

Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic

Richard T. Rodríguez

Writing in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2001, Hilary E. MacGregor introduced the newspaper's (presumably heterosexual) readers to Chico, a gay bar already popular with those in the know since its establishment in 1999:

It's midnight in Montebello. The four-lane boulevard that looks like any other in this flat, sprawling landscape is empty. But in an anonymous strip mall on West Beverly Boulevard, walk through a black door, wedged between a cleaners and a flower shop, and you enter another world.

The dark neighborhood saloon is jammed with gangbanger-looking toughs. Bald Latino guys with pierced ears, baggy pants, and hard faces. Tattoos peek out from collars and sleeves. Even the stripper gyrating on the billiard table in his jockstrap looks like a tough. "People walk in and see this and they think there's gonna be a gang fight," says go-go boy Rich Obregon from backstage, as he waits his turn to climb on the table and dance.

But this is just another Friday night at Chico, a gay bar in Montebello with the homey feeling of *la familia*. The bar has filled a niche so obscure, no one knew it was there. Bartender Julio Licón describes the clientele as a mix of homeboys, ex-gangbangers, cops and guys who trek out from West Hollywood, the desert and the San Fernando Valley in search of something edgier, more urban. "Tough, masculine-looking guys. Rough, bald guys. That's Chico," says Licón. "Straight people come in and they still don't know it is a gay bar." And, even when they do, some stay for the party. (E1)

There is much to highlight and unpack in these passages, which I will do later, but at the moment I want to uncover what lies at the heart of Chico's appeal: "Tough, masculine-looking guys. Rough, bald guys." These "guys" are the purveyors of what I will call the homeboy aesthetic. The homeboy aesthetic is identifiable as an assemblage of key signifiers: clothing (baggy

pants and undershirts are perhaps the most significant), hair (or, in the current moment of the aesthetic, lack of hair), bold stance, and distinct language (think *caló* mixed with hip-hop parlance), all combining to form a distinguishable cultural affectation hard to miss on Los Angeles city streets. Yet the homeboy aesthetic, to paraphrase John Clarke, “is more than the simple amalgam of all the separate elements—it derives its specific symbolic quality from the arrangement of all the elements together in one whole ensemble, embodying and expressing the group’s self-consciousness” (1976, 179).

The homeboy aesthetic is at once the subject of admiration and fear. It is embraced and resisted as a mode of working-class sensibility and a marker of cultural difference. For those who adopt it, the aesthetic is conscientiously contoured by repetition, but its tenor is decidedly implacable and cocksure. As the *Times* article suggests, the aesthetic conventionally signifies heterosexual masculinity. In this essay the *queer* homeboy aesthetic, however, refers to a style, circulating within Chicano/Latino gay male spaces, whose visibility emanates from the interplay of materiality and fantasy. Short-circuiting the presumptive heteronormative current, it further entails a fusion of fetishistic desire and revisionist pleasure, “a gesture of defiance or contempt” that, according to Dick Hebdige, “signals a Refusal” as well as conformity—sometimes based on circumstance, sometimes not—to fashion protocols (1979, 3).

The spaces in which the homeboy aesthetic is dislodged from the realm of heteronormativity—and heterosexuality—range from bars like Chico and the flyers advertising them to examples of gay male visual culture such as the drawings of Los Angeles-based artist Héctor Silva and pornographic video (and the constitutive relationship between these different cultural forms). While the principal investment in this project is to reveal how gay male rearticulations of Chicano masculinity might contest variegated gendered formations, I will, however, pose questions regarding the stakes involved in erotic appeals to “renegade” masculinities in same-sex relations that are inevitably circumscribed by power.

