target is nothing but rings within rings – a hole to aim at," insinuating that these targets act as a place to aim, just as a homosexual man aims his genitals at another man's anus.[136] This interpretation appears rather simplistic as Johns was never known to be this vulgar or straightforward about his sexuality. Instead these targets could be understood to represent what the homosexual had become in 1950s American society, a target of oppression by the American government.

Much of the initial critical reception of *Target with Plaster Casts* seemed to overlook homosexual undertones encoded in the work. Instead critics focused on its

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133. Johns originally intended to make his *Target with Plaster Casts* incorporate electricity just as his lover Robert Rauschenberg had done in several of his combines (Orton 1994, 47). For more on the incorporation of electricity in the combines of Robert Rauschenberg, see Melissa S. Geiger, "Robert Rauschenberg's *Oracle*, *Soundings*, and *Carnal Clocks*: A Sociohistorical Critique" (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2005). In Johns' own words, "the lids of the boxes would have been keys prepared in such a way that touching them caused noises from behind the painting" (Orton 1994, 47).

134. Jill Johnston, *Jasper Johns – Privileged Information* (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 231.

135. Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, 47.

136. Jonathan Weinberg, "It's in the Can: Jasper Johns and the Anal Society," *Genders* 1 (Spring 1988): 43.

"sinister overtones," likening the plaster casts of body parts to a dismembered body just as they likened Rauschenberg's *Bed* to the scene of a murder.[137] Officials at the Jewish Museum in New York were so offended by the boxes containing a plaster cast of a penis and a bone that "looked like the female genitalia" that they refused to display the piece in the 1957 exhibition "Artists of the New York School: Second Generation" unless these two boxes remained closed, a request Johns refused.[138] Johns also did not allow Barr to purchase the piece for the Museum of Modern Art after the curator confided that the box containing the plaster cast of a penis would need to remain closed "all of the time" for the museum to exhibit the work.[139] As is clear, the plaster cast of a penis caused controversy, but the precise reasons why are not discussed by any critic in great detail. Nevertheless, the piece was not considered problematic because of homoerotic content; if it was nobody was willing to make such an accusation.

I believe Johns knew that the penis would create difficulties and used it to his advantage by allowing for its very presence to overshadow any homosexual encoding he might have put into this work. He uses his targets to symbolize the feelings he had as a queer individual living in America during the Lavender Scare in a similar fashion to how Rauschenberg used a taxidermized goat in his *Monogram*. The former is a target, while the latter is a scapegoat. The plaster casts above the target are hidden behind closed

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137. Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, 49.

138. Ibid, 48-49. Jewish Museum officials tried to persuade Johns into closing the boxes containing the plaster cast of a penis and a bone resembling the female genitalia by saying that it would make the piece more "mysterious" to no avail (Orton 1994, 49).

139. Ibid, 49. Orton explains the dialogue between Johns and Barr in his chapter discussing *Target with Plaster Casts*: "…Barr asked him 'Could we keep this one box closed?' [referring to the box containing a plaster cast of a penis painted green] Jasper replied, 'It all depends. All of the time or some of the time?' Barr answered, 'Well, to be quite honest, all of the time.' Then Jasper said, 'I'm afraid, Mr. Barr, that I wouldn't find that acceptable.'" (Orton 1994, 49).

doors, hidden from sight like many closeted queer individuals during the Lavender Scare (and at other times, as well). When one opens these doors, they literally "open the closet" to reveal the figures that lie inside, freeing them from their oppression and allowing for them to express themselves on their own terms. Johns hides all of this behind depictions that he knew would be controversial in conservative 1950s American society, a move that diverts the viewer away from uncovering the true homosexual feelings Johns had encoded in the work.

The year 1959 proved to be the beginning of the end for Johns' and Rauschenberg's relationship, as the latter relocated to Florida, where he would remain until his death in 2008, leaving Johns alone back in New York City.[140] Speaking of their relationship in the years that followed, Rauschenberg admitted that his "sensual excessiveness" alienated Johns, who was a more shy, serious personality in opposition to Rauschenberg's outgoing, clownish one.[141] Nineteen sixty-one was the final breaking point with distance taking its toll along with mounting creative differences. Both took the breakup hard. Johns moved back to his native South Carolina where he made works such as his 1961 *In Memory of My Feelings – Frank O'Hara*; Rauschenberg constructed his combine *Slow* that same year, depicting a South Carolina license plate mounted atop a heap of mangled metal discarded as debris.[142] Afterward, neither imbued their work with the same homosexual encoding they had during their relationship. In the words of Katz,

140. Jonathan Katz, "The Art of Code," Queer Arts Resource, accessed March 11, 2019, http://www.queer-arts.org/archive/show4/forum/katz/katz_set.html.

141. Katz, "The Art of Code."

142. Ibid.

"It is as if, without one another, Johns and Rauschenberg have lost the ability to represent themselves."[143]

[143]. Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

MOVING FORWARD: THE OBSOLESCENCE OF QUEER ENCODING?

To close, I would like to briefly discuss queer encoding and its applications following Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns' breakup in 1961. Katz has argued that pop artist Andy Warhol's works exhibit methods of queer encoding similar to that in the work Rauschenberg and Johns. Noting that both Rauschenberg and Johns found Warhol to be "too swish," in comparison to their own somewhat "straight-acting" personalities, Katz believes that Warhol's persona was manufactured to sell paintings and make money.[144] For example, when the first potential collectors arrived at Warhol's house to view his pieces, they were "greeted by the artist answering the door in an eighteenth-century mask, complete with jewels and feathers."[145] After offering the collectors similar masks, they entered the house and heard "a single loud rock song blar[ing]from the record player over and over again. He never changed the record nor turned down the volume during the length of the visit."[146] The collectors noted that Warhol was oddly silent, "not the usual behavior of someone trying to impress collectors," yet they found themselves curiously attracted to Warhol's eccentric personality, leaving with one or two pieces each.[147] This manufactured, bizarre persona clearly attracted sales for Warhol, who would admit that his art practice was largely money-oriented.

Katz proposes that Warhol fashioned this public face following the artist's failures to market himself as a queer artist. Warhol seemed to be equally as guarded about

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144. Needham, "Robert Rauschenberg"; Katz, *Andy Warhol*, 1-2.

