

## On consumption and vulnerability

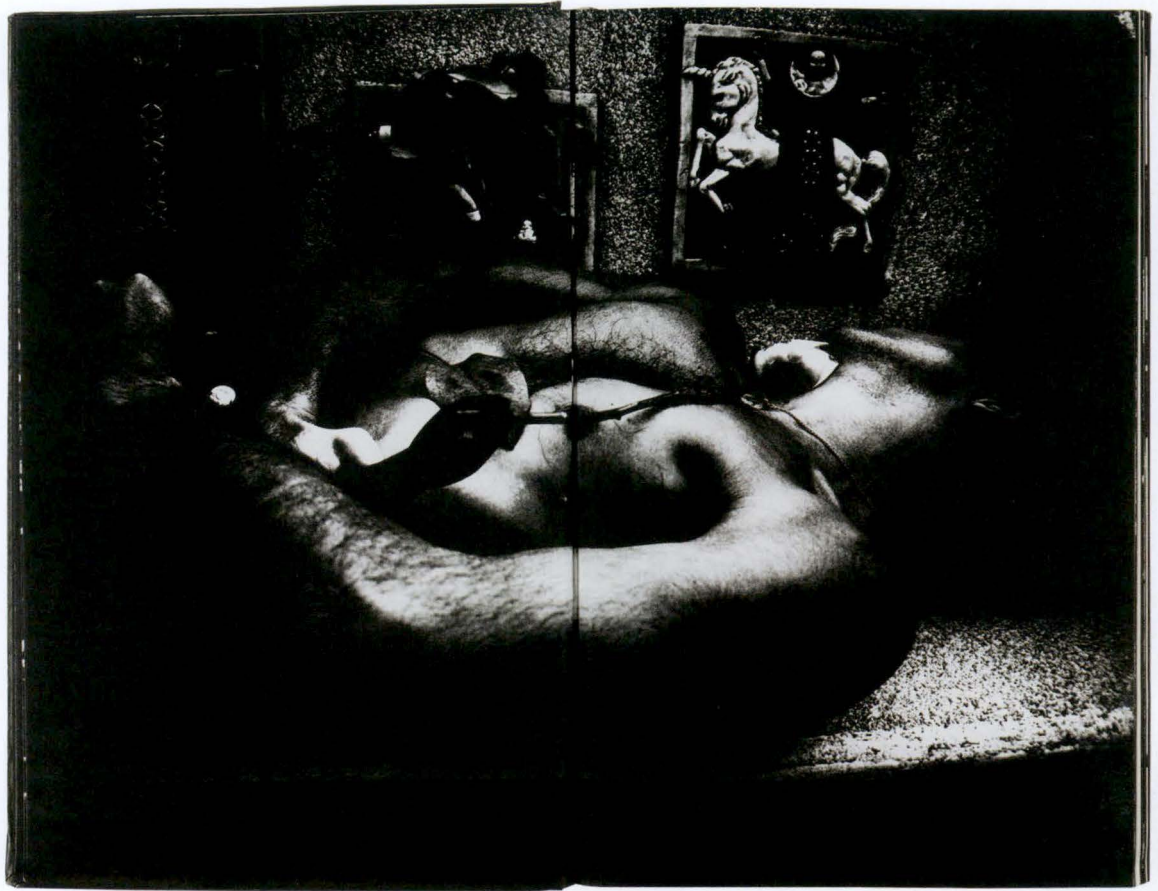
Stacey Ho

Since the time of the Decadents, representations of Saint Sebastian have been infused with homo-erotic desire. Within this conception, the arrows that pierce the soldier-saint's torso become cocks that penetrate and destroy him for the sake of pleasure. I imagine Roman soldiers gathered around the body of a beautiful young man, gazing upon him in death as an object of desire. Love, in this portrait, is infused with tragedy, desire with violence and possession, mirroring behaviours inherent to capitalism and harmfully constructed forms of masculinity.

In Peter Hujar's *Orgasmic Man*, I see a foil to such forms of domination. The darkness and loss linger on, as ever, but there is also the possibility of a different kind of desire. I imagine Hujar's world as one cleansed of terror, existing outside of it, as in death. Hujar photographed his friends and lovers. Accordingly, his images are suffused with intimacy and care for his subjects. His subjects were also artists, writers, and thinkers working and living within that particular moment in New York in the 1970s and '80s, just before and during the American AIDS epidemic. As we look back now, one cannot help but imbue these images with what Jalal Toufic would call *the surpassing disaster*—an event so traumatic that tradition withdraws and becomes impenetrable following that event. In this personal and cultural context, love becomes a form of community and also the framework with which to view a social history.

It is tricky to talk about photography as *truthful* and art as *beautiful*. And yet, found somewhere in the distance between subject, optics, and light, there exists in Hujar's images a faith in photography's ability to transmit a truth more real than what is tangible. In these ephemeral relations, these most frightening and vulnerable moments between love and death, Hujar shows us tenderness and dignity. Playing again with Toufic's notions, I am seeking a means of *resurrection* while looking at this picture—trying to find meaning, if possible, in this material in the present. What does this *Orgasmic Man*—a boy, really—want to reveal about love, queerness, gender, history, desire, death, beauty? As in much of Hujar's work, the impermanence and the realness of this question are communicated through flaws and flesh, reflecting off one lone and unique body to pierce through our own, penetrating our retinas, leaving its mark on our hands, feet, torsos, cells.

I watch this boy as he comes, given over to vulnerability. From this gesture, somewhere between pleasure and pain, I wonder about ways to inhabit desire that resist possession. Perhaps in this image, an arrow may be remediated so that it is not a weapon. To take up a position of defencelessness, to allow oneself to be consumed: perhaps from such acts one could begin to consider relations that reshape toxic forms of desire. In this world of possibility and from this fragile position, the body itself may open up and begin to write while embracing disaster.



Eikoh Hosoe and Yukio Mishima

*Killed by Roses*, 1963

photogravures in book published by Shueisha (Tokyo, Japan), each double-page spread 42 x 28 cm