



michael rababy



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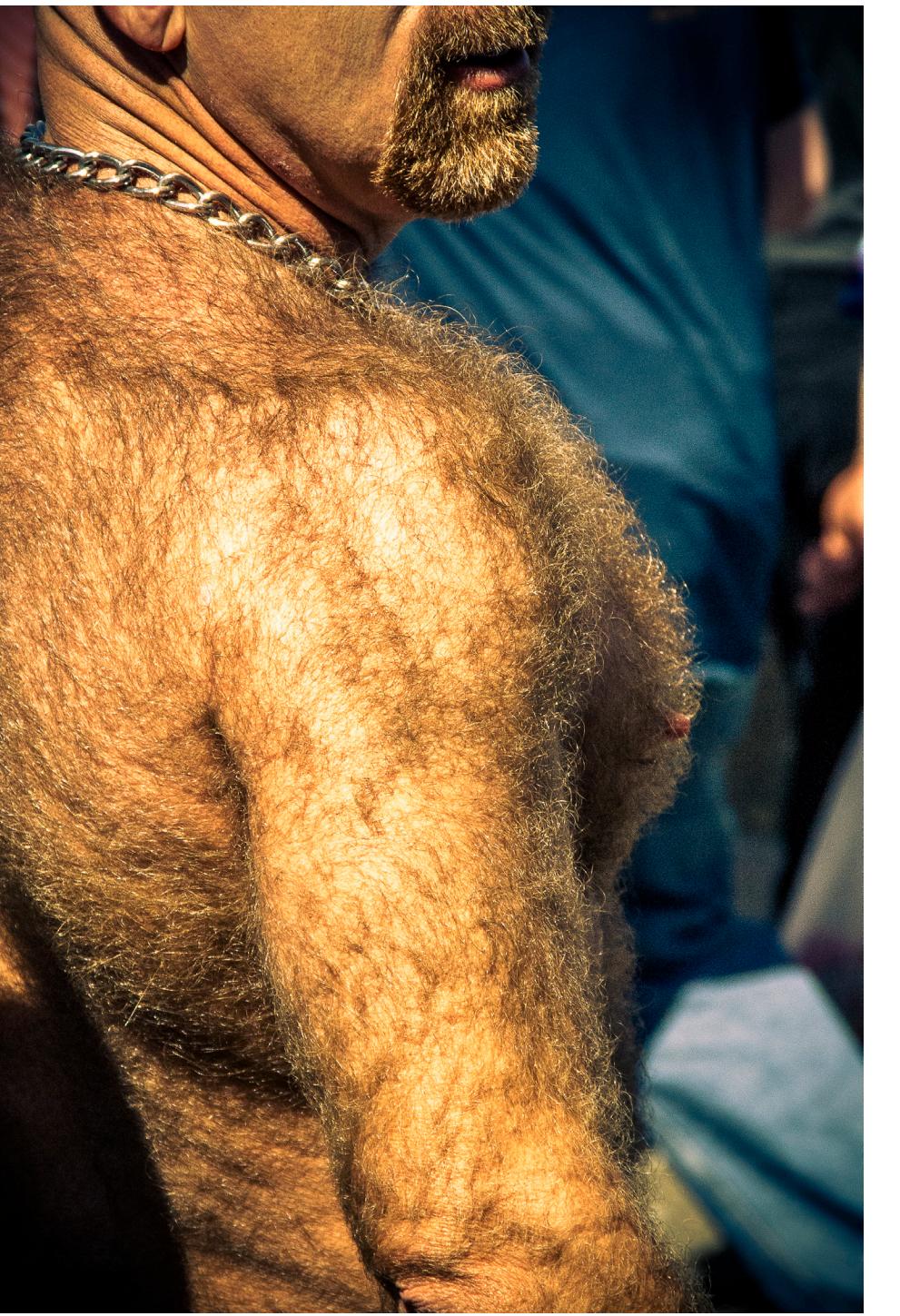