145. Katz, *Andy Warhol*, 1.

146. Ibid.

147. Ibid.

his sexuality as were Rauschenberg and Johns.[148] Warhol advocated for the superficiality of his art, warning “people to not look any deeper than the surface of his art and life,” as both were indeed connected in his encoded depictions.[149] In 1957, at the age of twenty-nine, having worked as a commercial illustrator for several years prior, Warhol attempted to have works exhibited at the well-known avant-garde Tanager Gallery in New York City.[150] These pieces, completed in the artist’s free time, depicted young, boyish men passionately kissing one another, a subject that even this avant-garde gallery did not want to exhibit, so Warhol’s works were quickly rejected.[151] Crushed by this professional setback, Warhol began to cultivate an image that was significantly less queer, one that he knew he could market for mass appeal. Although Johns and Rauschenberg’s comments indicate that many of Warhol’s contemporaries understood his eccentric behavior in terms of queerness, the artist chose subject matter and a manner of self-presentation that could simultaneously be read by mainstream observers as asexual rather than explicitly queer. While his personality could be considered queer, his sexuality was presented publicly as being asexual, and was therefore non-threatening to a patriarchal, heterosexual society.

Warhol seemed to be infatuated with the fabrication of public personas and how celebrities changed their image to appeal to a mass audience. For example, in his 1962

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148. Ibid, 2.

149. Ibid, 1.

150. Ibid, 2.

151. Ibid. Warhol took this rejection so hard because it followed a success in completing his series of drawings of famous celebrities’ shoes, and one was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and six others were reproduced in *Life* magazine (Katz 1993, 2). To follow such success with this blunt rejection likely showed the artist that such outright homosexual works would not be successful even in the most avant-garde of art galleries.

silkscreen *Marilyn Diptych*, Warhol depicts a headshot of famous actress Marilyn Monroe repeated with swapped color palettes, exhibiting the reproducibility of her own image. He emphasized Monroe's makeup, often coloring it as a foil to the surrounding planes of color to make it stand out in an almost clownish way. Indeed, the woman we see here is not the Norma Jeane Mortenson who worked in the Radioplane Munitions Factory in Burbank, California, but instead the Marilyn Monroe image that Mortenson would adopt to market herself in Hollywood.[152] Perhaps Warhol is drawing a parallel between Mortenson's image invention and his own. After all, Warhol was a queer man living in a society that demanded he create non-threatening self-images more in line with the norms and mores of the dominant patriarchal, heterosexual society. Warhol representing himself as who he truly was, a queer man interested in exploring his sexuality through his art, was unacceptable to the public at large at this time, evident in the Tanager Gallery's refusal to exhibit his drawings of men kissing on the grounds of subject-matter. Therefore, Warhol was forced to establish a new self-image: bizarre to attract interested buyers, queer while also mysterious and neutering, and non-threatening, non-sexual, to market himself successfully as an artist.

Moving forward, it appears as though Rauschenberg, Johns, and Warhol were the last of their kind in terms of utilizing queer encoding to hide their sexualities out of fear of societal ostracization or career sabotage. While gay liberation groups such as the Mattachine Society existed throughout the 1950s and 60s, it was the Stonewall Riots on June 28, 1969 that truly launched gay liberation into national discussion. The riots

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152. Michael Beschloss, "Marilyn Monroe's World War II Drone Program," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/04/upshot/marilyn-monroes-world-war-ii-drone-program.html.

centered around the Stonewall Inn, a famous gay bar in Greenwich Village and followed a New York Police Department (NYPD) raid of the bar, which at this point had been occurring nearly once a month.[153] However, this raid would not go as planned, as police, either accidentally or advertently, injured several queer individuals while exercising crowd control outside of the bar.[154] The mob, composed of mostly gay people who frequented the bar, began to act violently toward police, throwing bottles at them and slashing the tires to their police wagons in retaliation.[155] Ultimately, the crowd became so wild and violent that the police inside of the Stonewall Inn were forced to barricade themselves behind the bar until backup could arrive to quell the riot.[156] While a backup brigade was able to calm the crowd somewhat so that police could enter and exit the bar without fear of violence, the riot lasted into the night on June 29, and protestors demonstrating outside of the bar as police dismantled its interior.[157] This event is considered the linchpin of the gay liberation movement, and groups such as the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activist Alliance forming in the aftermath of the riots. On the one-year anniversary of the riots in 1970, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles would

153. Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 183. Purchased by the Genovese crime family in 1956, three members of the mafia would invest $3,500 in 1966 to convert the Stonewall Inn into a gay bar to generate profits (Duberman 1993, 183). Operating with no liquor license, no running water, and no fire exits to keep costs low, the crime family would pay off the local cops weekly to keep them from hassling the bar (Duberman 1993, 181, 185). While police would raid the bar about once a month to keep up appearances, they often gave the bar owners a twenty-four-hour notice prior to avoid arrests.(Duberman 1993, 194). However, on the night of the Stonewall Riots, the bar owners had received no notice and many individuals such as drag queens and crossdressers werearrested for indecency (Duberman 1993, 194).

154. David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 154.

155. Carter, *Stonewall*, 155-156.

156. Ibid, 175.

157. Ibid, 184.

hold their first Gay Pride Parades.[158] This development radically changed the stakes of expression for a generation of queer artists. Those who might have felt compelled to encode their sexualities within their works of art to hide their queer identities from the public instead began to feel an urgency to express their homosexuality fully and with pride.

Nearly a decade after the Stonewall Riots sparked the gay liberation movement, a tragedy of epidemic proportions would further compel the queer community to express their sexuality freely. The AIDS epidemic officially began in the United States on June 5, 1981 with five confirmed cases of the disease affecting homosexual men in Los Angeles. First referred to as "gay-related immune deficiency," or GRID, HIV and AIDS began to spread through the queer community like wildfire, as the disease was most easily spread through the mucous membrane of the inner-anus by means of seminal fluid.[159] The Centers for Disease Control estimates that over 50,000 people died of AIDS in the United States between 1981-1987, and males represented 92% of these deaths.[160] In the following years this number only rose, and over 200,000 people dying of AIDS between 1988-1992, with males representing 87.5% of these deaths.[161] Despite the large number of casualties that resulted from the AIDS epidemic, many queer individuals felt that government organizations such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) largely

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158. Duberman, *Stonewall*, 278-279.

159. Centers for Disease Control, "*Pneumocystis pneumonia*--Los Angeles," *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 30, no. 21 (June 1981): 250-252. "Gay cancer" was another term used to describe GRID before the terms HIV and AIDS were coined.

160. "HIV and AIDS --- United States, 1981—2000," MMWR Weekly, Centers for Disease Control, last modified June 8, 2001, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm.

