‘If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door.’

(Harvey Milk, from audiotape to be played only upon the event of his assassination)

What is writing? Staining sheets. While écriture is understood as operating on a symbolic level, the physical act of mark-making is grounded in materiality. Ink on paper, cum on the bedspread and bloody clothing of all sorts share the pull of the gaze. These things, like all things, look back. The psyche, being invisible, keeps its secrets better than the body, but it too leaks, and it also peeks. The writing, the writer and the written are not so discrete. They overlap. The writer is as much a text as the written. Sudden exclamations can interrupt the most banal texts. ‘Bang!’ When Harvey Milk declared that the fatal bullet should ‘destroy every closet door,’ he was advocating a very specific course of action associated with an entirely hypothetical scenario, which, in fact, came to pass. In retrospect, the words seemed prescient, their predictive, productive, performative character lending fuel to the eventual mythologizing of the man Milk.

Roland Barthes asked whether ‘for some perverts the sentence is a body?’ (1975: 51) Nearly four decades later, this question has lost much of its novelty. The sentence is, or can be, a body. The relationship between the body, the world and the word is always already technologized. The body can be a sentence, or an entire text, or an accumulation of texts. ‘The Bomb’ was arguably the most potent one-word statement of the 20th century. Language makes shit happen. It starts with a mark and can go anywhere. And nothing whatsoever is
immune to deconstructive textual analyses. In this text, that much is a given.

Materiality and representation are obviously intertwined, but the meanderings of their mutual penetration are anything but obvious. This text is informed by certain discourses, proceeds from particular premises and eschews specific disciplinary methodologies in favor of provisional conceptual alliances. Psychoanalysis and picture theory are key here. The premise that people are or can be pictures was articulated by Jacques Lacan, who wrote, ‘in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture’ (1981: 106). I am also indebted to the hypothesis that pictures want to be treated as persons (that is, ‘to be asked what they want’) as proposed by W. J. T. Mitchell. He explains:

Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. They present, not just a surface, but a face that faces the beholder (1996: 72).

Disciplinary influences from the Humanities can include cultural, visual, film, media, museum and queer studies against a backdrop of critical theory with deep roots in photographic history, theory and curatorial practice. An axiomatic lesson from cultural studies is that anything can be treated as a text: a written document, a photograph, an oral account, a piece of clothing, an exhibition. These things are all at least partially material, but they also all intersect with concepts and attitudes that can themselves be treated as texts: curatorial decisions, visitor reception, publicity, and so on. Meaning in representation, if it is to be found at all, is always provisional and maddeningly specific. As the British cultural theorist Kobena Mercer pointed out in his re/reading of racial fetishism through the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, ‘different readers make different readings’ (1989: 194). No two people ever see the same photograph, visit the same exhibit, or experience the effects of power or history in the same way.

So how to handle the apparent impossibility of communication? Provisionally and specifically. I can only speak for myself. We can attempt to see things from another or the other’s point of view, and they/him/her/it can attempt the same. Language is always fractured. We can speak and we can listen. We can also abandon any expectation of seamless communication. We cannot really communicate and there is no ultimate ‘Truth’ to know. We can, however make the attempt, fully aware of the impossibility of completing the task, of transmitting our ‘take’. We always fall short. Partial measures suffice. This is fine.
Edmund Carpenter noted that, ‘the problem with full statement is that it doesn’t involve: it leaves no room for participation; it’s addressed to consumer, not co-producer’ (1970, unpaginated foreword). There is always noise in the system. How can we know what has transpired, been said, how can we trust our own flawed faculties to record history, even provisionally? What do we keep? What do we destroy? Beyond that, what do we see as being worthy of preservation, or deserving of destruction? An object becomes an artifact through its relationship to the archive, and to these questions and the conflicting drives at work in ‘archive fever’ (Derrida: 1995).