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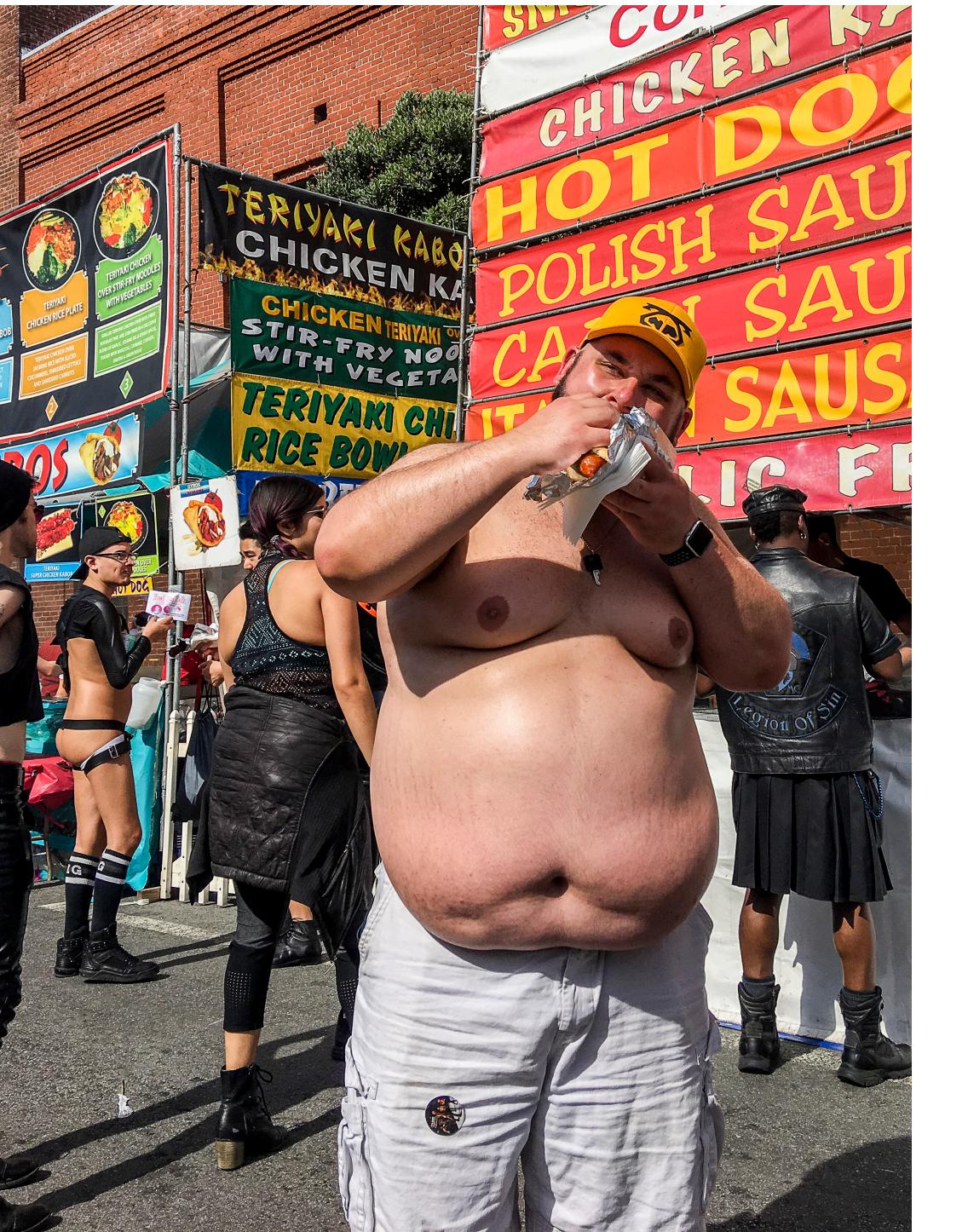