161. Centers for Disease Control, "HIV and AIDS."

ignoring the issue.[162] President Ronald Reagan only first acknowledged the epidemic in a 1985 speech in which he promised that work on solving it would be a "top priority" before hypocritically cutting 11% of AIDS-research spending the following year.[163] Activist groups that arose from this crisis, such as ACT UP and Gran Fury, often employed art to pressure the government to address the crisis. Works such as ACT UP's "Silence=Death" poster (fig. 4.2) and Gran Fury's *Kissing Doesn't Kill* (fig. 4.3) played a pivotal role in this activism designed to appeal to a mass audience. Far from containing any encoded imagery, these works were graphic and clear, produced explicitly for public communication and consumption. Queer artists made works that dealt with the crisis and its general and personal effects: Robert Mapplethorpe, David Wojnarowicz, and Félix González-Torres created works that addressed both their respective sexualities and HIV-positive diagnoses.

In the years since Rauschenberg, Johns, and Warhol first made encoded art, American society has changed its attitudes about homosexuality, and one might think that queer encoding would have become less prevalent. For example, in 2015 the United States Supreme Court ruled that the ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional in the decision, Obergefell v. Hodges. Polls from 2018 estimate that 60% of American parents say they would not mind if their child married someone of the same gender.[164] However,

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162. United Press International, "Police Arrest AIDS Protesters Blocking Access to FDA Offices," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-10-11-mn-3909-story.html.

163. Hank Plante, "Regan's Legacy," *San Francisco AIDS Foundation*, February 6, 2011, http://sfaf.org/hiv-info/hot-topics/from-the-experts/2011-02-reagans-legacy.html.

164. Philip Bump, "Republicans would least like their kids to marry a transgender person. For Democrats? A Republican," *The Washington Post*, February 21, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/02/21/republicans-would-least-like-their-kids-marry-transgender-person-democrats-republican/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.281b44fc81b6.

a queer individual's reasons for masking their sexuality in their works of art is not limited to fear of social stigma.not simply in response to social stigma. For example, many queer individuals find themselves living closeted lives behind manufactured self-images just as Rauschenberg, Johns, and Warhol did nearly sixty years ago, albeit for different reasons. Perhaps they conceal their sexuality in fear of their conservative family or friends ostracizing them, or out of an innate guilt that institutions such as the Catholic Church might foster in queer individuals from a young age. An accepting government and society does not necessarily mean that a queer individual can be free to express their sexuality fully without fear of repercussions from other factors.

We might also consider queer individuals living in other countries where homosexuality is still illegal as those who might continue to use queer encoding in their works of art. For example, the contemporary queer artist Alireza Shojaian was born in Iran, where homosexuality is punishable by death. Shojaian had the courage to create works such as his *Salad Season 1* (fig. 4.4) and *Salad Season 2* (fig. 4.5), in which the artist depicts himself peeling and cutting a carrot held in front of his groin to insinuate that he is performing these actions on his own penis "to show the pain of? someone that is not accepting his sexuality, his identity" while studying Fine Art at the Azzad Islamic Art and Architecture University in Tehran.[165] While the artist's classmates had their work exhibited throughout the halls of the university, Shojaian was forced to hide his work under kraft paper to be viewed solely by the professor, because he could be reported to the government and arrested for works containing homoerotic subject matter. Ultimately, Shojaian found himself unable to emigrate to the United States or Europe due to

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165. Alexis Stergakis, "Portraits of Queer Love and Life in the Middle East," *Queer Here*, November 30, 2018, https://wearequeerhere.com/queerart.

sanctions placed on Iran, and was instead forced to relocate to Lebanon, where laws surrounding homosexuals are more lenient, although society is still unaccepting of such a lifestyle.[166] Encoding can surely be found in the works of countless other queer individuals living in countries where homosexuality is abhorred or illegal. Those who lack the courage Shojaian had in depicting his sexuality despite the possible legal ramifications are forced to encode their sexuality in their works of art to keep the status quo and avoid persecution.[167] As these countries become more accepting of queer sexualities in time, or as queer individuals leave to find places that are more accepting of their lifestyle, the public will learn about the queer elements encoded in their works of art. However, until then, such elements will remain a secret to us, just as these elements were kept secret from the public in the War Images of Marsden Hartley's "Amerika" series and the works created by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns during their furtive relationship.

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166. Stergakis, "Portraits of Queer Love."

167. This section lacks examples of queer encoding in Middle Eastern art because, just as critics contemporary to Rauschenberg and Johns were unable to decipher the queer elements within their works until revealing their respective sexualities, we are also unable to uncover the queer encoding in any works of a closeted individual living in countries like Saudi Arabia or Iran without prior knowledge of their sexuality.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The practice of encoding, a term first used by Katz in reference to the hidden sexual themes found in the works of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, is not a method that is unique to these two queer artists. Katz theorized that Rauschenberg and Johns used abstraction to hide symbols and references to their queer sexuality within their works, allowing for this subject considered taboo during this time in American history to be hidden "in plain sight," so to speak.[168] In this thesis, I have made an effort to demonstrate that, in the War Images of his "Amerika" series, the queer American modernist Marsden Hartley utilized a method similar of encoding. Hartley, living in a society that condemned homosexuality under legal penalty, was forced to hide any references to his own homosexuality in his art.

To fully express himself creatively, Hartley hid allusions to his fallen lover, the Prussian Lieutenant Karl von Freyberg. Hartley created his "mask," so-to-speak, by referencing his fallen lover through symbols such as his initials, age, regiment number, and military regalia. While these symbols held significance for Hartley, it is unlikely that the average viewer, who lacked knowledge of von Freyberg or the artist's homosexuality, could have connected these symbols to their more private meanings. As mentioned earlier, these symbols referencing von Freyberg operated as floating signifiers to the general public, unable to connect these symbols with any tangible referent or signified. Those whom Hartley entrusted with the secret of his homosexuality, however, would have been able to understand these more personal referents. Other symbols that were not

168. Katz, "The Art of Code."

as directly tied to von Freyberg—the flag representing Germany and Bavaria, the Iron Cross, the tassels—operated as dual signifiers, or signifiers with two intended signifieds. The general viewer with no knowledge of von Freyberg or Hartley's sexuality could connect these signifiers to a signified that was representative of the German homeland and its military's regalia, and therefore could view a piece such as his *Portrait of a German Officer* as a celebration of German troops and the Great War. This signified was a diversion from the true referent that Hartley was expressing in his War Images as symbols of von Freyberg's attire and support for the German cause. Hartley's method of encoding utilizes semiotics to deflect viewers from making any possible connections between homosexuality and the artist himself.