Why do people go to exhibits? They go to visit artifacts (that is, to treat pictures and things like people) and view other people (that is, to treat people like pictures and things). ‘He’ and ‘she’ become ‘it’, and vice-versa. An exhibit is a nexus of communication technologies, including the original wetware gadget: the visitor him or herself. Museum visitors interact with exhibits, talk about them, listen to them, experience revelation in their presence. A particular display may include historical artifacts, photographs, electronic media, fine art, and almost always includes written material: wall text, catalog essays and other didactic and critical material. Together these things speak. Exhibits are written and they are read; pieced together as grammars with stories to tell – not only by curators, museum directors, and other likely suspects, but also by the audience and its response, and the reception (if any) by critics.

Writing stains surfaces, marking them indelibly. Sentences, as speech acts, are written and they are handed down. A particularly perverse speech act was performed by the judge in Dan White’s court case, who infamously handed down the judicial sentence with the words: ‘Seven years, eight months.’ The ‘White Night’ riots ensued. The sentence in ink (India and laser-jet are no different here, although pixels may be) forever changes the paper on which it is written. The judge’s sentence changes the trajectory of the defendant’s life. The story turns on a word. Sentences reveal and conceal. Sometimes they conceal a body, a body wrapped in significance, but made, materially, of meat. A particularly staining strain of history is written in blood on Harvey Milk’s suit. And that suit has not just a story to tell, but a message to impart, one that reverberates through history in the stories of martyrs: that is, the exhortation to further acts of self sacrifice for ‘the cause’, whatever it may be. It may have an ironic, or in this case, camp undertone, but the call is a call to action, and syncing to the metaphor of the saint and the martyr, a call to crusade, or in more contemporary terms, to evangelize. Which begs the question: what was
Milk’s message, what big or small truths did he exhort through his particular evangelism? How is it still deployed through the relics of his life?

The International Museum of GLBT History has recently opened a permanent exhibition space on 18th Street in the heart of San Francisco’s Castro district. Since the opening in January 2011, the museum has attracted intense international media coverage, with stories appearing in more than 75 countries, and in over 36 languages. Celebrities visit for ‘photo ops’. In a post-DADT, ‘it gets better’ world, with most Americans at least supporting same-sex civil unions, it is trendy to be a friend of the ‘friends of Dorothy’. This is a fortuitous moment for this museum to launch, and its success is certainly partially tied to good timing. It is also apparent that the fact of this museum being in this location is more spectacular than the specifics of the exhibits themselves. The venue is itself the destination.

This has not always been true. The Museum is associated with the GLBT Historical Society, which had staged exhibits in the small galleries attached to their archives for many years prior to the opening of the new, larger, very public space. Its roots go back further than that, to the early 1980s at least. Willie Walker, the Society’s founding archivist, used to rummage through dumpsters in a frenetic effort to save the remnants of lives that relatives of the dead sought to erase. Gay men were dying and their families were throwing away their histories, cleansing themselves of the taint of AIDS. The future was uncertain. Of course, it always is. Derrida says, ‘the archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge, a token of the future’ (1995: 19). The future is in a continual contest with the threat of oblivion. Derrida goes on to say, ‘there is no archive fever without the threat of this death drive, the aggression and the destruction drive’ (1995: 19).

In 2003, the Society mounted an exhibition to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Harvey Milk, the ‘slain gay political leader gunned down by a homophobic ex-cop’ (Stryker: 2003). The centerpiece of Saint Harvey: The Life and Afterlife of a Modern Gay Martyr was an installation of the suit Milk was wearing when he was killed. This was the first time the suit had been exhibited. It was pulled from the archives for the occasion. A few years later, it was on display again, in the temporary exhibition space at the corner of 18th and Castro Streets in San Francisco. A lot of visitors saw it the first time and even more did the second. Between serial display, it resides in the archives. It will certainly emerge again soon.