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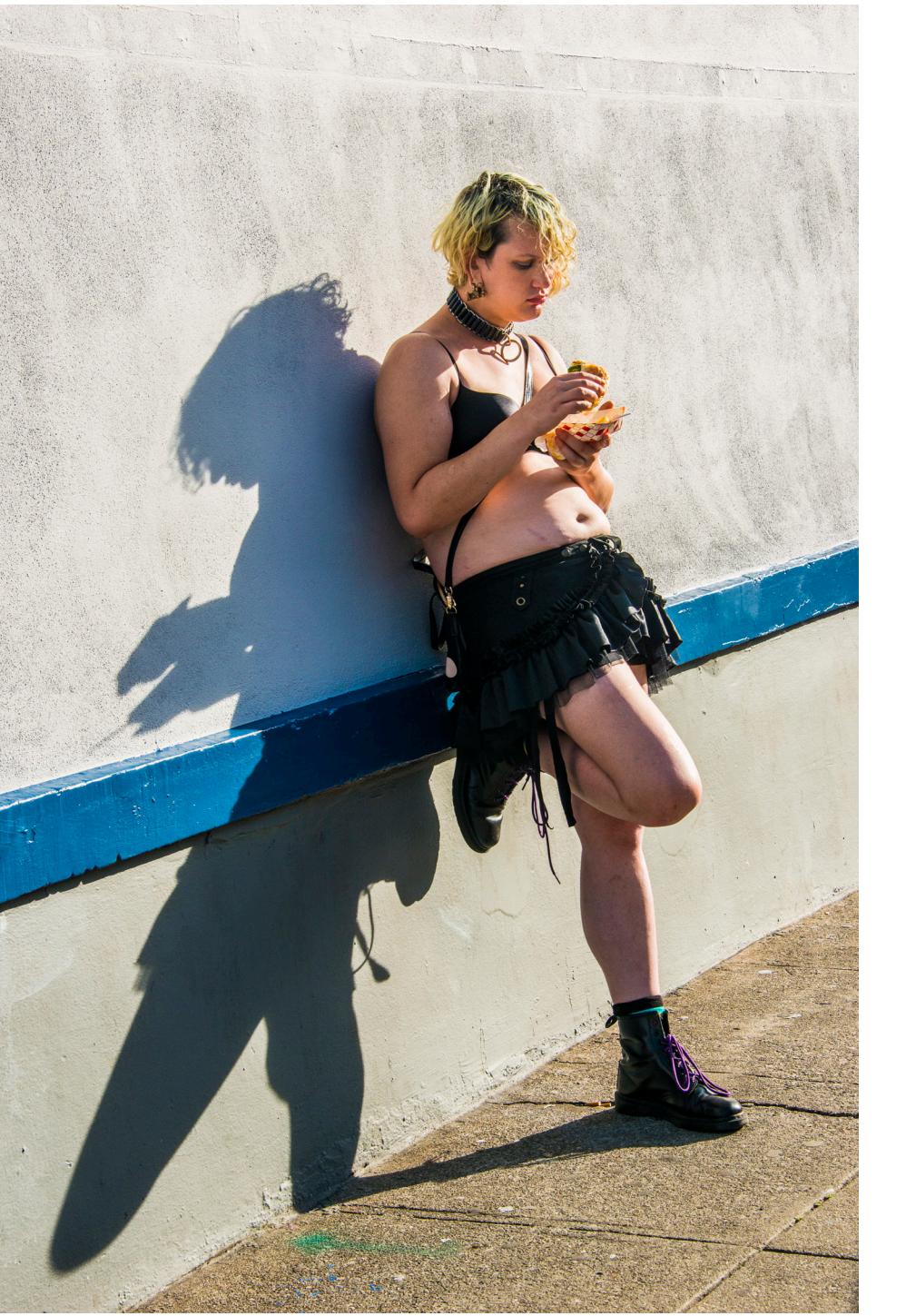
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