Let me recount the primal scene that generated my interest in this essay’s subjects, which was witnessed on one hot summer night in 1992. I was a twenty-one-year-old recently self-confirmed Chicano gay man who had yet to experience a Latino gay bar, Southern California-style. While

RICHARD T. RODRIGUEZ, assistant professor of English and Latina/Latino Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, is author of a book on kinship discourse and Chicana/o cultural politics that is forthcoming from Duke University Press. He can be reached at rtrodrig71@yahoo.com.

an undergraduate studying in the Bay Area, I had frequented La India Bonita and Esta Noche in San Francisco, then known as sensational watering holes. But what I witnessed in this Santa Monica Boulevard dance club was not simply a modality of style that sharply distinguished, for me at least, the San Francisco Bay Area from the greater Los Angeles area. The style here represented an aesthetic performed in the flesh by brown men, a performance previously unthinkable in a heteronormative public sphere, materializing only in what I had thought were *my own* homosexual fantasy scenarios for which *East Side Story* oldies' compilations served as the soundtrack. But now before me stood, within this arena, as it were, two homeboys pressed against the second floor railing, locking lips, groping crotches, and working up a serious sweat. I stopped in my tracks as the sight of these two men unleashed a flood of desires and fantasies, triggering an instant recall of the many men with whom I had grown up in my hometown of Santa Ana and who were always assumed to be straight, even by me. Yet within the space of the bar, the signifying force of the homeboy aesthetic was queerly modified as my gaze fell upon these men in the heat of passion, making a once-private fantasy public and making me a desiring subject.¹

Teresa de Lauretis writes that fantasy “is a fundamental human activity based on the capacity for imagining and imaging; for making images in one’s mind (imagining) and making images in material expressions (imaging) by various technical means that include, say, drawing and photography but also language and even one’s own body, for example, in performance” (1999, 306). The scenario I have described corresponds to what de Lauretis identifies as public fantasy, consisting of a recasting of “existing cultural narratives . . . reusing their structures and thematic concerns, but bring[ing] in new material, new contents, new characters or cultural agents, new issues and themes drawn from the contemporary world and its social arrangements” (306).² I want to make clear, however, that fantasy—in both private and public domains—allows for a generative understanding of the homeboy aesthetic and how it is articulated, revised, adopted, and wielded. Fantasy, as Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis contend in their now-famous formulation, “is not the object of desire, but its setting” (1986, 26). Building from and extending this premise, this essay aims to do more than simply cast the homeboy aesthetic as an object of desire devoid of context; rather, it foregrounds the historical and social settings in which the queer homeboy aesthetic materializes to grasp, in turn, the materiality of the aesthetic as fashioned by desire.

Q-Vo, Queer Vato

The aesthetic of the homeboy—additionally symbolized by other designations such as *cholo*, *vato*, and *gangster* in distinct locations and historical moments—undeniably occupies a place in the U.S. cultural imagination. And while such terms possess their own cultural history, all of them combine to form a genealogy of Chicano urban style discernable in the public sphere. More than a subculture confined to the “underground” (wherever that might be), the homeboy aesthetic surfaces alongside practices of everyday life and is featured in mainstream media. In Hollywood films—whose range loosely spans Michael Pressman’s *Boulevard Nights* (1979) to Antoine Fuqua’s *Training Day* (2001)—and in hip-hop music videos by Cypress Hill and Mack 10, it is articulated in shapes, forms, and fashions often contestable but nonetheless recognizable in various attempts at “accurate” representation. In his foundational yet overlooked study, *¡A la brava, ése!* (1988), Mexican cultural critic José Manuel Valenzuela tracks the emergence of *los cholos* on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, grounding them in a sociocultural context to understand their proliferation, demonization, and signification. Chicano writers and artists have also featured the street-wise homeboy adorning the aesthetic. One might think of Mario from Ron Arias’s novel *The Road to Tamazunchale*, first published in 1975, or of Juan Fuentes’s offset lithograph, *Cholo, Live* (1980, printed in 1981), featuring four homeboys whose postures emblemize the homeboy aesthetic with sheer precision. When evoked, the homeboy aesthetic routinely represents aspects of *la vida loca*, a lifestyle commonly attributed to gangs.