The question of why we go to exhibits is distinct from the question of why we go to a particular exhibiting venue, or why we go to opening
Fig. 1. The suit that Supervisor Harvey Milk was wearing when he was assassinated. Exhibited in 2003 at the Saint Harvey Exhibit at the GLBT Historical Society Museum, San Francisco. Photo by Daniel Nicoletta, August 22, 2003.
nights. The glamour of a venue may be sufficient to attract visitors who may not even know what exactly is on display. John Berger associates glamour with publicity, noting that it is based in envy of the unattainable, and did not exist in its contemporary form before industrial society could reproduce the printed image (Berger: 1972). A venue’s location may also attract fresh foot traffic. Or its novelty may be a draw. All these are true of the Museum, and to a lesser extent, were also true of the temporary space, but none were or are true of the archives and their attached galleries. The third floor Mission Street location is hard to find and parking can be a challenge. Visitors to its exhibits (when it was operating as an exhibition space) were not drawn to the venue; they came for the exhibits. Splashy openings have their own appeal. The joke around the public opening of the Museum in the Castro was that it was ‘Club History.’ A line of dressed-for-the-occasion queers lined the street, waiting patiently for their chance to enter the moderately-sized venue, which was filled to capacity. Museum staff tended the line; archivists became bouncers for a night – but nobody put up a fight. The scene on the street was as festive as the one inside, minus the displays.

But the visitors to the Saint Harvey exhibit held in the archives eight years prior didn’t come to an ‘event’. They came to visit . . . Saint Harvey. They had to work to find him, and they found him multiplied: a myth already in the making, traces of an absent body (except for the blood stains), and the exhibit itself, its title suggesting the attitude of awe the audience ought to assume vis à vis its object. The suit, the shirt, the shoes are metonymic stand-ins for the body of the murdered man. They are not pictures or images in any conventional sense, but at the same time, they are. They refer to his absent body, and point directly to the moment of violence that transformed a living body into dead meat. Looking at the position, or posture, of the suit, it is almost possible to see the missing body. Merchandising is cited as well. This is the way clothing for sale is often displayed. A vitrine at ‘his feet’ contains assorted related items, including a broken pocket-comb, split by the bullet that killed him.

At this point, it may be useful to recall the layers of representation that are at work in this image. Mitchell says that:

Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures ‘made in the image’ of a creator to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image (1984: 504).
The image of Milk’s suit on display pictures, but is not in itself, a display in an exhibit. It is a photograph, reproduced in print media. It can do things, like travel in time and space and live in a book, that a display or an exhibit can not. But the exhibit is three dimensional. We can walk around it, check out its rear. Looking at this reproduction, we are unlikely to strike up a conversation about Harvey Milk, gay politics, sex, bodies, photography, visual technologies or anything else. We won’t notice what other people are wearing if there is no (other) body there. At an exhibit, with the proximity of other bodies and a strong social component built in to the base of exhibition, all this is very likely. At an exhibit, visitors are presented with an array of media. Photographs, artifacts, didactic writing, sometimes video, audio and electronic media collide in the big picture that is the exhibit as a whole. Sections within the exhibit operate semi-autonomously, with velvet ropes, vitrines and other small architectural features clearly outlining curatorial intent and the suggested limits of reception.