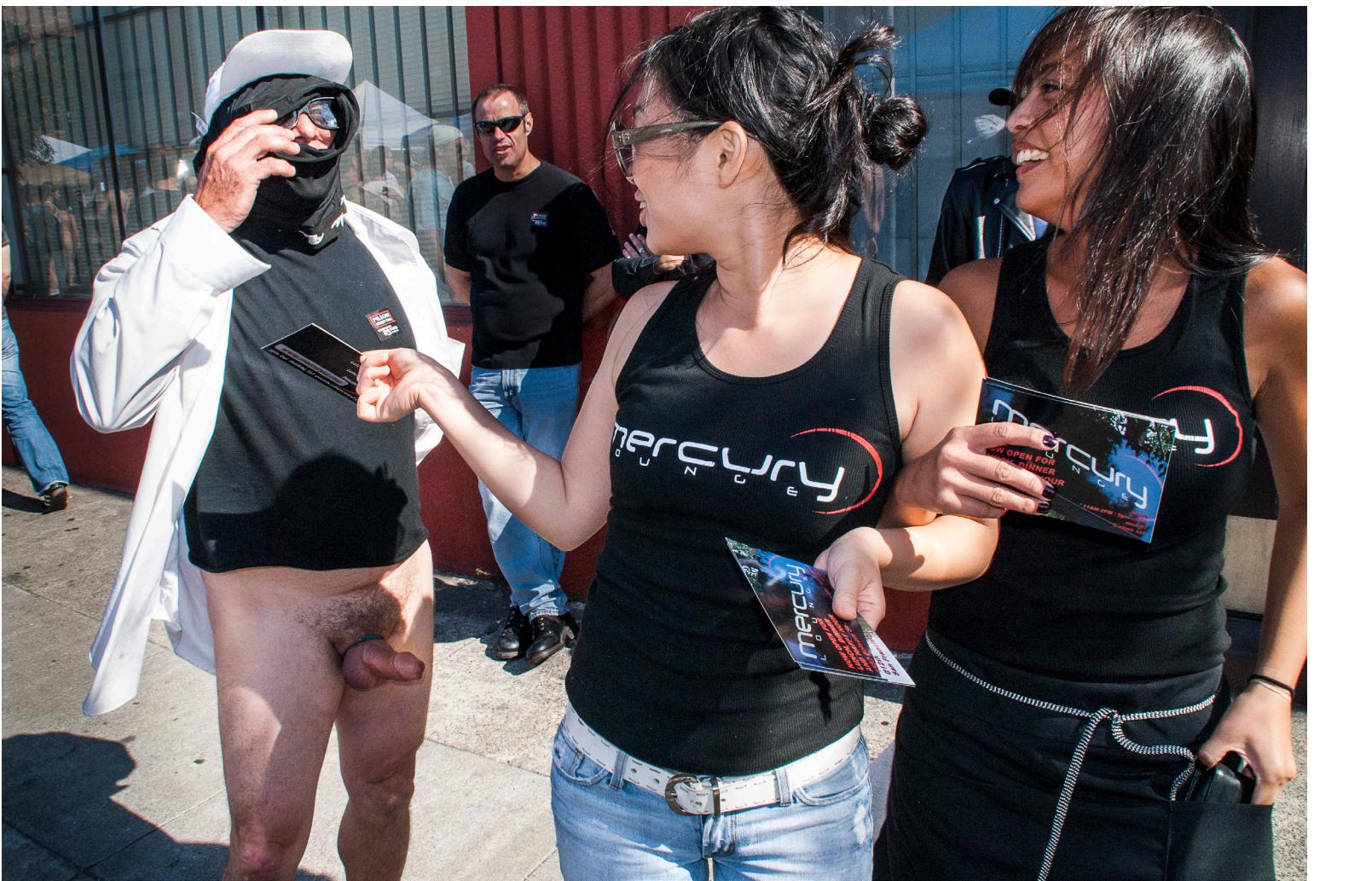
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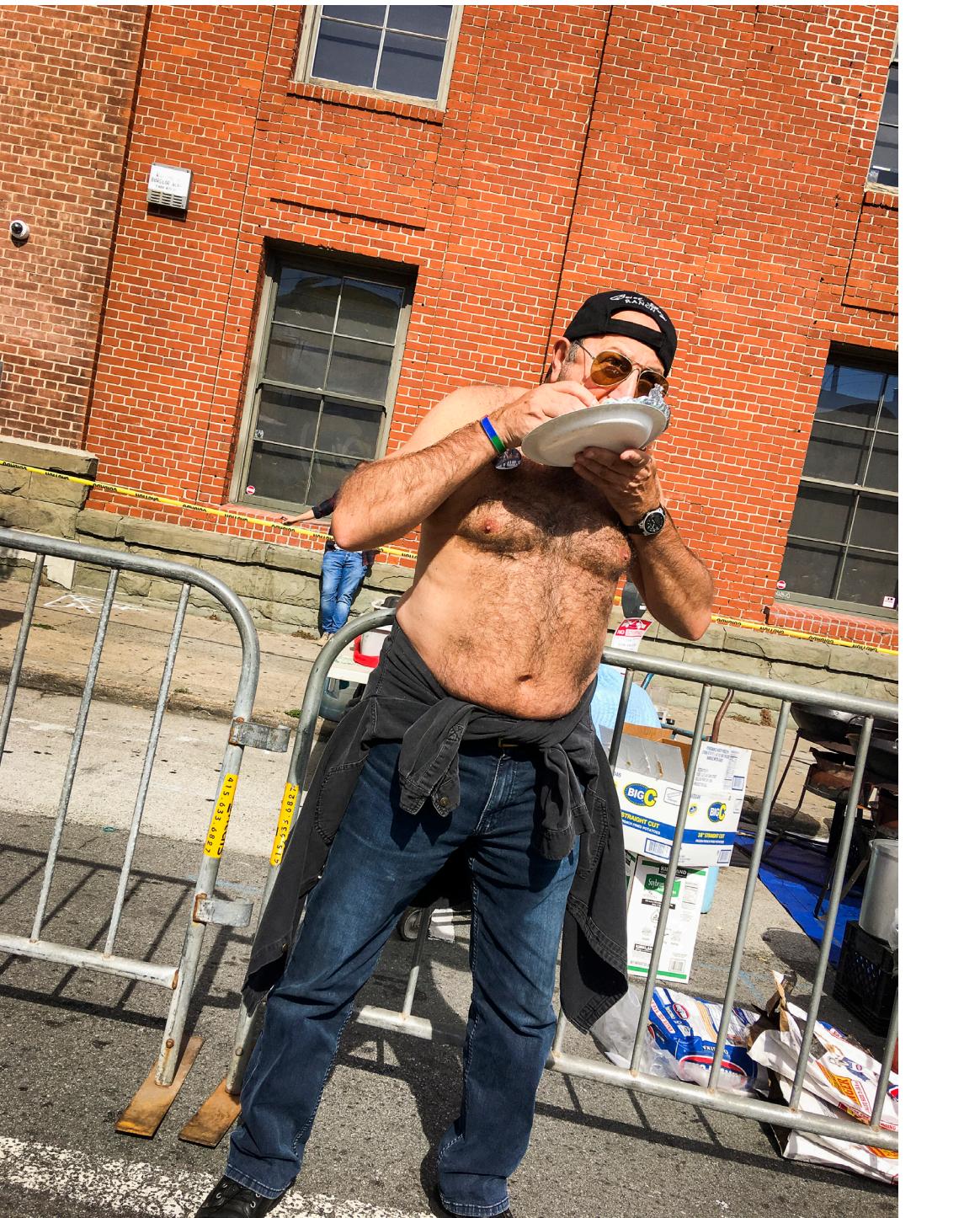
