Courtesy UCLA Film & Television Archive, used by permission of Pat Rocco
Pat Rocco’s *A Very Special Friend* opens with an attractive young man rolling into Los Angeles on a hopped freight train. As he hitchs a ride downtown, luck favors him when a visually pleasing stranger picks him up. Conveying attraction without words, the two take the Hollywood Freeway to Echo Park near downtown, where they enjoy an affectionate boat ride. Finally, the youthful duo heads north to Griffith Park for a naked romp in the grass, as they roll, tussle, and ultimately “seal their new-found friendship with a long . . . lingering . . . kiss,” as a catalog description for the 8 mm film described.

Formally, technically, and aesthetically, the short one-reel film operates at rudimentary levels, possessed most markedly of an endearing exuberance that helps cover such aspects as the lack of live sound. Historically, however, the film takes on added significance; opening in December 1968, its proud (and naked) gay kiss was an unprecedented visual spectacle in the public screening of American cinema. As the first American filmmaker to shoot and exhibit openly gay erotic films, Rocco delivered a significant contribution to gay pride and visibility. Informed by his predecessors and influential to his followers, Rocco served as a critical cultural worker, activist, and community builder in the late 1960s.

Furthermore, like many of Rocco’s films, *A Very Special Friend* maps a clear cartography of desire, one that tracks gay kinship and presence across a multiplicity of specific social spaces. Without question the most precise and vivid filmic chroni-
cler of Los Angeles’s late-1960s gay sexual geography, Rocco mapped, recorded, and contributed to gay community formation at a pivotal moment in that city’s history. More than mere ethnographer observing the actions around him, Rocco employed his films as bold acts of place-claiming on cultural, social, and also spatial geographies, resisting a hegemonic, heteronormative legal and political regime that claimed a monopoly on the assignment of meaning and visibility to gay identity and practice.

Yet despite his unprecedented cinematic interventions into both gay visibility and the social production of space, Rocco has remained relegated to the margins of historical memory, glossed over in the narrativization of gay cultural and political history. Making only cameo appearances in historical accounts of gay male erotic visual culture or gay cinema, he also finds little place in the recounting of Los Angeles’s cinematic underground, though his location shooting remains a better record of LA public space than that of almost any filmmaking peer, straight or gay. As of this writing, in early 2012, he remains omitted even from that current online arbiter of historical significance, Wikipedia.

The logic of this erasure can be partly understood in materialist terms; Rocco’s films have received extremely minimal home-video distribution, allowing them to recede into the dustbins of memory for those unable to make the trek to UCLA’s film archive. Dominant notions of periodization, too, obscure his role. While an entire generation of LGBT historians has meticulously dismantled a narrative in which New York City’s Stonewall rebellion of June 1969 singularly spearheaded the modern LGBT rights movement, uncovering the rich and diverse history of queer resistance, Stonewall still exerts unique interpretive force. Recent historical scholarship has contemplated the political use-values of gay liberationists’ imagining of Stonewall as an abrupt rupture
with the past, in terms of the construction of “the closet” as a concept applied retroactively and ahistorically, while other work examines the ways the rupture-narrative obscures homophile-liberationist continuities on such matters as patriotism and drag/gender performance. Yet “pre-Stonewall” remains burdened by seemingly unshakeable connotative implications, as Stonewall still carries a sufficient density of meaning to collapse much culture and activism of the late 1960s into an apparent transitional effort with gay liberation as the inevitable outcome. Meanwhile, outside the ivory tower, the mainstream mass media perpetuate misinformed and pat narratives of the queer past, as when the New York Times in June 2011 inaccurately labeled the Stonewall Inn “where the gay-rights movement began.”

Trapped in a liminal position between the homophile 1950s and the liberationist 1970s—or, more specifically, between the beefcake years of physique culture and the unabashed era of gay hard-core porn—Rocco and his soft-core film work resist easy analytical placement in the existing chronology. More than a mere footnote-worthy transitional figure, though, Rocco embodied the ways post-Stonewall gay liberation, despite its bold pronouncements of radical newness, evolved organically out of the homophile era. This essay seeks to recover his work, situating it in the battles over space and sexuality in late-1960s Los Angeles.

Recent scholarship in urban history, LGBT history, and the history of sexuality has emphasized the roles of visibility, desire, and the use and meaning of public space in the shaping of the postwar city, as well as the formation of gay activism and community. Rocco’s films contributed to that process on dual planes, functioning at both the textual level of representing gay visibility in public space, and at the material level of public exhibition, where the sheer fact of acknowledging gay sexuality at a public congregation had to contend with violently repressive state power. With coercive legal structures suppressing both corporeal and textual representation of gay self-definition, these acts of visibility contested the definitional power of the law to demarcate the licit from the illicit by demanding recognition of gays as citizens of the city. While scholars would later question the extent to which visibility, as a necessarily normalizing and thus disciplinary tactic, has proven sufficient in legitimizing queer rights, activists have never doubted its necessity, and Rocco contributed substantively to that process.