The artifacts on display were/are intended as representations of the historical figure of Milk. They operate more like photographs than paintings in that they are directly related to the body of the man they are intended to evoke. They bear the somatic indices of his body in the blood stains that incorporate the microscopic inscription of his DNA. He could be positively identified from this evidence. The stains also trace the history of the fatal event. Forensic specialists could write a story from the holes and gore. But there is also a sense in which the display does function as a painting. A crucial point of photographic theory – which has been in play with varying implications since the inception of the medium – suggests that the removal of the ‘hand’ of the plastic artist alters the psychic relation of the viewer to the image, imbuing photographic media with a ‘truth effect’ that is hard to overcome. Even those well acquainted with photography and its progeny, who know them to be liars of the cleverest kind, are continually seduced into believing their apparent testimony. But this display does show its hand. Curatorial practice is creative and the hand, eye and mind of the curator are evident in the display. It is obviously constructed, it does not pretend to be ‘natural’. In that sense, it does function as a painting, albeit an often invisible one. We may know, as visitors to the exhibit, that choices have been made, regarding what to display and how to display it. We know, and yet . . . it disappears as soon as it is seen. The display relates to the fetish in a way similar to the photograph, as Christian Metz described it, ‘a cut inside the referent’ (1990), a part that implies an always incomplete and
missing whole. When we see a photograph of an installation of artifacts relating to the life of a man who was himself a representation of an emergent concept of community as well as a literal political representative, we can easily get caught in a web of imploding re-re-representation. The stutter implied by such multiple representations can provoke a critical vertigo. Nevertheless, there is something worth grasping at here.

Displayed with arms outstretched as if crucified, radiantly backlit, the artifacts highlight and problematize the show’s title, _St. Harvey: The Life and Times of a Modern Gay Martyr_. Milk the agnostic is here transformed into a Queer, Jewish Christ-figure. There is no mistaking the iconography. He is skinned on the cross, or rather his skin (or his second skin) is displayed cruciform. Clothing is called a second skin, understood as something that we shouldn’t take off, but photographs too, evoke this boundary. Jay Prosser notes that:

There is a recurring belief in photographs as a kind of skin. It is the most metaphysical and yet at the same time the most corporeal image of the photograph we have, and it goes back to a mystical conception of photography – to an ideal of photography that existed even before the chemical invention of photography. In it the photograph is the ghost of the photographed body, a revenant of the referent’s lost skin (2005: 179).

Curatorial intent is immaterial. The bloodstained suit, impressed with the body of the slain man, hangs there, visible and purposively so. Clothing is detachable, changeable, queer in the sense that it changes the one who wears it. In drag, clothes can change the sex of the wearer in the eye of the viewer. Clothing is technological. It is protection, camouflage and signification; it both conceals and reveals. There is no meat body in this corpus, but if there were, it would hang, arms outstretched, limp and crucified. The clothing demonstrates this. A Catholic visitor in particular could be impressed with a memory of the shroud of Turin. The stains on the shirt and those on the shroud both suggest representations of abstract Modernist bodies. A critic of the recent contemporary art historical canon would catch that. Of course, a secular viewer, with a background in display merchandising, may well have a completely different experience. Some visitors to the exhibit lamented the ‘altar-like installation of Milk’s bloody, bullet-riddled clothing in the shape of a crucifix (as) simultaneously sacrilegious, exploitive, and disrespectful.’ Others saw in it traces of the wry, irreverent humor for which Milk was known. Few noted that the first Christian, to whose own martyrdom the exhibit in general, and

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this display in particular, made such explicit reference to, was himself, if probably neither agnostic nor Queer, most certainly also a Jew.

Many visitors read neither disrespect nor irony into the display and were neither offended nor amused by it. Others did read irony and it opened an understanding of a man whose own well-known naughtiness paled under political pressure for his secular canonization. For some audiences the altar-like configuration has functioned as an actual altar, and has evoked profound and complicated feelings. They may have felt awful standing before him/it, but also felt awe. Many wept, and this outpouring – though partly an expression of simple sorrow for the loss of a cherished ‘ancestor’ – also bore elements of a religious experience. Saints look back through the eyes of icons. This effigy does not weep (and cannot weep, being headless and therefore eyeless), yet it often provokes tears in those who stand before it. The audience provides the artifact its missing visual organs, with their accompanying capacity for tears, and in its presence they themselves become weeping effigies. Eyes that can see can also cry. The spectators stand looking at the suit and see something there. Standing silently, they also hear something. The eyeless effigy cannot weep, but it can speak. ‘Objects will become speech, if they mean something’ (Barthes: 1971, 111).