Nearly half a century later, the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns found themselves living in a society that was nearly as antagonistic to their queer sexuality as was Hartley's Germany. While both Rauschenberg and Johns expressed frustrations and commentaries as queer men living in an oppressive American society, they concealed their sexuality in an encoded way, as had Hartley. In his *White Painting (Three Panel)*, Rauschenberg encodes ideas related to conservative 1950s society and its treatment of queer individuals during the Lavender Scare. In a disguised fashion, he implied that if a queer individual cannot be open about their sexuality for fear of punishment or alienation by society, then they are forced into roles placed on them by others. Such a commentary is evident in the fact that the viewer's own shadows are thrown into the canvas by light, making these ephemeral areas of shade the subject of the piece for the brief moment they appear on its surface.[169] I believe that Rauschenberg was

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169. Folland, "Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism," 350.

commenting here on his own feelings as a queer man who was forced by society into the role of husband and father to avoid accusations of homosexuality. Just as Hartley encoded the his relationship with Karl von Freyberg in the War Images of his "Amerika" series, so too does Rauschenberg encode the relation his *White Painting* has with his own commentary on living as a queer man in a society antagonistic to his lifestyle. While the former created this diversion with both floating and dual signifieds, the latter accomplished the same goal in his *White Painting* by hiding this meaning beneath a surface that he knew would both enrage and captivate contemporary audiences.

In *Bed*, Rauschenberg comments on the public opinion regarding homosexuality at this time. The artist depicted his bed linen, where homosexual acts with his lover Jasper Johns took place, as a mass of filth, just as how homophobes might have viewed the locus of homosexual activity. The artist utilized encoding well here. Without prior knowledge of Rauschenberg's sexual identity, critics likened the work to a visual representation of a rape or murder rather than as social commentary on homophobia.

Rauschenberg's *Monogram* is perhaps one of the artist's most sexually-loaded combines. The taxidermized goat's penetration of the car tire was "read as a sign of sexual penetration" and the paint splatters on the goat's face was likened to the ejaculatory drip paintings of the Abstract Expressionists, making this combine one of the his most sexually explicit works.[170] However, I believe that the true meaning of the piece lies beneath the work's surface in line with Bendiner's assertion that the goat represents the scapegoat of Leviticus 16:22.[171] I take this interpretation one step further in asserting

[170]. Cranshaw and Lewis, "Re-Reading Rauschenberg," 45. Reckitt, *Art and Feminism*, 65.

[171]. Bendiner, "The Sins of the World," 56-59.

that Rauschenberg himself felt like a scapegoat while living as a queer man during the aftermath of the Lavender Scare in a society where queerness was associated with Communist sympathies and even treason. The myriad of different interpretations centering around this work suggest that Rauschenberg did indeed encode this homosexual commentary.

Rauschenberg's lover and confidant, Jasper Johns, operated in a similar fashion, opting to comment on his role as a queer man living in a society antagonistic to his way of living through the encoded symbols in his art. In his *Flag*, Johns appropriated the image of the American flag and depicted it as a dirty, dingy symbol more representative of oppression than patriotism. Johns provides a powerful commentary on the conflict between homosexuality and patriotism in a society where queerness was equated with Communist sympathies, and therefore depicts his flag not as a pristine symbol of American patriotism, but as the sloppy, dirty symbol of the anti-homosexual sentiment. Johns hides this commentary within a depiction of a symbol so common that critics and scholars alike found themselves arguing the very nature of the work itself, rather than any possible homosexual commentaries found beneath the work's surface. In much of the reception and scholarship surrounding this piece, a debate is waged between the work's nature as either artform or flag, and whether this ontological nature interrupts the function of the flag depicted in the work itself. I believe Johns very much did this on purpose, hiding his encoded commentary beneath a familiar symbol depicted in a controversial way.

In the final piece discussed in this thesis, Johns' *Target with Plaster Casts*, we see that Johns is again commenting on his status as a queer man living in the aftermath of the

Lavender Scare utilizing a nearly universal symbol, the target. Johns' depiction of the target is what the homosexual had become in 1950s American society. Atop this depiction Johns placed hinged boxes containing plaster casts of his own body: foot, ear, face, hand, nipple, penis, and heel, inviting the viewer to open these boxes and literally "open the closet" on the pieces contained within. These casts are hidden behind closed doors, away from sight just like many queer individuals who were forced to hide their sexuality behind closed doors during the Lavender Scare. When one opens these doors, they reveal the figures that lie inside, freeing them from their oppression and allowing for them to express themselves on their own terms. Johns hides these parts, including a plaster cast of a penis, a motif that would be controversial in conservative 1950s American society. Interestingly, the hidden penis diverts attention away for the target, which might allude to anal sex.

In their uses of encoding, Hartley relied on semiotic elements such as floating and dual signifieds, and Johns and Rauschenberg relied more on hiding their encoded elements behind depictions they knew would either be controversial or so well-known that nearly any meaning could be brought to the piece. In his discussion of the encoded elements in the works of Rauschenberg and Johns, Katz insists that the former 's use was "explicit" and easily readable. In my readings of several key works by Rauschenberg to feature t encoding, I have not found any elements that would be considered "explicit" or easily readable to those who lacked the knowledge that the artist was, a queer individual. Katz also does not go into any detail as why they chose to hide their queer sexuality, only briefly proposing that the "Red Scare" may have been a cause, but never expanding upon such an assertion. I would surmise that this perhaps this relates to Rauschenberg's own

guardedness about his sexuality, and Katz either chose to omit such connections out of respect for the artist, or because the artist himself offered little in the way of information regarding this topic. Nevertheless, I feel that the method of encoding he applies to Rauschenberg's and Johns' works is an important one that can be applied to many artists suspected of being homosexual throughout history. I have only provided one such example in this thesis, stretching the concept of encoding utilized by Rauschenberg and Johns to apply to the closeted queer artist Marsden Hartley nearly half a century prior. I believe that these methods of encoding could be utilized and applied to works by such artists whose sexuality has long been debated, such as the Baroque artist Caravaggio, or realist painter Thomas Eakins, both of whom lived in societies unaccepting of homosexuality and were suspected homosexuals themselves. I believe that reconsidering their works with queer encoding in mind could be useful in perhaps uncovering any homosexual expressions beneath the surfaces of their artworks, his would be an undertaking too large for this thesis alone.