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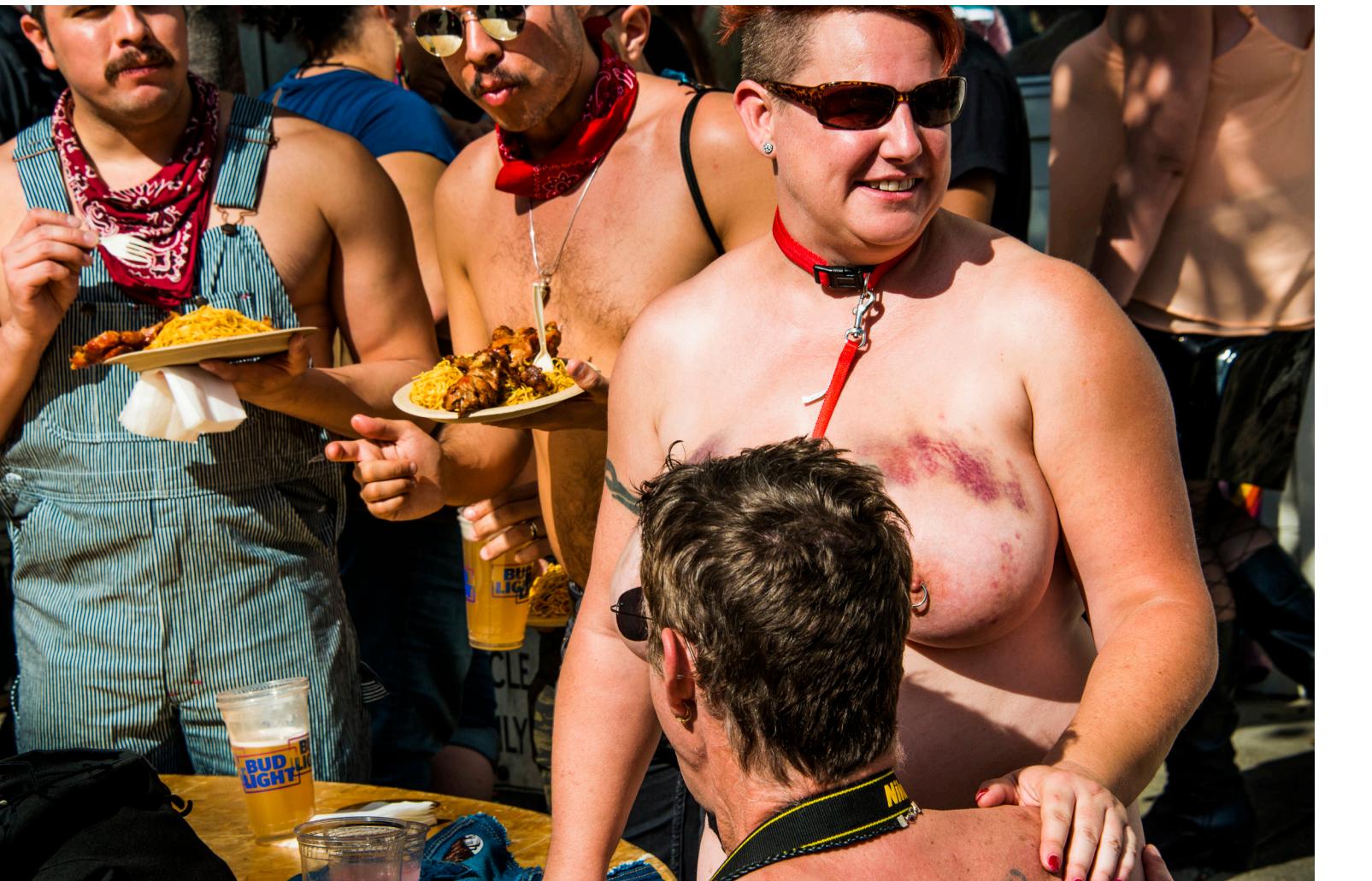