The object in the archive is always potentially on display. But the archive also always provides a retreat from the collective gaze. The artifact gains its privileged and protected place via its significance, which may be either material or symbolic. It may be worth something or it may mean something – or both. This particular object, Harvey’s suit, is not worth much in conventional economic terms. It is, however, historically and symbolically ‘valuable.’ It is, sartorially speaking, a piece of semiotic weaponry. It returns the insult of the shooting with the accusation of the artifact’s mute testimony. Carpenter says that clothing ‘serves as social weaponry. It defines sexes, classes, age groups; fashion is therefore infallible. Violations threaten the social order, producing fear, shock, anger’ (1970, unpaginated). This shocking piece of clothing now resides in an archive. Its origins, however, are vague. It was manufactured in Dallas by ‘Palm Branch’, and ‘Expertly tailored for Jas. K. Wi(l)son.’ The (l) marks a blind spot. An encrustation of blood obliterates the central letter and leaves a reasonable doubt. The shirt label is obscured by blood and is completely unreadable – except as a stain. Where did Milk buy this suit? Could it have been Dallas – site of another assassination fifteen years before? Where is that suit? Did Milk campaign in this particular suit? He may have. What is known of this suit is that the San Francisco
Supervisor, the first openly gay elected official in a major United States city, did legislate in it and that he did wear it to work on the morning of November 27th, 1978.

All that is visible of a man wearing a suit is his head and hands. This may seem a trite point, but it is important. The Japanese gangsters known as Yazuka typically cover their entire bodies in intricate, multi-colored tattoos, with the exception of their hands and heads. The tattoos have particular cultural meanings that associate the men wearing them with a criminal underground. Conventionally clothed, their bodies show no sign of the dubious associations so clearly signaled when they are naked in the public bath. Many pioneers in the now venerable modern primitive body modification movement maintain a similar discretion. Fakir Musafar, known as one of the pioneers of contemporary body-modification culture, worked for years in the advertising industry, all the while maintaining a life-long practice of extreme DIY body-mod. Clothed, he was (and is) nondescript. The clothing is as much a technology as that which it conceals. Milk’s suit showed only head and hands – like most suits. But, not unusual for its time, it concealed a (former?) identity as a gay hippie. The hippie suit he wore before that concealed his previous incarnation as a closeted gay Republican.

From the visual evidence itself (putting aside for a moment what we know about suits and about bodies) there might be nothing at all under the suit that Harvey wore to work at City Hall that fateful day. It could have been empty. When Dan White entered the office where Harvey Milk was working, he fired shots into Milk’s suit. He proved that the suit was not empty by pumping bullets into it. The bullets passed through the body of the suit and into the body of the man. The man’s blood, the synecdoche of his body, retraced the paths of the bullets, emerging from the holes in the suit to meet the outside world.