Through his screenings, Rocco claimed and defined a sense of gay place both in the theater itself and across the city in the locations and images whose meanings his camera resignified. The historian Martin Meeker identifies “geography making” as a crucial aspect of establishing gay social infrastructure in the 1960s, and few accomplished that task as effectively as Rocco. His film work may be largely forgotten, but the meaning he helped etch onto gay place in Los Angeles has socially and materially outlasted its flickering celluloid traces.
Illicit/Invisible: The Heteronormative Legal Regime of 1960s Los Angeles

Rocco undertook his work in a city renowned for its “history of forgetting”; possessed of a massive cinematic apparatus which literally devours its own social history in the production of a fabricated mythical past, Los Angeles is described by critic Norman Klein as “the most photographed and least remembered city in the world.”9 In peddling hegemonic narratives that continually reasserted various social hierarchies, the studio dream-factories did not act alone. Complicit in this process of shaping public memory were the civic authorities who supported the projection of social hierarchies at the very material level by shaping the urban landscape and imbuing the built environment with specific meaning, a process that urban studies scholars describe as the transformation of space (a descriptive geographical term) into place (the form that space takes when enmeshed in the inescapable nexus of social meaning).10

A legal regime of heteronormativity—the system of codes, institutions, and laws that collectively act to maintain the imagined cohesion, naturalness, and inevitability of heterosexuality, and thus stigmatize as deviant all that falls outside its auspices—harnessed the powers of the state from the federal to the local level for the policing and governance of sexuality.11 While the criminalization of same-sex intimacies most transparently reflected this, a wealth of laws and policies ranging from immigration conditions to welfare benefits all colluded in what Margot Canaday calls “the straight state,” denying sexual citizenship in both obvious and subtle manners. Even after the early-1950s flare-up of the “lavender scare” that culminated in President Dwight Eisenhower’s 1953 Executive Order 10450 prohibiting federal employment of “sexual perverts” as “security risks” faded in intensity, it left behind a legal infrastructure whose very normalization rendered it nearly invisible to those outside its clutches, but all too evident to its queer targets. As William Eskridge’s exhaustive study of “gaylaw” shows, the law promoted heterosexuality and disfavored homosexuality in a staggering multitude of ways.12 The agents of heteronormativity operated in cultural, political, medical, and other arenas, but at the local level police forces served as its strongest arm, canvassing the city in an effort to maintain the invisibility of homosexuality, or, when that failed, its constant criminalization.

In Los Angeles, Rocco’s films fit into a larger history of contestation over public space. As historian Daniel Hurewitz notes, already by the 1930s a circuit of gay geography had developed in downtown Los Angeles; known as “the Run,” it extended from Pershing Square down Main Street and Hill Street, to the public library and bus depot. From the start, civic leaders fought to suppress this social infrastructure, waging an undeclared war by midcentury. The leafy, tree-lined Pershing Square suffered “redevelopment” in the 1950s, rendering it less fit for semiconcealed couplings. As the protagonist of John Rechy’s 1967 novel Numbers laments, it was “no longer the Pershing Square he knew. Vengefully, the enemy, known as ‘The City Authorities,’ had removed the benches and ledges that outlined the park, had cut the
trees. . . . Now it was a concrete skeleton.” Gay bars, bathhouses, and other public space suffered similar wrath, as the “enemy” sought to eradicate gay space and visibility throughout the city, using legal tactics of criminalization and blunt force as key tools in its quest.13

In the face of the increased gay and lesbian visibility that suffused urban America, and especially Los Angeles, after wartime military demobilization, the city committed its resources against that visibility. This story has been told elsewhere, but important to historicizing the importance of Rocco’s film work are the ways antigay policies played out against both gay people and gay space, generally simultaneously. From the 1952 arrest of Dale Jennings, a founding member of the homophile Mattachine Society, for cruising in a public park, to the recurring police raids and violence toward gay bars from Long Beach to Silver Lake, the power of law worked both to brutalize gay bodies and also to wrench control over the meaning of public space from its gay occupants.14 In this, Los Angeles followed national trends in urban policing—as episodes from Atlanta’s “Public Library Perversion Case” of 1953 to the steady police violence of “Rizzo’s Raiders” in Philadelphia used criminalization to generate a narrative in which “homosexuality was foreign to the neighborhood,” as Marc Stein writes, describing a powerful act of denying the right of place-making (and citizenship) to gay city dwellers.15

In addition to the sodomy laws, broad “lewd vagrancy” charges, and other forms of state terrorism sanctioned by the law, obscenity charges played a central role in the antigay crusade. From the 1940s into the mid-1960s, male physique magazines, homophile political publications, and queer avant-garde cinema had all been deemed obscene by local authorities. Again, these efforts took spatial form, with authorities very clearly understanding that art-house theaters screening gay-themed films were sites of gay community formation. Even decaying grindhouse theaters whose “nudie” films solicited a presumed straight spectatorial gaze but whose marginal position in the social landscape allowed same-sex intimacies to transpire in their seats and restrooms came under repeated attack on heteronormatively motivated obscenity charges.16

Thus, when Rocco began exhibiting his films in the summer of 1968, he confronted a legal regime that he challenged on three fronts: first, by openly screening gay erotic material whose textual content resisted its preemptive legal demarcation as obscene; second, through the act of exhibition itself, a bold incursion into a public sphere where even the homophile movement remained resolutely purged of erotic qualities for fear of incurring suppression or further stigmatization; and, finally, by reclaiming the means of production over the signification of public space in the films themselves. Their map of gay Los Angeles charted out a sexual geography of public desire that inscribed gay eros onto the urban landscape with a visibility and verve that resisted the decades of forcibly maintained spatial meaning.
Magic in the Raw: Enter Pat Rocco