According to the *Los Angeles Times* article cited earlier, the homeboy aesthetic, in exemplifying an unabashed *hardness*, might also be found in a Montebello bar on West Beverly Boulevard like Chico. Crack open Chico’s front door, MacGregor writes, and one will discover that “the dark neighborhood saloon is jammed with gangbanger-looking toughs. Bald Latino guys with pierced ears, baggy pants, and hard faces. Tattoos peek out from collars and sleeves. Even the stripper gyrating on the billiard table in his jockstrap looks like a tough.” The homeboy thus becomes emblematic of a “tough” within the space of Chico, creating an aura in which all men who occupy its quarters, from the customers to the strippers, are profiled as staunch machos. Go-go boy Obregón raises the stakes by injecting the aura with a metaphoric testosterone shot: “People walk in and see this and they think there’s gonna be a gang fight” (2001, E1).

MacGregor’s article, however, unveils the homeboy aesthetic with a queer bent, recruiting Licón to affirm that the homeboys in the club

appear, at first glance, heterosexual based on their masculine exterior: “Straight people come in and they still don’t know it is a gay bar.” Chico is a space for men desiring men who adopt the homeboy aesthetic, as well as for those who seek it out for pleasure. Co-owner Marty Sokol—“a Philly-raised, Boston-educated Jewish guy” who dresses like “a young Latino thug”—affirms that the bar “appeals to more of a homeboy type” and also draws clientele “from West Hollywood because we offer them something they can’t get there” (MacGregor 2001, E1).³

Chico, then, becomes a site of fantasy, once again recalling Laplanche and Pontalis’s assertion that fantasy “is not the object of desire, but its setting.” But it does more than simply represent the object—*el chico*—that one might find there; rather, it enacts a setting for homeboys and their admirers to congregate for episodic fulfillment. This site of fantasy helps destabilize gender norms that commonly frame Chicano/Latino masculinity and crucially alters the ways in which the homeboy aesthetic has been made always already heterosexual or rendered antithetical to homosexuality. Such sites make possible a recasting of the homeboy from a “straight” historical narrative to one in which new formations—such as the “homo-thug”—emerge.⁴ Let us now take as an example the work of a brilliant artist whose delicious style also establishes fantasy spaces within which to queer the homeboy aesthetic.

Redrawing the Boundaries

Born in 1955 in Ocotlán, Jalisco, a small Mexican town about eighty kilometers outside Guadalajara, Chicano artist Héctor Silva has no formal training in art.⁵ In fact, he insists that he didn’t know he could draw until he was twenty-six. At seventeen he crossed the border during a school vacation and never returned. Instead he got a job washing cars, and he has since been a cook, busboy, farmworker, and art store clerk, to name only a few of the many positions in his employment history. A former resident of San Diego and Chicago, he currently lives in the greater Los Angeles area.

Silva’s artistic style contrasts to that of other Chicano artists not only in content but also in form. He works in pencil, his medium of choice for sketching photorealistic profiles of movie stars, popular musicians (some in *calavera* mode), and the lusty homeboys who largely populate his visual repertoire. He is often accused by critics and curators of failing to take his artwork to the “next level” (most likely meaning painting), and his work rarely circulates in the galleries and museums where one might experience

Chicano art. In fact, the production, distribution, and reception of Silva's drawings recall the means by which Chicano art earned its political edge during the Chicano movement era, given the alignment of his work with mediums like poster and postcard art. As Tomás Ybarra-Frausto recounts:

Remaining outside the official cultural apparatus, Chicano artists organized alternative circuits to create, disseminate, and market their artistic production. The interpretive community, those who decided what counted and had value as art, was often made up of the artists themselves. Going against the traditions of art as escape and commodity, a prevalent attitude toward Chicano art objects was that they should provide aesthetic pleasure and delight while also serving to educate and edify. (1992, 20)

Silva's work starts from the street and rises up, sometimes making its way into the gallery space but most other times "remaining outside the official cultural apparatus." His work finds audiences on gay erotic websites like BiLatinMen.com; in Latino gay community publications like *Revista Adelante* and hardcore fetish magazines like *Instigator*; on campaign-endorsing postcards such as those supporting Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa; on posters for bars such as Chico, for community events, and for AIDS conferences; and in the opening and closing shots of a gay porn tape, Mark Jensen's 2001 *Cholos in Charge*.