The assassination of Harvey Milk was an act of iconoclasm. In murdering the physical man, White also sought to eliminate the signifying man. People are also pictures, and a picture, ‘any picture,’ as Lacan noted, ‘is a trap for the gaze’ (1981: 89). Dead men don’t speak, indeed. Yet Milk, through the technologies of representation and display, has never stopped speaking. Discussing electoral photography and the irrational search for ideological icons (for instance, ‘the war hero’ or ‘the family man’), Barthes notes that the campaign photograph ‘offers to the voter his own likeness, but clarified, exalted, superbly elevated into a type.’ In Milk’s case, this would be a prototype. Gay politicos are now largely acclimated into the political environment. But then, the notion was new, and Milk represented...
the shift that allowed a homosexual to enter the body politic. As the first of a new breed, Milk was bound to become an icon. Lining the suit is the history of Harvey-in-suits. A gay radical and a populist, Milk was once a Wall Street stockbroker and closeted homosexual. He unself-consciously wore suits then. Coming out to San Francisco, he became a hippie and shed the suits for gaily-colourful patchwork hippie garb. The patches were possibly purely decorative, as was sometimes the case with hippie patches, but they may have had another purpose – they may have concealed holes. In any case, Milk’s sartorial shift signified a political shift. Milk maintained his hippie appearance during his early runs for office. He was a populist and a gay activist, and looked the part. To wear a suit could send the wrong signal. ‘Suit’ was a slur to the 1970’s west-coast hipster: it signified ‘the man’ and his ‘system’. Milk was a political outsider, and used this point to become an insider. Milk ultimately cut his hair and ran in a suit – and won. He reclaimed the suit as a mimetic argument that the gay body belonged in the body politic. His early bids for office, in which he dressed the part of a bohemian camera-buff were unsuccessful. His success coincided with his claiming the politician’s uniform. I am not suggesting that it had anything like a cause and effect relation. Many factors would influence the final, successful run, including the shift to district-based elections. But the shift was visually apparent and Milk’s supporters understood the irony implied by the act of camouflage that gained him, and, by extension, them, access to City Hall. The mimicry was sufficient to secure public office, but not to protect the man in the suit from the man who would shoot his argument (about the place of the gay body in the body politic) full of holes. The suit on exhibit shows its holes. They are indices of Milk’s fatally wounded body, un-patched and on display.

‘Where does the outside commence? This question is the question of the archive’ (Derrida: 1995, 8). Harvey Milk’s suit began its journey to the archive when Milk’s blood emerged from his body into the outside world. The bullet holes are the roads the blood travelled, and the suit the landscape through which it passed. Different to other suits he owned, indelibly marked now, it came to be part of history on record. Archives are repositories of artifacts, including records and pictures. The artifact only visits the original or any exhibition; it ‘lives’ in the archive. This suit will be back. In this it bears a metaphorical relationship to saintly relics. Reliquaries are archives of a sort, and vice-versa. Once a year, in the case of the former, on (a particular) saint’s day, the relic emerges – to be admired, wondered at, prayed to, wept over. Its annual function complete, it returns to the interiority of the
reliquary or archive. The tempo of exhibition is subject to the whims of curators, venues, communities and the economy in general and does not adhere to anything as concrete as a church calendar. Nevertheless, the repetition of ritualistic public adulation is followed and countered by equally ritualistic retreat into institutional protection.

The visitor to *Saint Harvey* stands in front of the suit in triplicate. First, he or she stands in for the assassin and stands roughly where he stood. The killer was the last person to see this suit in its ‘natural state’ – that is, as clothing for a living man. Standing facing a living man who wore a suit tailored for his living body, the assassin painted himself into history by turning Milk’s suit into a bloody canvas. Standing in the exhibition, facing the suit, now empty of flesh but full of significance (unlike Milk’s other suits, which are just empty) the visitor sees the splashes and drips of blood. As a museum-goer, s/he may think of the splashes and drips of action painting. Seeing the holes, s/he may think of the void. S/he stands there, a visitor to an exhibit, as a killer might stand before their victim or as an artist might stand in front of their finished work.

Second, the visitor mirrors the display. No one visits naked. The clothed visitor reflects on the clothing visited. Identification is made and a resemblance established. Some have noted the uncanny sense that the clothing is haunted by a trace or visitation of Milk’s actual body. Some *body* comes to call on the disembodied. The lighting almost suggests phantom hands and a slightly lowered head. Is it looking – back? Carpenter notes that, ‘the notion that looking is a generative force, that the meeting of two looks can be creative, is widespread’ (1970, unpaginated). The visitor looks up at (the potent image of) the murdered martyr and the martyr looks back down at the visitor, returning his gaze and, as a meaningful object, speaks. ‘A work has no meaning without an audience willing to interpret what its meaning might be’ (Potts: 2003, 21).