When Rocco began screening his films in June 1968 at the Park Theatre, off MacArthur Park in downtown Los Angeles, he stepped onto particularly fraught ground—the same geographical space, in fact, where Mattachine member Jennings had been arrested simply for making a nonsexual pickup sixteen years earlier. While later gay writers and historians would reclaim erotic and pornographic expression—“fuck photos have always had to serve not only as our stroke materials, but also, to a large extent, as our family snapshots and wedding albums, as our cultural history and validation,” as Thomas Waugh memorably put it in 1996—at the time of Rocco’s emergence the topic was altogether less integrated into the public face of gay activism. For the early gay rights movement, operating in a biliously homophobic context, respectability played a crucial role, and homophile respectability entailed downplaying sexuality in an effort to render homosexuality more palatable to the mainstream. The desexualizing logic was instrumentalist, as the risks of gay activism were palpable. Banal expressions of eros such as a textual lesbian kiss or indirect poetic allusion to toilet cruising could potentially result in a magazine being barred from the mail on grounds of obscenity—as the Mattachine-offshoot Los Angeles homophile magazine ONE learned in 1954—and rigorous self-policing was a necessity in the legal context of Cold War America. Overt displays of sexuality were all too easily co-opted in the service of antigay tropes of deviance, perversity, hypersexuality, or degeneracy.

Thus, physique magazines, later politically reclaimed by historians, remained excluded from the official homophile movement as late as 1965, when the Mattachine Society of Washington asserted that the “physical and intellectual interests . . . should remain separate,” positioning itself strictly in the latter camp. “A distinction must be made between the serious and the pleasurable,” the group argued, and when gay activists tried to bridge the gap, as did Philadelphia’s Clark Polak in his groundbreaking Drum magazine, which merged political writing with erotic nude photography, the result was excommunication from the movement. Joining Polak and others in contesting these homophile restraints, Rocco helped cast them aside, paving the way for a publicly sexualized gay identity. Steeped in the iconography of 1950s physique culture, Rocco’s early films displayed little conscious historicity but nonetheless invoked an ongoing debate over the proper role of sexuality in gay public self-presentation, siding with those who would fuse the erotic and the political.

Their public nature was more unprecedented than the erotic aspect. In addition to the alibi-laden world of physique culture, a clandestine world of gay erotic materials—written, pictorial, and cinematic—had long circulated, both in illicit black markets and outside capitalistic distribution channels entirely, as in the often handwritten pornographic stories that circulated widely by the 1940s. Consumption of all these erotic texts was, as Waugh notes, “an act of belonging to a com-
munity composed of producers, models, and, most important, other consumers.” Indeed, archival records of stories written in the midcentury reveal their sharing as an act of community-building, supporting Waugh’s framing of gay smut consumption as “without question political.” While this consumption was never limited to the strictly private sphere, it was rigorously excluded from the visible public sphere, and from the dominant historical memory as well. Thus the exhibition of Rocco’s short films at the Park Theatre marked a watershed moment in gay visibility, upending both homophile respectability and privatized erotic consumption.

Within the heteronormative legal system of postwar Los Angeles, visibility assumed critical significance for gay rights. The only official promotion of gay visibility was that which reinforced images of pathological deviance, such that when the city council had called for the closing of gay bars in 1947, part of its argument rested on the very display “in public view” of “homosexuals in large numbers to congregate, to make love to one another,” and even to “carry on lovers’ quarrels”—the sheer sight of such “carrying on” being “highly detrimental to public morals.” Much preferred was the regular sensationalized media coverage of “sex degenerates” and “perverts” that helped discipline sexuality by stigmatizing its queer incarnations. Visibility that eluded such pathologizing tropes was precisely what most threatened to undermine the very narratives through which heteronormativity activated and legitimized itself, which is why gay activists from the 1950s to the twenty-first century have shared such a central focus on visibility, albeit in widely varying forms. It was a healthy, happy, and public gay visibility that Rocco sought to present.

After a youth spent in various margins of the entertainment industry, Rocco’s experiences paid off when he came across a 1968 advertisement in the L.A. Free Press calling for physique photographers. In Rocco’s own words, “The company was called Victor Associates. I had a camera. They gave me a roll of film and told me to go ahead. I did. They liked the results, and it just went on from there.” As he won growing assignments, Rocco began bringing an 8 mm camera to the shoots; what began as 90-second larks grew into several-minute shorts, then into larger-scale 16 mm shooting of generally formless nude frolicking. Capitalizing on his efforts, Rocco compiled a brochure and advertised it in the Free Press, finding himself “deluged with letters” almost immediately.

Rocco’s rapid success caught the eye of Park Theatre owner Shan Sayles, who had just begun to identify the potentially lucrative gay market. The year before, another Sayles theater, the Apollo, had screened a gay-oriented program, showing muscle films advertised as a “camp-out.” The growing sense of gay defiance in the air demanded something more forthright; new activist groups like PRIDE (Personal Rights in Defense and Education, est. 1966) were “determined to dissociate” themselves from the perceived “stodginess of the homophile movement,” as historians Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons write. The entrepreneurial Rocco had not begun his film work with a strong political consciousness, but his efforts fit the
emerging climate, and Sayles invited Rocco to screen his films without the protective veneer of camp’s distancing, as the “first homosexual film festival.”