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The Perfect Moment (after Mapplethorpe's Self-Portrait with Whip)

I currently live in the Divisadero/Lower Haight district of San Francisco, a spillover neighborhood nestled between tie-dyed Disneyland-ed Haight-Ashbury, the Castro gayborhood, and the historically black cultural center of the Fillmore. The location makes for a motley glory of characters sharing sidewalks: Brigitta, the Rasta lotion-maker; Devon, the fire-eating middle-school Math teacher; Bob, our whip-smart snarky landlord who helped elect Harvey Milk; let alone my own household of a Mexican-Guatemalan husband, Malaysian asylee artist, and tatted-and-pierced activist Berkeley doctoral candidate. Everyone is hyphenated here.

When I first moved to the neighborhood a decade ago, I found it to be the perfect moment — moving to the city I loved more than any other, and to a pocket of it that contained a community art space, Ethiopian restaurant, discount produce market, dive bar with two-dollar drafts and life-long bartenders, and Sam's corner store that defied its size with its abundance of needs, all on the same strip.

But the neighborhood is changing, much like the whole city. The tech economy is booming, and those who are riding this Millennial Wall Street wave bring a very different sheen to the water. It has become wealthier, more white-collar, more white-washed, more white. And with that, an exodus of people that attracted me to the city in the first place. It is true what all the magazine articles and culture blogs say: San Francisco is losing something. But what, exactly?

Vincent, a bondage enthusiast who runs a Burner collective down the street, hangs explicit close-ups of nude models sucking dick, finger-fucking and fisting on the walls, for the Divisadero Art Walk. I am handing him nails as he grumbles between hitting the hammer, "This neighborhood is getting so polo shirt. We need some Mapplethorpe shit to smack these bitches awake, remind them what this town is about." The weight of my nod is deliberate, one of insider knowledge — the image, the issue, all of it. "Now more than ever," I say.

Mapplethorpe's self-portrait is stark, high contrast, painting his shadows into void spaces: armpit, anus, brow. His back is crouched and bent, a strange shape of the body. His ass is exposed and square and center, a tail slinks from inside, along the foreground, and out of sight. Gaunt face with features pulled forward to a point. This body shape, and this tail: one may think a rat, some kind of animal. But the tail is a black leather whip, and his chaps and vest are black leather, another animal. His right hand clutches the whip just before it disappears inside of him, and he looks directly into the camera, feral, almost sinister. Another kind of animal.