Now, finally, the visitor is (the) spoken to. He or she has secured an audience, and entered into dialogue, with the saint. Standing before the relics, listening, receptive, the visitor performs an invocation of willingness, opens a space to receive sacramental speech. Sanctification requires miracles. Milk satisfied this law with the prescient prediction of his own assassination. That it may have been more the calculation of an astute political mind than the religiously inspired act of a holy man is of no concern. For the visitor to the saint’s shrine, the speech is clear. It is the exhortation to evangelism. The evangelism it urges is secular of course, and counters most contemporary evangelism. Its purpose, however, is clear. It speaks a
specific doctrine that is to be taken as a guide and insists upon ardent devotion to a cause.

Milk’s election as supervisor was revolutionary. His entry into the body politic was a first, and it changed everything. After Milk, gay men and lesbians entered political life in force and their presence there became naturalized. Barthes noted that, ‘revolution excludes myth’ (1971: 146). Harvey the man was a man, but Milk the martyr is a myth. As a myth, the myth of the gay martyr is a hothouse myth. San Francisco’s Harvey Milk Plaza could not exist in Topeka, but queer youth from Topeka lounge there, cruising, hustling and begging for change. They come because San Francisco is itself a myth, the myth of the ‘gay Mecca’, the myth that was nurtured in part by the man-myth Milk himself. ‘Some myths ripen better in some social strata: for myth also, there are micro-climates’ (Barthes: 1971, 149).

What is on display in this exhibit? Artifacts from the life of a man, certainly, and the relics of the man/myth, but there is more. The suit is also a picture. It is very literally a drawing – of blood. It is also a picture of an assassination, a hyper-realistic image of a specific event. It is a record of the iconoclastic gesture of assassination. People are also pictures, and the suit is a grim work of modernism: a gay politician erased. The suit recalls media images the viewer may have seen in the aftermath of the event. There is Diane Feinstein, tearfully facing the press, delivering the shocking news of a double murder in City Hall: the popular progressive mayor and the gay supervisor – both dead. There is the killer. Does he look smug? After a ludicrous trial that hinged on the now infamous ‘twinkie defense’, the verdict of voluntary manslaughter is read and then – breaking glass, flames, police cars burning: the White Night riots. Some see the suit and are carried away, taken (a)back to their own roles in the drama. Others, some too young to remember the events themselves, may think of filmic representations, the early documentary The Life and Times of Harvey Milk, and the more recent near-blockbuster Milk. Visitors will often picture the scene, the act, the moment, but no one pictures it the same way. Only Milk and White were there to see it and both are now dead – by the same hand. There is no photographic record, no tape to replay the event. The suit pictures all the created recollections at once, or one by one – the picture is variable but persistent. There is no escape in its presence.

... the imaginary is much nearer to, and much farther away from, the actual, – nearer because it is in (the) body as a diagram of the life of the actual, with all its pulp and carnal obverse exposed to view for the first time (Merleau-Ponty: 1993, 126).

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All this takes place in a specific context. The International Museum of GLBT History is a project of the GLBT Historical Society. The mission of the GLBT Historical Society is:

to collect, preserve, exhibit, and otherwise make available to the public historical, cultural, and artistic materials related to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender communities, identities, and practices, as well as of other sexual minorities. (Their stated) goal is to build the world’s first full-scale, professional quality museum devoted to GLBT history and culture (GLBThistory.org).

Its mission is specifically historic, its institutional history based on archival and historical methodology and goals, and its visitor profile community-based and queer. Should Harvey Milk’s suit go out on loan – separately from the exhibit Saint Harvey – to some other institution mounting some other exhibit, its meaning would change. In an exhibit about political assassination, it could hang between a vitrine containing the hat Lincoln wore to the Ford Theater and the car in which John F. Kennedy was riding on that historic day in Dallas. In an exhibit comparing religious and secular notions of sanctity through historical relics, it could hang between the shroud of Turin and Gandhi’s robe. ‘Context … is a text itself, and it thus consists of signs that require interpretation’ (Bal and Bryson: 1991, 175). The Society exhibits art, but it is not a museum of art. Nor is it a location likely to host funerary rites, but it functions as a site for the ‘remembering of the dead, but a remembering as well that they are dead, and that life continues for others’ (Metz: 1990, 159). Visitors to the relics of Saint Harvey may weep, may apprehend the suit as a shroud, may even have an experience that borders on the religious, but they are not in church. They are in a museum of history.