The Park screenings found instant success, and the savvy Sayles sustained the program, with Rocco’s shorts as the cornerstone. Advertisements for the ongoing “Most Unusual Film Festival” in the summer of 1968 consistently emphasized the “homosexual themes” of the films, a risky gamble in Los Angeles, where obscenity charges remained a tangible threat for anyone screening gay erotic material. Bearing out Richard Meyer’s argument that the history of gay art has been informed by censorship, the second round of the festival invoked the First Amendment and “the liberalization of sex laws throughout the world,” clearly recognizing its precarious situation. Presenting Rocco’s films as political interventions, the flyer asserted that “freedom to think, to speak, to write and to film . . . is essential to us as individuals and to the safety of our democratic society.” The festival even added that only through these freedoms could society move from “ignorance and irrationality” to “knowledge and reason, the finest pillars of public morality,” positioning itself against the illicit with classic American imagery. The gambit paid off; the police kept their distance, and grosses for the first week of August 1968 topped nine thousand dollars, quite a haul for a dilapidated grindhouse theater.

If the advertising and presentation struck lofty notes, Rocco’s films themselves displayed somewhat less sophistication. Many reflected the formal influence of physique tropes, from posing to athleticism to the wrestling and wrangling that pervaded Bob Mizer’s short physique films shot for the Athletic Model Guild. Mizer’s backyard spectacles, like his pictorial output, frequently relied on tacitly eroticized physical contests in which clothing just happened to be ripped off until men groped and struggled in loincloths, in a variety of cheaply constructed settings that ranged from prisons (Boys in Prison) to spaceships that had seemingly plummeted from the set of a destitute Ed Wood shoot (Space Mutiny). Rocco abandoned Mizer’s low-budget sets, opting for location shooting in both urban and forest settings, but he frequently reflected the physique imperative to motivate physical contact through struggle. The Challenge (1968) features two racecar drivers cruising one another at the San Fernando raceway, tussling after the race. Surprise Lover (1969) begins with several minutes of naked wrestling on a bed, and Wanted (1969) employs physique culture athleticism to build erotic tension, as two young men meet while running laps at a track before going through pushups, long jumping, and other displays of physical bravado.

Where Rocco’s early shorts most boldly broke with physique tradition, however, was in their disavowal of the alibi. While the advertising for Rocco’s programs at the Park clearly marked them as homosexual, the films themselves needed no such clarification. Unlike Mizer’s work, the homoeroticism was not deflected, but highlighted and embraced. After the racecar drivers in The Challenge spar, they stroll to
a stream, strip, and frolic playfully, before fixing up a car and driving off together. The naked wrestling of *Surprise Lover* gives way to affectionate cuddling, and, after the athletic competition of *Wanted*, the two fit young men wash one another off in the shower. Rocco even closes the film with a sly wink toward expectations past; after the sensual shower, sorrowful music swells as the two seem about to part ways, before they disregard the misleading aural cue and walk off arm in arm. These films needed no alibi: they were openly, proudly gay.

The major theme of Rocco’s early work was visual fascination with the male body. To be sure, investigations of the human body had driven much of the cinema from the late nineteenth-century zoopraxiscope experiments of Eadweard Muybridge through Mizer’s physique microepics. But if such endeavors fall under the larger modernist project of “making sex speak,” as porn historian Linda Williams writes, Rocco sought to make gayness sing. An exuberant sense of playful visual pleasure suffused his one-reelers, brooking no concession to the culturally mandated shame, secrecy, or other stigmatizations of the vast heteronormative social machinery of the era. Thus *Magic in the Raw* (1968) presents a bumbling naked magician in a park, waving his wand to call forth a cowboy on a table draped in red satin cloth. Further waves of the wand each remove an item of clothing, until the magician absentmindedly taps his wand, causing the desirable cowboy to vanish. The technical primitivism of the film’s “magical” cuts mirrors the wide-eyed erotic openness, unencumbered by the psychological burdens gay desire was assumed to carry in 1968.

Rocco’s films, with their full-frontal nudity, went well beyond the physique visual palette. Initially, though, Rocco restricted his depictions to naked eroticism shorn of directly sexual content. By 1968, obscenity law had grown increasingly permissive but remained unclearly defined, such that, having tested the boundaries with his groundbreaking nude shorts, Rocco shied from putting his naked bodies into overtly sexual contact. He showed awareness of the fuzzy legal parameters in which he operated. While the eroticized full-frontal nudity of his films engaged in carefully calibrated brinkmanship with the shifting obscenity laws of the late sixties, Rocco ignored the August 1968 request of a Minnesota studio owner for still-frame photographs with full erections, a more risky undertaking at that moment. When he did move forward at the end of 1968, with the rolling naked kisses of *A Very Special Friend*, he once more undertook his screenings with full awareness that he was treading onto terrain designated as illicit. The owners of the Park Theatre even preemptively retained a lawyer to stay on site during screenings out of concern for police harassment or arrests. “Nobody knew what the law was,” Rocco later remembered, and by tentatively stepping into the previously forbidden, *A Very Special Friend* helped redefine it at the enforcement level. Beyond the challenging of obscenity laws undertaken in Rocco’s films, their very acts of shooting, replete
with public nudity and sexuality, as well as simple displays of gay affection that remained suppressed by police (and other homophobic) violence, all resisted heteronormative legal constraints on gay visibility. For that matter, shooting guerilla-style across Los Angeles, without required permits, also constituted a literal refusal to abide by the official arbiters of acceptable documentation and representation. From the means of production through the textual content, Rocco’s films forcefully demanded a reckoning with the border between licit and illicit and between legal and illegal.