Andy Warhol also utilized queer encoding in his oeuvre. The advent of the gay liberation movement following the Stonewall Riots, as well as the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, largely compelled queer artists to forgo queer encoding in favor of a more direct and open visual language. However, conditions still exist that necessitate the utilization of queer encoding by artists who want to hide their sexuality either from conservative family or friends or by those in conservative societies where homosexuality is still punishable by prison, lashes, or even death. For these individuals, queer encoding is still very much a necessity in their art-making process.

To close, I would like to restate that I believe that queer will fall back on utilizing the methods of encoding when conditions dictate. I am not positing that Marsden Hartley was definitively the first queer artist to imbue his works with encoded queer symbolism, although he may be the earliest artist that we can say for certain utilized such a system of encoding. Should we reassess artists that have been considered queer individuals with these methods of encoding in mind to uncover the true nature of these artists' sexualities and discover new meanings in their works. While Jonathan Katz first applied the method of queer encoding to Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, I have now attempted to apply it to the earlier artist Marsden Hartley. Perhaps other scholars could enlist attempt to this method of queer encoding in examining art produced during earlier periods.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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Figure 2.3: Marsden Hartley, *Indian Fantasy*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 118.6 x 99.9 cm. North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina.

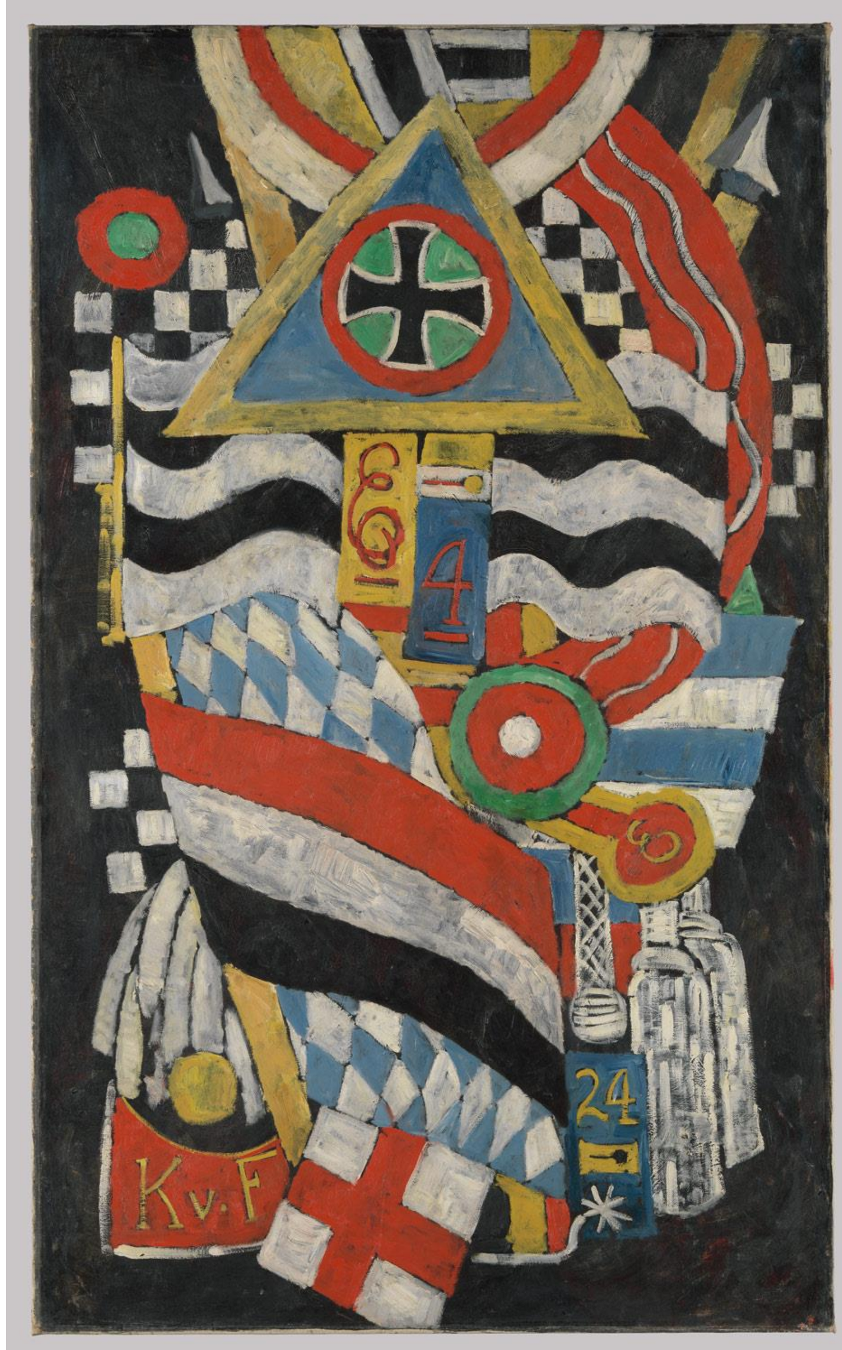

Figure 2.4: Marsden Hartley, *Portrait of a German Officer*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 173.4 x 105.1 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

Figure 2.5: Marsden Hartley, *Painting No. 47*, 1914-15. Oil on canvas, 100.3 x 81 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.