The first time I saw this photograph was in college. I was reading about the X Portfolio in my Art and Culture class. I winced, an electric pain ran through my limbs. It was the phantom pain of my naïve queer sympathy, pity for a man who lost his way, or something more baleful. I watched the news and memorized the AIDS PSAs. I knew what became of this man, and somehow colluded his death with this image. That he would make this image at all, a kind of death.

I was so young.

In the years of Crisco and Disco Mapplethorpe was introduced by then-lover Jack Fritscher to the Mineshaft, the members only Meatpacking BDSM sex club that inspired dungeon love and piss-play, the Village People and jail-cell fetish, Foucault and Freddy Mercury. With his Hasselblad and handsome face he invited this night-life with flashbulb light. And part of that night, that life, became his own, like a picture in one's pocket.

In 1998, after Mapplethorpe's death, Warner and Berlant wrote the essay "Sex in Public." It wasn't really about sex in public, but that got our attention. Indeed, that was the reality of the essay. Sexuality is mostly a public act — chivalric gestures, kneeling for the popped question, white lace and taffeta, bachelor parties, the white picket fence, and certainly knowing that when you fuck missionary and cum inside it is to make a baby, and a growing belly is proof. All public. All white. But the world of Mineshaft Manhattan in the time of Mapplethorpe was private: in the shadows, leather, and black.

At the same time Mapplethorpe sought a refuge in basements and blinds-drawn windows, in an effort to challenge San Francisco City Hall's defamation of a similar community on the other side of the continent, organizers created what is now the Folsom Street Fair, which brought the leather daddies, the piss pigs, the subs, doms and in-betweens, the Vincents, into the soft embrace of NorCal light. People gawked at the audacity, clutched their proverbial pearls, as ass-less chaps and nipple tassels paraded down one of the city's major arteries, and the blood quickened with cock-ring vendors and panels on lube utility. Yet, people came — they certainly did.

Before sight of this photograph, before knowledge of the Fair, my world was Baltimore Catholic, and the body was dubbed a temple. Meaning, the body was sacred. Meaning, the body was only entered for the love ritual. Meaning, sex was our animal selves. A private animal. And even though my classmates and I rolled our eyes at the archaic sentiment, even though we all silently acknowledged that we masturbated every day, that we experimented with the girls of Seton Keough down the street (or fantasized about the boys experimenting with the girls of Seton Keough), we blushed as well, felt the twinge in our gut. Our body gave our shame away in some fashion.

From Berlant and Warner: "Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation." Straight folks have diamond rings and priests, a single red rose and The Supremes. We queers sought to conceive our own expression since none of those things were designed for us. That is largely what San Francisco was for a perfect moment, a bunch of loose change that didn't fit into a designated slot, and so they rolled west to create their own economy, their own public, South of the Slot.

My friend K. We were waiters at a hip Atlanta bistro close to my college. Tall, football shoulders, forearms like polished ebony bedposts. He slung sandwiches and his imaginary wig, swishing across a floor like the song played only for him — a liquid body that poured sweet into open hands. I loved him dearly, but sometimes as he flooded a sidewalk or spilled himself into a store, I would feel my eyes roll for onlooking strangers, a performance of I am not like him. Yet, if a frat boy or high-hair heckled, those same eyes would burn a hole into their polo shirt with hopes of arresting their polish. This duplicity didn't escape me, both this protective defense and wish that K would *tone it down* sometimes.

I felt the same way the first time I attended Folsom. I was 22, a twink, a cub, a litany of lingo from a most colorful lexicon. The porn stands, the sex toy demonstrations, the sex, was dizzying. I was at once pulsing with the power I found in the street, but the Catholic school boy gurgled up, and I blushed as I walked through the crowd. I saw deviance. I saw darkness. These people had somehow lost their way. And after a man sporting a leather harness with his dick in his hand tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I wanted a taste, I breathlessly bee-lined for my hostel bed.

Mapplethorpe wasn't just fucking, though; he was fighting. Ed Koch New York was a spineless Hercules charged with cleaning the stables, to rid itself of its animals, and Robert didn't want to be swept away by a river. Imagine a river sweeping away all the rats of Manhattan, those trapped in a mineshaft. And San Francisco was fighting, as well, by ascending to the streets before the flooding trapped them all. It was the way to survive. I only learned this much later. I wish I had learned it sooner.