As an act of community building, the exhibition of Rocco’s films drew gay men together in public. Highly lauded by the gay press, Rocco found a large and immediate audience. The interactive relationship between Rocco’s films and their crowds was evident in the formation of a group called SPREE, the Society of Pat Rocco Enlightened Enthusiasts, who staged plays, musicals, and social events for over a decade, along with community organizing and benefit shows for various gay causes. One short film directed by SPREE member Jack Pierce reflected Rocco’s role in some gay lives. In *Worlds Apart* (1969), a young man from the California hinterlands drives to San Francisco for a Rocco screening; swooning over star Ron Dilly, the visitor nervously chases an autograph, winding up back at Dilly’s hotel for a tender night together. Indicating the permeable borders between screen and audience, the film firmly situates Rocco’s work in the gay community, as a site where various bonds are forged onscreen and off. In a sense, the entire process of Rocco’s filming, marketing, and exhibition thus enacted a collective cultural bargaining through which a communal voice demanded to be recognized for its occupation of various social spaces. As Daniel Hurewitz has shown, the law worked best against gay men in Los Angeles when it could target and interpellate them individually as criminals and deviants; only through the community formations that enabled a collective voice could the legal hermeneutics of licitness themselves be hailed. The very existence of a visible community amounted to a claiming of social citizenship.

It was in place-claiming (that is, the cultural inscription of meaning onto geography whose social and material articulations had long remained under the aegis of civic authorities), where Rocco made his greatest mark. Documenting the sexual geography of gay Los Angeles with an unprecedented exactitude, Rocco created a spatial map that both recorded ongoing activity and brought the subterranean into view, demanding recognition and laying a claim to gay public space.

**A Soft-Core Map of Los Angeles**

In the context of the freighted turf wars over gay visibility and urban space, the act of staking claims to gay placehood took on particular political salience in Los Angeles. “Spatial narration,” argues Manthia Diawara in a related context, “is a film-
making of cultural restoration, a way for Black filmmakers to reconstruct Black history, and to posit specific ways of being Black Americans.” Working along similar principles, Rocco’s films not only served as salvos announcing the intransigence of gay public presence in specific locales, they also operated as an erotic cartography, one that wrenched the meaning of gay space from violently homophobic civic forces and also from the rather dismal vision of John Rechy, gay Los Angeles’s foremost literary chronicler of the time.

Where Rechy, in his pioneering 1963 novel *City of Night*, saw a “dark purgatory” of hustlers and johns trapped in a bleak holding pattern of emotional alienation, Rocco offered instead a vibrant spatial network rife with possibilities; “the capital city of the west, with millions of happy people throughout,” the opening narration to *The Groovy Guy* (1969) labeled Los Angeles, its bright shots of City Hall and other downtown areas visually refuting Rechy’s rendering of “trashy, ugly downtown Los Angeles.” Rocco’s casual depiction of the uncomplicated naturalness of homosexuality, with its clear (or at least uninterrogated) identity categories, was in some ways less ideologically dangerous than Rechy’s queering of normative masculinity, in which *City of Night*’s narrator remains counteridentitarian through the book’s ambivalent, ambiguous conclusion. Yet if hardly protoqueer in his sunny simplicity, Rocco remained oppositional in his historical moment. Such romanticism would rightly come in for later critical analysis (discussed further below), but in a representational arena dominated by stigmatization, pathologization, and criminalization, an insistence on gay happiness constituted an act of resistance in 1968. His perspective was well received by the newspaper *Gay*, which in 1970 lamented the “overlay of shame and guilt” in too much gay art.

*Hey Look Me Over* (1968), an early short, signals Rocco’s geographic designs. Opening with a shot of the Egyptian Theater and a pan across Hollywood Boulevard, the film immediately positions itself with tangible specificity. As a young man hands out flyers to “pose in the sun for hippie oil painters,” passersby respond with varying levels of interest. When one man tosses a flyer away, Rocco zooms in on it lying in the street, as a pair of feet walk over it without noticing—a rejoinder of sorts to Los Angeles’s deliberate “history of forgetting,” showing instead the invisibility in plain sight of this subterranean gay world. When three attractive models do accept the invite, Rocco establishes their precise location, just east of Hollywood, with a close-up of the Griffith Park sign. As the three men pose naked for the painter, Rocco surveys their bodies with transparent erotic interest, but also conveys the affectionate playfulness they share, a sharp contrast to Rechy’s contemporaneous description of “the anonymous horror, the emotional carnage of the sexual hunt” in the same place. Reconfigured as a site of gay desire and play, Griffith Park is claimed by Rocco’s camera as part of the gay world that refuses to maintain its assigned invisibility.
After the three models leave the park arm in arm (a Rocco motif that instantiates community formation in bodily form), Rocco cuts to the art gallery where the painter displays his work, intercutting shots of the paintings with rapid flashbacks to the naked men posing. The effect is to track vectors of gay desire across the Los Angeles cityscape, with Hollywood Boulevard, Griffith Park, and the art gallery establishing the partial nexus of a sexual geography excluded from mainstream acknowledgment. Rocco extended this nexus in other films. A Matter of Life (1968) returns to Hollywood Boulevard, as star Joe Adair walks east to venture up Vermont Avenue in Los Feliz. The aforementioned A Very Special Friend traverses the city from downtown to Echo Park and once again into Griffith Park, and The Groovy Guy (1969) shows a contest sponsored by The Advocate, with Rocco’s camera lingering on the precise addresses of the locations, like Klondike Gay Bar at 5300 W. 8th Street.