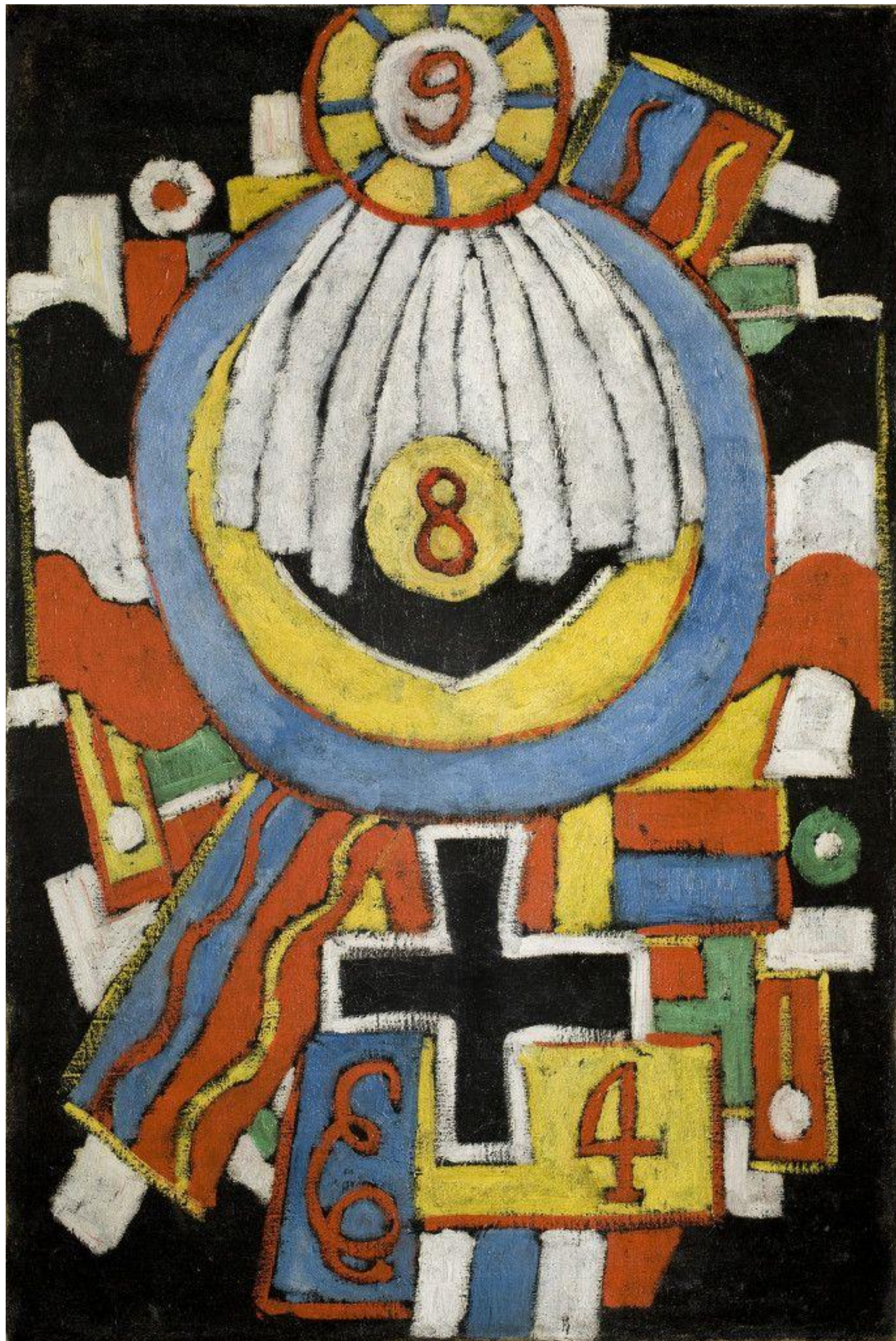

Figure 2.6: Marsden Hartley, *Portrait*, 1914-15. Oil on canvas, 81.9 x 54.6 cm. Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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Figure 2.8: Marsden Hartley, *Eight Bells' Folly, Memorial to Hart Crane*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 80.33 x 100.33 cm. Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

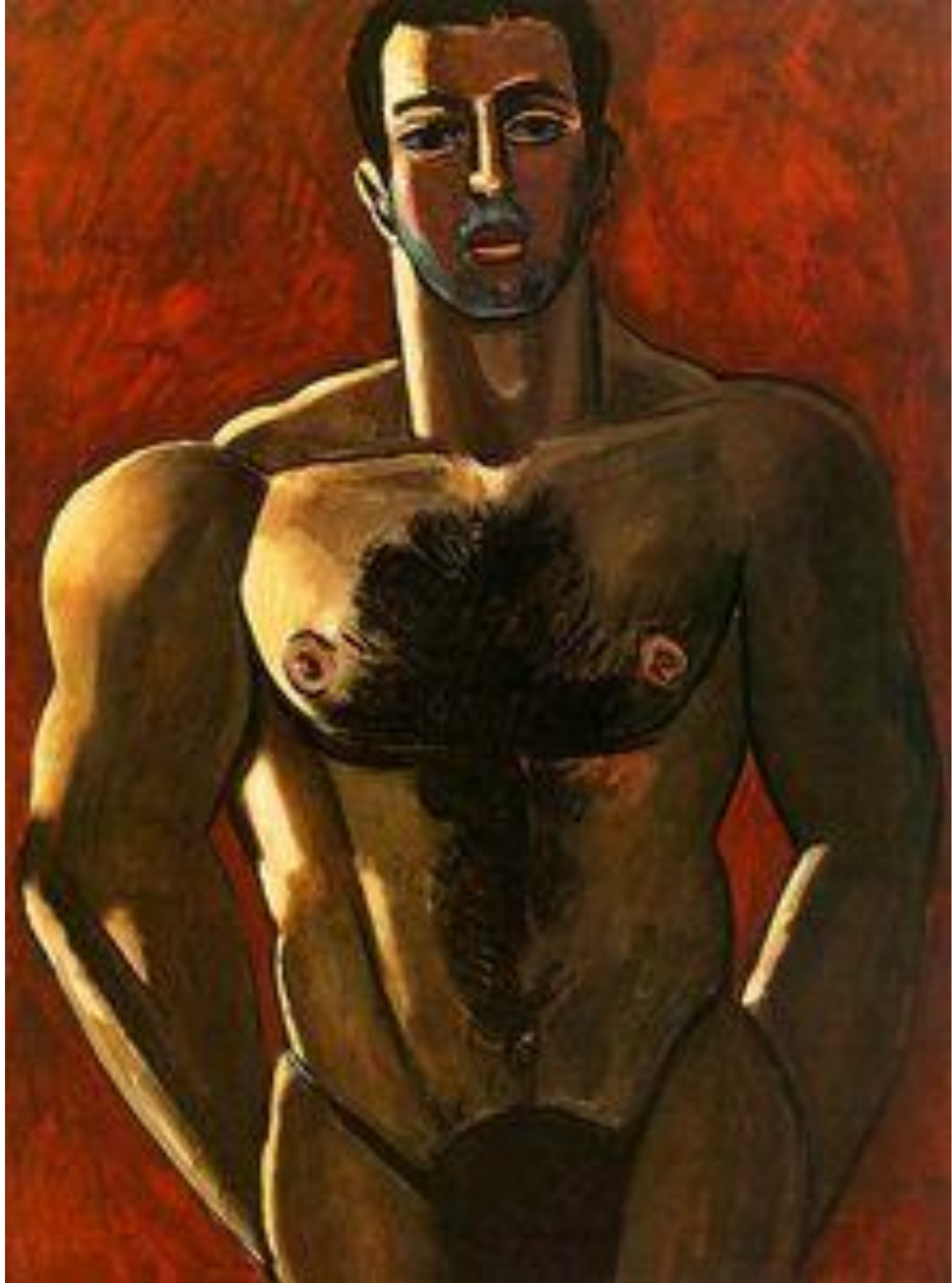

Figure 2.9: Marsden Hartley, *Madawaska, Acadian Light-Heavy, Third Arrangement*, 1940. Oil on board, 101.6 x 76.2 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