K eventually moved back home. He missed the family that saw his swish as a fuck you to a God that he very much believed in. And so, still lonely in Atlanta, policed even by those in his own community who, desperate, built white fences around their basement flat, he packed away his wig, straightened his shoulders, and squared back to South Carolina. And a light went out of him faster than a flood could sweep a street.

Times Square cleaned up not with water but with a flood of unnatural light, the dark of the night completely stripped away. It now exhibits a soulless glow, a spotless silver and glass, with tiny glimmers of a history blown out with neon advertisements, heteronormativity in LED. Now, it is a city in constant exposure, a constant public, and one that glares. San Francisco suffers the same — the sheen of the Salesforce Tower, the gleaming metal and glass of an unchecked industry, shiny as polished coin.

I was blind that first time at the Fair. The monochrome lens of my Catholic upbringing had me only see the black of the leather, the shrouded sex, the darkness that doctrines edify so well. What I didn't see that day was the color, the range of love that now had a place to be in a natural light. A different kind of public. Natural. Indeed, I now know this is one perfect moment that suffers no loss. In fact, it is all about finding, finding one another, and having the choice whether to remain in shadow, or to walk in the light. A choice.

I only wish that K had seen Folsom, before he succumbed to the ridiculous shame felt by so many queers for just being who they are. If only he could have flipped his wig once on that street, to embody, fully, the temple that was his self, a sacred thing. A beautiful animal.

Mapplethorpe looks right at me. You think the center of the photograph is his ass, but no. Look closer. It is the hand that grips the whip, like a talon, the whole arm active, a present action, a full control. And now, the look is not sinister at all. It is a challenge, daring you to tell him to *tone it down*. Daring you to dismiss his presence. That he is here, just as much as the frat boy, the high-hair heckler, and you, and I.

We need to hang these fierce looks on the walls of our beloved towns before they suffer from too much polo shirt. Now, more than ever.

Divisadero has become, in the words of realtor websites, "hot." The community art space is now a fashion boutique, the produce market a five-dollar pour-over coffeehouse. Brigitta moved her shop to Oakland. And Vincent recently packed up and complained all the way to Portland. Change is inevitable, I get it. Cities change, certainly. But, it isn't the change that makes my head so heavy. It is what we are losing in the midst of this change: the loose change, the motley glory, that collective push against the conformity that threatened so many of our lives. Most tech bros don't know this because they've only known a picket fence public, and are safely oblivious within the privilege. They can't acknowledge San Francisco as a sanctuary, because they can't even see the threat we're protecting ourselves from.

Fuck your white lace.

Mapplethorpe died at exactly the age that I write this essay. This fact doesn't escape me. What have I done to counter the pressures of the picket fence, for not only people like Robert and I, but all those who don't want to kneel? What, write this essay? Perhaps. What I do know is that when I catch myself rolling my eyes, when I judge those who love differently, when I blush at the sight of my own body — all things I still catch myself doing — these are moments I now feel shame, because I understand it is weakness. Now, when I walk into the swollen throng of Folsom, I know this is human resilience. Love is resilient. And Folsom may be a lot of things, and certainly has changed over the years — just like San Francisco. But it continues (and must continue) as a fuck you to the forces that made me, made K, made Robert — all of us animals — afraid of their own hearts, by making public all the ways that love exists. It is, indeed — leather and lycra, harness and heartbeat — what love looks like.

- miah jeffra
founding editor, foglifter press

"the things that spell san francisco to me are disappearing fast... I should have liked to have lived here then — color, excitement, power, freedom."

— from the film 'vertigo'

in these divided times, no matter where you come from or where you're going, we all come together at the food court.

wise men and established cultures know that it's essential to snack while drinking alcohol. this book is dedicated to the fine people of the folsom street fair who have made this book possible.

these images were shot in 2007 and 2017. other than the cell phones, it's hard to determine the decade for each image, which I find — in a way — hopeful.

all my friends in san francisco complain how the city is changing. a century of artists and poets are being replaced by algorithmicists and trust-fund hipsters. soulless robots are casting out the beautiful freaks. but as the millennium tower sinks, the folsom street fair stands its ground.

— michael rababy 2018