Sex and the Single Gay (1970) takes on another specific Rechy location, the heavily cruised Selma Avenue in Hollywood. For Rechy, “male ghostforms haunt Selma” as they “stand waiting for a car to stop.” As if in conscious rebuttal, Rocco opens in this very spot, with street signs situating the film at the corner of Selma and Las Palmas. As a young blond hustler stands waiting, he is picked up by a john who takes him home. What appears a formal commercialized exchange, however, is revealed at the film’s close as part of an ongoing and reciprocated courtship; setting a date for the next week as he’s dropped back off, the hustler adds, “and that one’ll be on me.”

Working initially with no crew and operating his own camera to create his urban cinema, Rocco anticipated the location-shoot fetishism of 1970s New Hollywood auteurs. Visually, his depiction of Los Angeles often departed from the Golden State myths of beach movies and Hollywood glamour, instead capturing the smoggy skies, sun-bleached pavement, and endless traffic that marked the
more prosaic everyday life of greater Los Angeles (making Rocco a rare American filmmaker to depict Los Angeles in the style of such foreign directors as Franco Rossi [Smog, 1962], Jacques Demy [Model Shop, 1969], and Michelangelo Antonioni [Zabriskie Point, 1970]).

Thematically, this paralleled the concurrent uncovering of the multiple overlaid geographies Rocco exposed, replacing mythologized topographies with newly visible social realities. As an act of place-claiming, this marked specific LA terrain as gay space, sometimes in astonishing ways. A Breath of Love (1969), for instance, begins with a naked man on a hill performing a modern dance routine, reaching Prometheus-like for the sky against a distant downtown skyline. After running naked through nearby residential streets, the dancer whirls onto the Hollywood Freeway, continuing his routine past exits for famous streets like Melrose and Western. Placing a beautiful naked man on the very automotive artery of greater Los Angeles, Rocco announced a gay presence that would not be denied, a bold declaration of ubiquity undertaken with a spiritedness capable of arousing jealousy in contemporaneous agitprop groups like the Yippies or the feminist WITCH.37

Amazingly, Rocco returned for a second shoot on the Hollywood Freeway after realizing he’d forgotten to take stills of performer Brian Reynolds. For the return, he invited NBC News to cover his shoot, as he stationed a cameraman on the Van Ness overpass. In the short How to Shoot a Nude on the Freeway (1969), Rocco also showed how Reynolds had been able to dance freely across the notoriously congested freeway: a half-dozen friends had deliberately clogged all lanes down the road, leaving him clear to perform. When police arrived, Rocco was able to use the presence of the NBC cameras to establish the “newsworthiness” of the shoot and avoid arrest. The filmic place-claiming rested on very literal and material place-claiming.38

Undoubtedly Rocco’s most subversive sexual reterritorialization transpired just south of Los Angeles, in Disneyland. Devised by Walt Disney as a cultural bul-
wark against the class (and increasingly, racial) diversity of such public amusement grounds as Coney Island and Atlantic City, Disneyland perfectly embodied the heteronormative middle-class identity of its host city, Anaheim. In *Disneyland Discovery* (1969), Rocco smuggled gay desire into this citadel of normalcy. Opening with a blond man in jeans and T-shirt strolling the theme park’s artificial Main Street, the film quickly sets up a flirtation with a brown-haired man at a popcorn stand, who smiles and offers his popcorn. As the two cruise one another, they traverse the grounds, with Disney’s own musical broadcasts offering inadvertently ironic commentary. As the “Davy Crockett” song blares at Frontierland, its white supremacist celebration of rugged masculinity hints at unauthorized manifest queer destinies. As the troublingly racialized soundtrack tunes on the Dumbo ride declare “I done seen everything, when I see an elephant fly,” Rocco highlights an equally stunning visibility. Finally, alone on Tom Sawyer Island, the duo embrace, passionately kiss, and run naked in the well-established Rocco style. The film closes with the couple back on Main Street, with one final sly wink at the straight blindness to the pervasive gay presence in its midst, as the men approach a straight family from behind, holding hands for a fleeting moment before diverging to pass around the family, giving corporeal realization to Rocco’s central theme of unacknowledged but omnipresent gay desire. The nuclear family floats through this space blinded by its own entitled normalcy, an enforcing agent of heteronormative hegemony; but here it is a failed regulatory unit.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, his lax approach to copyright and trademark caught up with Rocco on *Disneyland Discovery*, as the company clamped down on the unsanctioned use of its material. The midcentury development of 8 mm cameras had spurred a home-video tsunami, and filming at Disneyland was long casualized.
After *Discovery*, Rocco later claimed in an interview, the park sharply curtailed the use of cameras. While the film was withdrawn from circulation almost immediately and recut, clearly the combined forces of heteronormativity could not stop Rocco’s cinematic mapping of gay Los Angeles.

Some of Rocco’s most potent spatial representations came in the documentaries with which he began complementing his erotic efforts around 1969. His documentary work often took a more staid approach than his playful erotica, but the two genres converged in their distinct geographical emphasis on situating homosexuality in the cityscape. Rocco’s verité-inflected work played a crucial role in documenting moments of activism and visibility otherwise purged from the media record that served as the unofficial archive of twentieth-century collective historical memory in the United States.