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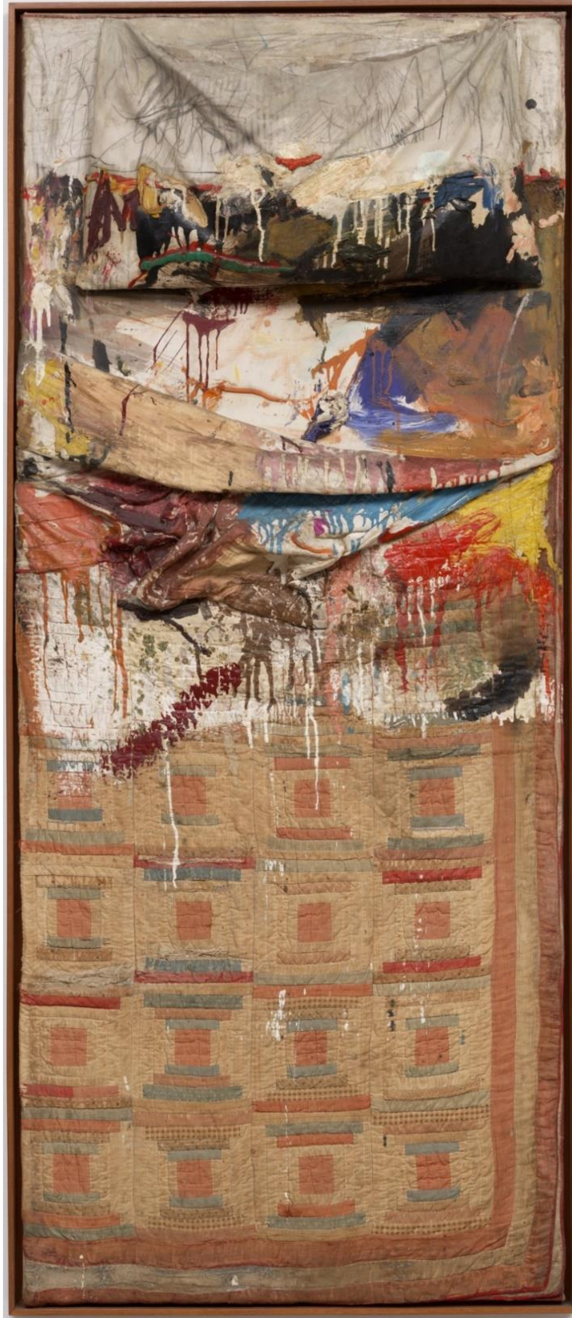

Figure 3.2: Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955. Oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports, 191.1 x 80 x 20.3 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

Figure 3.3: Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, 1955-59. Oil, paper, fabric, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe-heel, and tennis ball on two conjoined canvases with oil on taxidermied Angora goat with brass plaque and rubber tire on wood platform mounted on four casters, 106.7 x 160.7 x 163.8 cm. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

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Figure 4.1: Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962. Acrylic paint on canvas, 205.4 x 144.8 cm. Tate Gallery, London, United Kingdom.