Silva's work has gained wide notoriety among Latino gay men but is not limited to that audience.⁶ His art is centrally known for queering the homeboy aesthetic in sexually explicit ways, positioning masculine Latino men in homoerotic fantasy scenarios that provoke visceral responses similar to those produced by, for example, the work of Tom of Finland. Indeed, the comparison to Tom of Finland makes sense given that Silva counts him—along with Frida Kahlo, religious iconography, gay pornography, Chicano prison art, and black-and-white photography—as a major influence.⁷ In his book *Dirty Pictures: Tom of Finland, Masculinity, and Homosexuality*, Micha Ramakers argues that "in a world dominated by homophobia, [Tom of Finland] held up a 'mirror' to gay men in which they could see themselves as they were not: as real men, living in Tomland, where gay desires and acts were not considered a sad perversion, but ruled. Ultimately, Tom of Finland produced propaganda—homophile hyperrealism?—for a utopia controlled by a lustful brotherhood of Überfaggots" (2000, 38–39).

Yet Silva's mirror (as well as Tom of Finland's, I would add) also reflects fantasy scenarios in which one can situate oneself, not necessarily identifying with a particular subject position that would, as Ramakers might have it, crystallize a masculine ego-ideal, but rather arriving on the scene from

multiple desiring points of entry. In other words, a gay man may situate himself as the desiring subject in the symbolic mirror upheld in Silva's work, but there are many ways to be "caught up himself in the sequence of images" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1986, 26). That is, "the subject may locate him- or herself at more than one point in a scenario" (Sinfield 2004, 34). The subject also has the ability to "try out alternative identities and desires," as Alan Sinfield insists, imagining himself in one way or another part of "a lustful brotherhood" (perhaps one version of "the homey feeling of *la familia*" mentioned in the *Times* article) that departs from the heteronormative premise of the homeboy aesthetic vis-à-vis the artist's imaging of male same-sex fantasies (34).

The stunning drawing *My Homeboys (¡Ay Papi!)* (2000) inspires a grasp of how one can occupy multiple positions in a fantasy scenario. In it, we see two homeboys in a rapturous moment (fig. 1). The homeboy on the left is in a state of ecstasy—eyes closed, head cocked back—while getting worked over by the homeboy on the right. The homeboy on the right is clearly intent on pleasing his man, devilishly delighted to know that what he is doing is *exactly* what he needs to do to get him off. The viewer of the image can identify as either homeboy, choosing to be either the giver or receiver of pleasure. But the viewer can also enter the fantasy as a third, unseen participant—a voyeur, if you will. He may not identify with either homeboy but may instead desire the homeboy aesthetic without wanting to adopt it. In short, what Silva's work does is make the aesthetic available to the viewer, linking his homeboy fantasies with others who then fashion the terms of fantasy to their own accord.

In *My Homeboys Rudy and Frank* (2003), Silva lovingly depicts two *pelones*, one of whom displays his admiration for the other, while that other is recognizably enjoying this admiration (fig. 2). Both are cognizant of being gazed upon. Bracketed by daisies, these two men—clothed, unlike others in Silva's pantheon—constitute a scenario in which the homeboy aesthetic is nonetheless shot through with gay male desire. Contrasting to the vividly toned and tattooed bodies of the previously mentioned homeboys, the homeboy with the husky build in the foreground also represents an important break from the norms of homoerotic imagery. Whether they symbolize the growth of an amorous relationship or an unruly blossoming of desire, the flowers—two of which resemble wide-open eyes—frame a fantasy setting with adoration and desire, ultimately provoking the viewing subject to look upon Rudy and Frank as model propagators delighting in the brush of flesh and the queer reclamation of the homeboy aesthetic.