*Homosexuals on the March* (1970), for instance, depicts two protests. At the first, the Reverend Troy Perry of the gay Metropolitan Community Church leads a rally in downtown Los Angeles for consenting-adults legislation that would repeal California’s archaic sex laws; at the second, a gay-rights march travels from the Hollywood Bowl down Hollywood Boulevard, participants singing “We Shall Overcome,” with Rocco documenting the automotive motorcade, as well as surprised Angelenos on the street, both straight and gay. As Rocco notes in *Homosexuals on the March*, no representatives of mainstream print or television media showed up downtown to cover the two hours of speeches or the multigenerational, multiracial march that followed, leaving him nearly alone to record the event for posterity.

Other Rocco documentaries likewise recorded media-neglected incidents in the struggle for gay liberation. A 1970 protest against the West Hollywood eatery Barney’s Beanery, long notorious for its misspelled “Fagots stay out” sign, drew Rocco’s camera. *Sign of Protest*, the resulting short, showed such picket signs as “Give the Queens the Beans,” “Fags Unite,” and “Give Me Sex or Give Me Death,” with approximately fifty protesters chanting “Hey hey hey hey, we are proud, we are gay.” Rocco interviews participants and also a noncommittal police officer monitoring the scene. While the mainstream media again ignored the protest, it and a gay boycott effectively compelled the owner of Barney’s to finally remove the sign.

The result of these filmic placements was the most vivid, comprehensive view of Southern California’s gay sexual geography in any medium, a place-claiming intervention that both identified existing gay space (Griffith Park, Selma Avenue, etc.) and laid claim to the entirety of the urban environs for gay visibility, from the Hollywood Freeway down to Disneyland. Gaps remained; Rocco’s filmic geography built off, without acknowledging, preexisting social maps in its absence of attention to Latino East Los Angeles or African American South-Central. Still, no other filmmaker, writer, or culture worker of the period could claim such a visible imprint on such specific terrain.
Conclusion: The City Comes Out

“The city is not a clean slate upon which to build something new,” geographer Moira Rachel Kenney argues, “but a thing constructed, upon which activists and communities layer new meanings.” Her study of “mapping gay L.A.” fails to include Rocco, but his film work accomplished precisely that, sweeping off the social narratives of criminality and invisibility to chart gay desire across the city. When Carl Wittman outlined “imperatives for gay liberation” in his widely read 1970 “Gay Manifesto,” “Free ourselves: come out everywhere” was the first item. Rocco’s pre-Stonewall films and screenings had certainly anticipated the cry to arms, helping the city itself come out.42

As quickly as he burst onto the scene, Rocco would recede from the spotlight, superseded by the hard-core porn of the early 1970s that he refused to shoot. New political formations would take shape in the hard-core era, as directors like Wakefield Poole and Fred Halsted aligned with the gay liberation project of public sexuality. Several of the most engaging early hard-core films would situate gay sex in carefully mapped urban landscapes, from Halsted’s sex-tour *L.A. Plays Itself* (1972) to Jerry Douglas’s *The Back Row* (1972), which traced spatial configurations of New York City cruising from subways to the insides of Times Square porn theaters.43 None, though, would generate as extensive a cultural remapping of any city as Rocco’s film work from 1968 to 1970 did.

Rocco himself shifted attention from movies to other forms of gay activism after the mid-seventies, serving as first president of Christopher Street West, working with the Stonewall Democrats, and operating a homeless shelter, among other efforts.44 Ironically, the law reached him only after his erotic filmmaking ceased, when a vice squad operation in early 1974 included Rocco in a sweeping set of arrests of gay activists and filmmakers. Rocco’s role had merely been one of unwittingly introducing an undercover informant posing as an aspiring porn actor to producers. Felony conspiracy charges loomed, based on the continued criminalization of gay sex that followed as a corollary to the shooting of gay porn, but the case fell apart and resulted in dismissed charges after the gay press exposed the operation as blatantly homophobic and unconstitutional.45

Such sexual outlawry notwithstanding, Rocco’s failure to achieve queer canonicity surely stems from an additional factor beyond the material and historiographical logics addressed in the introduction — namely, his decidedly unqueer status. At the local level, recent restoration work, screenings, and exhibitions by the Outfest Legacy Project, UCLA’s Film & Television Archive, and the ONE Institute Gay and Lesbian Archives, suggests an ongoing memory-project to reclaim Rocco’s place in LGBT history.46 Yet in the absence of meaningful distribution or broader public access to his work, scholars remain the dominant arbiters of the queer past, and with the institutionalization of queer theory came the valorization of specific modes of transgression and performativity (not to mention avant-garde aesthetics)
that eclipsed the vanilla naturalness of Rocco’s gay representations. As his contemporaries like Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol entered the emerging queer pantheon, Rocco’s imagery shaded comparatively into homophile affinities of the seemingly most regressive sorts, its soft-hued romanticism never challenging the underlying technologies of gender called into question by queer artists, for whom mere visibility as a strategy of resistance was superseded by the necessity of subverting the production of gender and sexuality at levels deeper than that surface announcement of being.47

Later queer icons from Vaginal Crème Davis to Richard Fung would also challenge the equation of gay identity with whiteness. José Esteban Muñoz, who uses those figures and others to generate a queer of color critique that disidentifies with dominant white gay culture, would surely be nonplussed as well by the disproportionately white bodies of Rocco’s erotic vision of the deeply multicultural city, which possessed a racial liberalism not wholly at odds with the civic politics of the era.48 And as studies of the affective role of shame and abjection in queer history have risen in prominence, dismissive tones have come to characterize what David Halperin and Valerie Traub call the “increasingly exhausted and restrictive ethos of gay pride.”49 What in 1968 read as a welcome corrective to John Rechy’s shadowy depiction of the gay underworld by the twenty-first century read as a flattening of its pockets of nuance, an overcorrective to a queer history marked, in part, by the infliction of trauma.