Can a historical artifact have an author? Certainly to be written into history, an artifact must be divided from similar objects that do not warrant either a place in history or a place in the archive. ‘Authorship is an exclusionary concept. On one side, it works to circumscribe the artistic corpus, and on the other it works to circumscribe the archive.’ Who then is the author of the suit as a historical artifact? Is it Harvey Milk himself? It could be. From a Republican closet-case, he remade himself as a man of the people. The suit would be nothing without him. Is it the curator? Without curatorial ‘authorization’ the suit would not be on exhibit. And what part did Dan White play in the transformation of a mundane piece of everyday clothing into a historical artifact? The figure of the modern gay martyr was produced, in part, through the iconoclastic act of assassination,
which collapses ‘the distinction between symbolic and actual violence’ (Mitchell: 1990, 183). Subsequent historicizing also played a part. Finally, the viewing (reading) audience contributes to the meaning of the text, art object, or artifact through the act of interpretation. But authorship has its limits. ‘Authorship ... is no more a natural ground ... than is context ... (and) what counts as authorship is determined by interpretive strategies’ (Mitchell: 1990, 181).

Milk the man became Milk the picture, the martyr and the myth many years before the relics of his martyrdom were found. For years they lay undiscovered, boxed beneath the bed of his lover Scott Smith, to whom they had been released after the investigation into his death was complete. They were excavated in an archaeological intervention upon Smith’s death, and came to rest in the archives of the Historical Society. From the archives they were produced for the exhibit – a yearlong saint’s day.

When Milk died, his aides, who knew he expected to take an assassin’s bullet, played the tape he kept in his desk drawer for just such an occasion: ‘If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door.’ Two bullets entered his brain. Three entered his body – through his suit. Normally, when not in use, a suit is kept in a closet. Not this suit. It lives in the archive. And not this time. This one speaks.

An exhibit is a picture, a person, a text, is significant, speaks. It sometimes talks back, antagonizing or annoying its visitors. We encounter it as an/the other. It looks back. What each of us perceives depends on how each of us participates in the synaesthetic riot of perception/communication with other objects/others. My world is not the same as your world, but the world became an exhibition a long time ago, and now, it has gone viral. Some might visit this display and see a pervert after their children. Some might even delight in the fact that he’s dead. There’s nothing to stop them; curatorial intent only suggests an attitude, or intellectual style. Those visitors would be rare, however. The display, and the context of the exhibition, suggests the ideal visitor. Modern gay saint, hero, martyr: the right attitude is obvious. It knows what it wants. Barthes said, ‘the text is a fetish object and this fetish desires me. The text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability ...’ (1975: 27). The ideal visitor is gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-something, queer, straight-but-not-narrow, already an ally, has done their 101 studies, an alphabet suit of political correction. This is not about changing minds, but about an exhortation to a certain level of dead serious camp militancy that seems almost quaint in a
post-AIDS, post-9/11 world. It preaches to the amen corner. We’re already saved. Mitchell noted that ‘we create much of our world out of the dialogue between verbal and pictorial representations’ (1984: 532). This representation, in dialogue with all the others, speaks the partisan words of the modern gay martyr, the words he used during his campaign to delight his supporters and to chide his enemies for their paranoiac gay-panic. It says: ‘My name is Harvey Milk and I’m here to recruit you’ (Milk in Shilts: 1982, 359).

References
Unpaginated foreword, ‘Clothing as Weaponry’, ‘Eye Beam’.
Prosser, Jay (2005), Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).