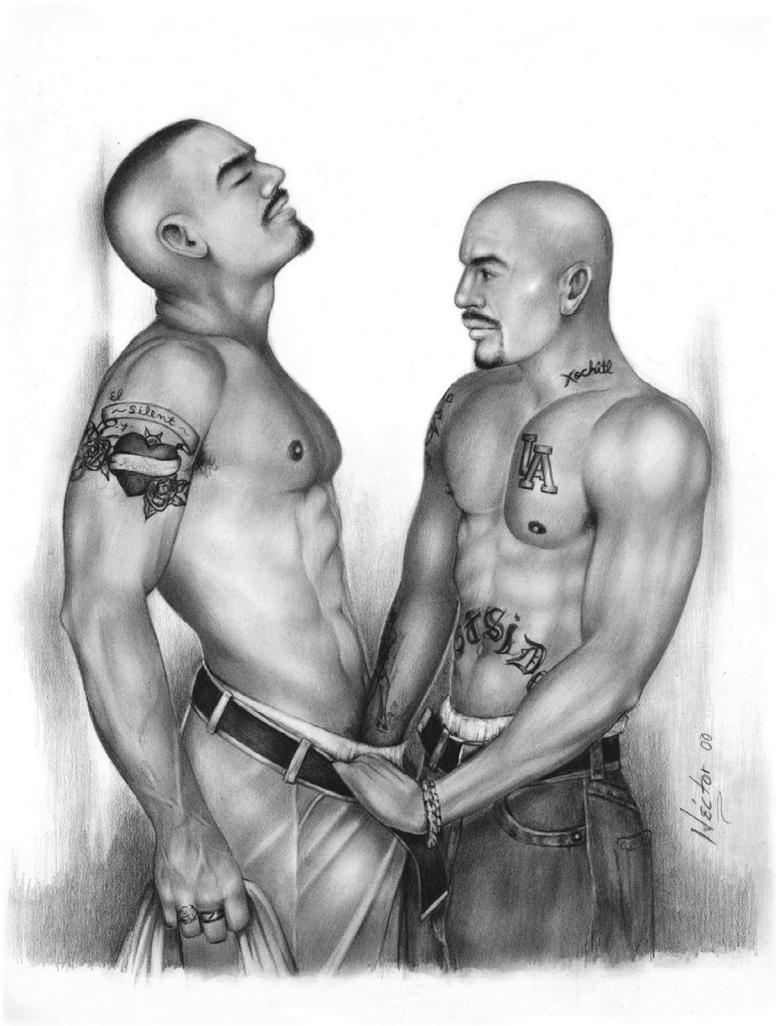


Figure 1. *My Homeboys (¡Ay Papi!)* (2000). Pencil drawing by Héctor Silva. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Silva maintains that the men in his work “are men in my own fantasies, but they are also the fantasies of other people. They are also the guys I see in the neighborhood, on the street, in the clubs, everywhere, especially here in L.A.”⁸ It is the shuttling between the realms of private and public fantasies, then, that registers a dialectical relationship between imagining and imaging that ultimately restages the form of the fantasy in the arena of representation. Reading the gay male gym-body (the display of muscle as image for courting desire) against the macho straight male body

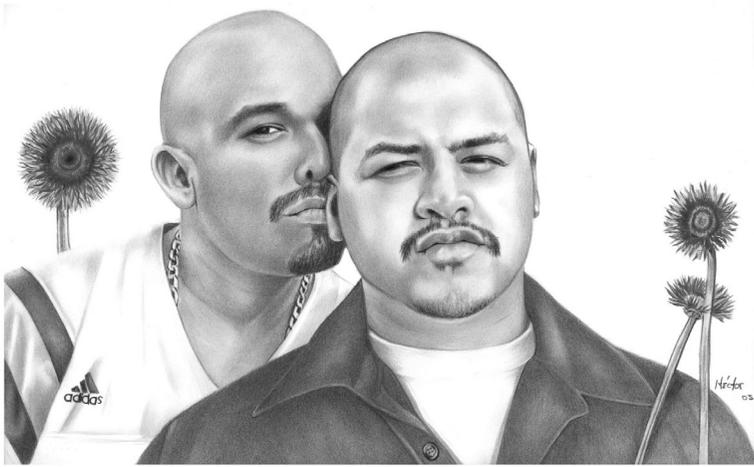


Figure 2. *My Homeboys Rudy and Frank* (2003). Pencil drawing by Héctor Silva. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

(“an armored body” mostly “given over to utility”), D. A. Miller offers a hypothesis that fittingly resonates with the fantasy scenario that grounds Silva’s queer homeboy representations. Miller writes: “Even the most macho gay image tends to modify cultural fantasy about the male body if only by suspending the main response that the armored body seems developed to induce: if this is still *the body that can fuck you*, etc., it is no longer—quite the contrary—*the body you don’t fuck with*” (1992, 31).