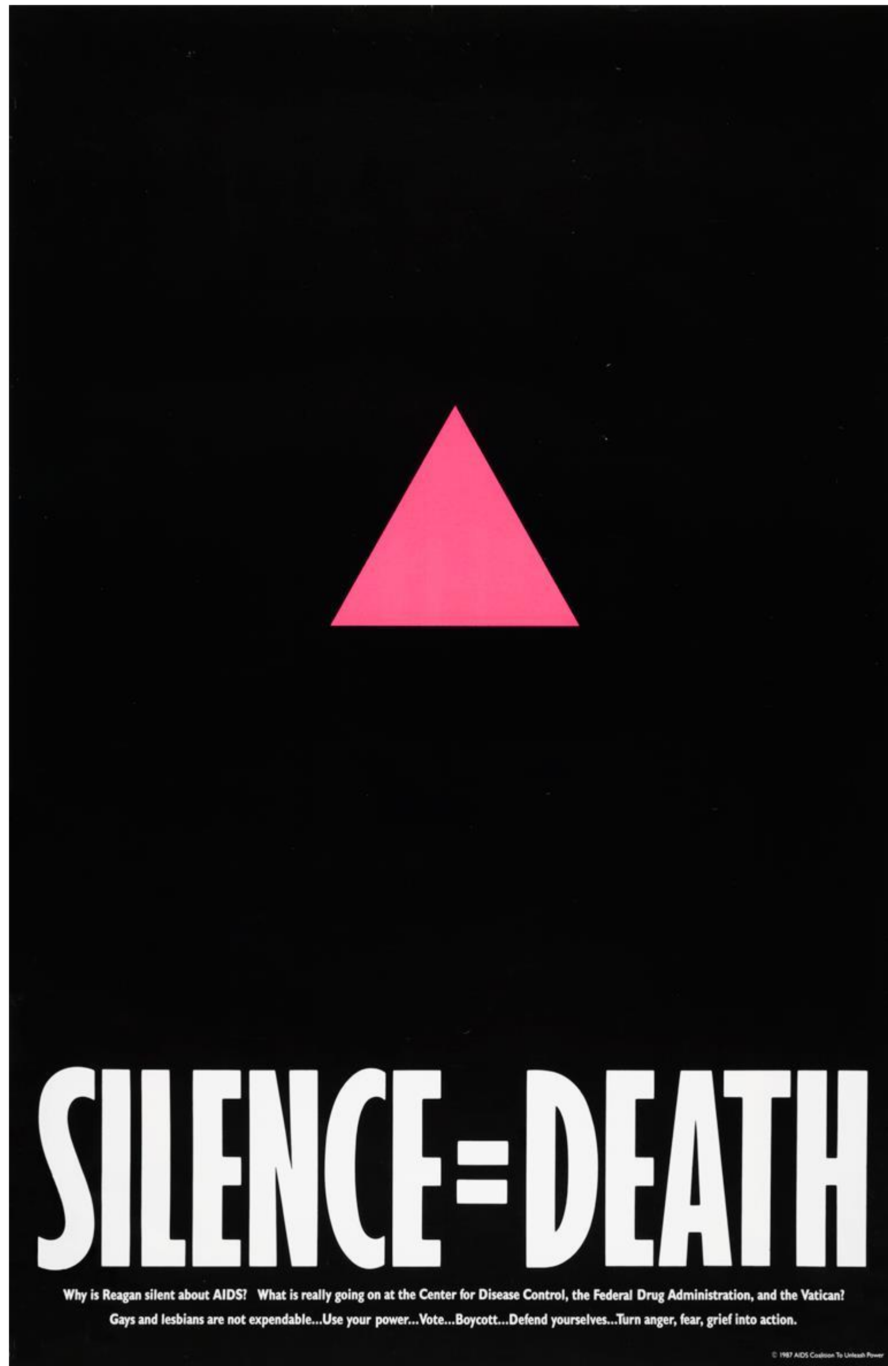

Figure 4.2: AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), *Silence=Death*, 1987. Color lithograph, 55.8 x 83.8 cm. Private collection.

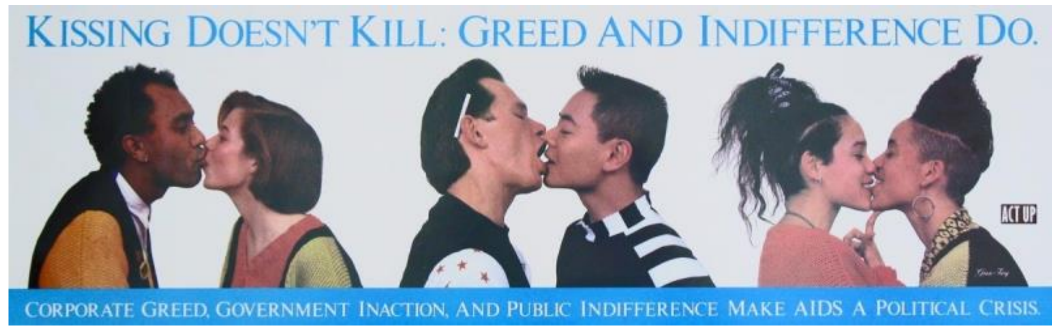

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Figure 4.4: Alireza Shojaian, *Salad Season 1*, 2012. Acrylic and color pencil on cardboard, 39.9 x 30 cm. Private collection.

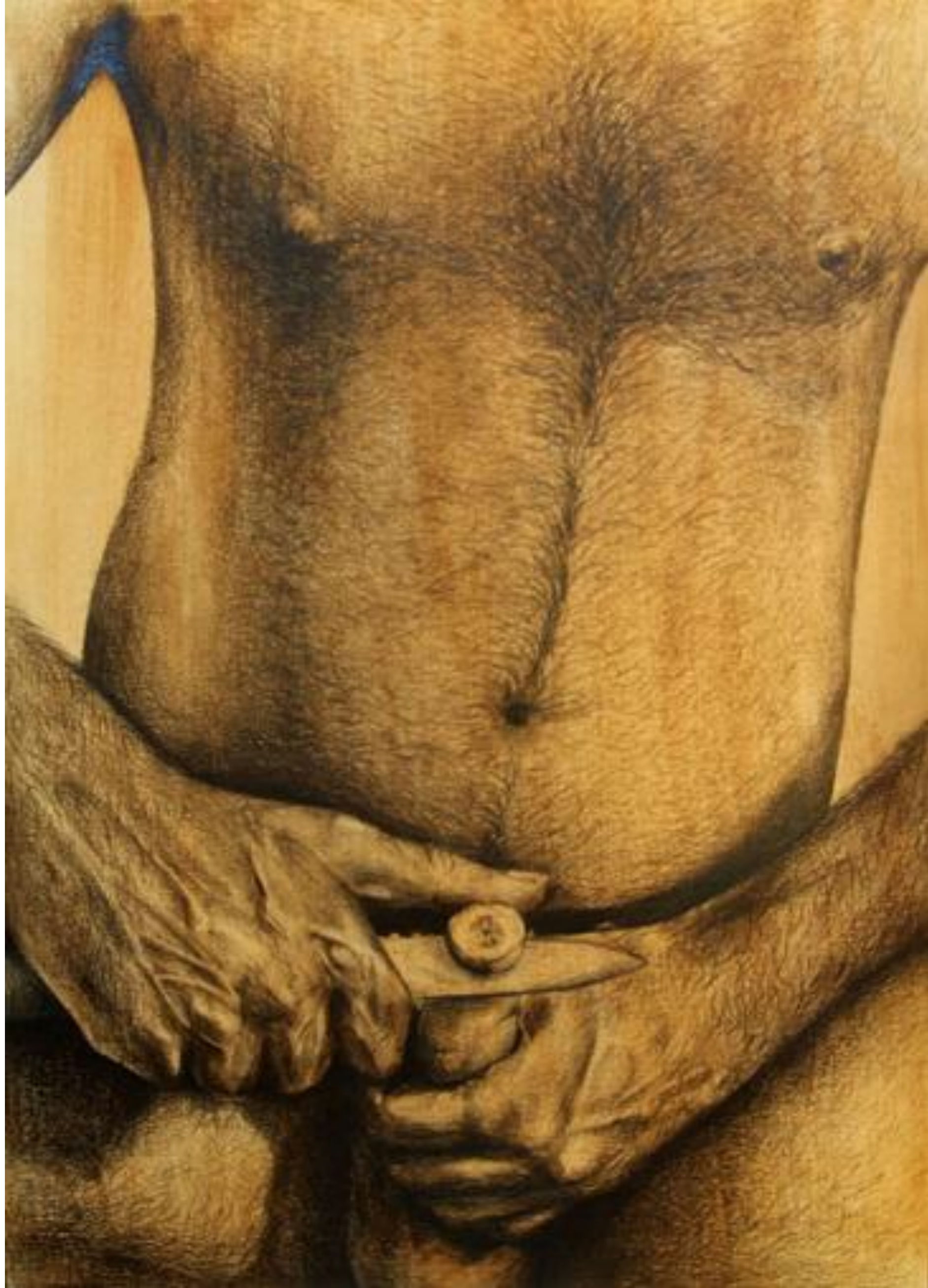

Figure 4.5: Alireza Shojaian, *Salad Season 2*, 2012. Acrylic and color pencil on cardboard, 39.9 x 30 cm. Private collection.