Silva’s work must be understood as a response to power, breaking silences about homosexuality within Latino homeboy culture and turning male masculinity on its head so as to show that hard and fast representations and performances of machismo do not necessarily correspond to sex and sexuality. Redrawing the boundaries of gender norms in his works that portray “straight-appearing” men going down on men as well as receiving anal pleasure by both penis and fist, Silva’s scenarios are both liberating and libidinous, resituating Latino male masculinity under the banner of nonnormative fantasy.

Notes

This essay is dedicated to Héctor Silva, whose fantastic fantasy scenarios enabled it. I am grateful to Aide Acosta, Lisa Cacho, Abel Correa, David Coyoca, Dionne Espinoza, Johanna Galarte, Julian Hernández, Martin Manalansan, Eugene Rodríguez, and Siobhan Somerville for their support, suggestions, insights, and unflinching critique. Parts of this essay are included in *The Chicano Manual of Style*, forthcoming from Chicano Studies Research Center Press.

1. The impulse here is inspired by Professor Luz Calvo's (2005) call for a queer Latina/o studies that necessarily links libidinal energies with activist struggles for social change.

2. Teresa de Lauretis's account of public fantasy appropriately resonates with John Clarke's previously mentioned discussion of style, thus illustrating how fantasy and style are similarly fashioned. Alan Sinfield (2004) also draws upon Clarke's essay in his discussion of fantasy, which significantly informs this piece.

3. Fittingly, the bar's slogan is "Get it on the Eastside."

4. Judith Halberstam (2005) uses the term "homo-thug," as well as "homey-sexual," in her discussion of subcultures among queer youth of color. The "Blaxican homo hop" artist Deadlee is frequently identified as a homo-thug and stands as a fitting example for the context at hand.

5. Silva identifies as a Chicano artist even though he was not born in the United States. He sees his politics and the work he produces as informing his choice of this identity.

6. Silva informed me that the people who purchase his prints—from his website, at festivals where he sets up a table, and at specialty stores like Rough Trade on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles's Silverlake district—include men of all colors as well as straight women and lesbians. Furthermore, while his work would seem to command the most attention in places like Los Angeles, Silva's drawings are quite popular in Europe, especially the Netherlands, and other parts of the world (e-mail to author, February 21, 2005).

7. Information taken from Silva's websites: www.artbyhector.com and www.artbyhector.com/erotic.

8. E-mail to author, February 21, 2005. This closeness to "realistic" representations departs from Tom of Finland's men, whose enormous endowments often seem larger than the bodies to which they are attached.

Works Cited

- Arias, Ron. 1975. *The Road to Tamazunchale*. Reno, NV: West Coast Poetry Review.
- Calvo, Luz. 2005. "Radical Perversities." Paper presented at conference on Queer Scapes: Body Space Sexuality, USC/ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, November 18.

- Clarke, John. 1976. "Style." In *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, 175–91. London: Hutchinson.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. 1999. "Popular Culture, Public and Private Fantasies: Femininity and Fetishism in David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly*." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24, no. 2: 303–34.
- Halberstam, Judith. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Routledge.
- Laplanche, Jean, and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis. 1986. "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality." In *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan, 5–34. London: Methuen.
- MacGregor, Hilary E. 2001. "Into the Night: In Montebello, Producer Puts Down Roots at New Breed of Gay Bar." *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, E1.
- Miller, D. A. 1992. *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ramakers, Micha. 2000. *Dirty Pictures: Tom of Finland, Masculinity, and Homosexuality*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Sinfield, Alan. 2004. *On Sexuality and Power*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Valenzuela, José Manuel. 1988. *¡A la brava, ése!: Cholos, punks, chavos banda*. Tijuana, Mexico: Colegio de la Frontera Norte.
- Ybarra-Frausto, Tomás. 1992. "Chicano Art: Text and Context." In *Different Voices: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Framework for Change in the American Art Museum*, ed. Marcia Tucker, 17–29. New York: Association of Art Museum Directors.