Aligned with the dominance of queerness is a critique of homonormativity, defined by Lisa Duggan as a gay politics complicit in heteronormative institutions through its reliance on a “privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”50 And indeed, Rocco celebrated the same-sex-wedding-performing Reverend Troy Perry (A Man and His Dream, 1969) decades before marriage equality took center stage in mainstream LGBT rights activism. Everything about Rocco’s work was proudly gay, none of it contemporarily queer.

Yet if Rocco’s work invites a homonormative reading at the textual level, its material implications resist facile placement. In mourning the “ghosts of public sex,” Muñoz implicates the post-AIDS eradication of commercial sex spaces, listing “backrooms, movie theaters, bathhouses”—a geography that Rocco’s screenings in part helped build.51 Indeed, if homonormativity constitutes “the sexual politics of neoliberalism,” as Duggan contends, those politics frequently infiltrate ostensibly radical representations. While the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s and recent salvos like the polymorphously perverse Shortbus (2006) might “activat[e] rich new relationships among not just the theories but the sensations of sexuality, visuality, and community,” they do so within far more privatized diegetic and screening environments than those of Rocco’s early work—and frequently themselves “succumb” to various normative tropes upon close inspection, as one film scholar confesses.52 In sharp contrast to the twenty-first-century neoliberal city, Rocco’s gay Los Ange-
les remains resiliently public; if the textual politics promote quaintly identitarian notions of “coming out,” the material effect of his gay geography is nonetheless one of queering the city by infusing it with uncommodified desire that refuses absorption into the modern “gay village,” deployed as marker of cultural capital in the privatized consumer citizenship of neoliberalism.  

That neoliberal regime arose in part out of the transfer of regulatory power from the legal arm of the state to the global currents of the market. As such, Rocco’s work in dismantling the law’s concept of “the illicit“ can be read as concurrently ushering in what David Bell and Jon Binnie call “the arsenal of entrepreneurial governance,” whose reconfigured legal arrangements in zoning, marketing, tax codes, and other less immediately obvious avenues continue to police the boundaries of the licit and illicit, with capital replacing morality as the rhetorical driving force. Indeed, from the start, market forces — to which he willingly submitted himself— shaped the meaning of Rocco’s work, sometimes antithetically to his professed intentions. While the filmmaker consistently rejected the label “pornography” for his erotic wares, already in a 1969 advertisement for Woody’s Adult Books in Hollywood were Rocco films listed alongside “hundreds of split beaver magazines.” The LAPD could not discipline him, but Disney could. 

Ultimately, then, one form of social border-patrolling replaced another, neither Pat Rocco nor anyone since having finally opened sexual citizenship for universal access. What Rocco did contribute to was the deinstitutionalization of one assemblage of illicitness, the set of laws and policies that denied gay visibility outside stigmatized representation. The material impact of his early screenings best reflected its persistence when SPREE, the group that organized around his films but ultimately expanded into a self-sustaining theatrical group of 500 members, won official commendation from Mayor Tom Bradley in 1976 for its community-service fundraising performances, volunteer efforts, and “sense of civic pride and duty”—reflecting both gay social citizenship and absorption into Bradley’s new neoliberal urban reality. Meanwhile, gay desire in Rocco’s Los Angeles resisted confinement to any “gay village” model. His films’ greatest contribution, which outlasted their position in gay public memory or their historicization as mere transitional steps en route to a hard-core telos, was their insistent place-claiming impetus, which rendered legible a new map of gay Los Angeles where gay was, literally, everywhere.

Notes
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7. See, for example, Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).


19. The magazine was ultimately exonerated, but only after fighting the charges all the way to the Supreme Court in 1958.


26. Both films c. 1950s, collected on AMG: A Third Visit. VHS. Directed by Marvin Jones
   (Los Angeles: Campfire Video, 1993).
27. Linda Williams, Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible” (Berkeley:
   University of California Press, 1989), esp. 1–33.
29. Rocco, author interview. Rocco also discussed the lawyer in Doug Sarff, “Produced and
   Directed by Pat Rocco,” Advocate, January 16, 1974, 23. On obscenity law and Supreme
   Court sexual politics, see Whitney Strub, Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography
   and the Rise of the New Right (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 59–79, and
   Marc Stein, Sexual Injustice: Supreme Court Decisions from Griswold to Roe (Chapel Hill:
   University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
30. While the full story of SPREE is beyond the scope of this article, the group’s activities can
   be traced through its administrative records (box 8) and newsletters (box 9), extending from
   1969 to 1978, Rocco Papers.
31. Hurewitz, Bohemian Los Angeles, esp. 115–50.
33. John Rechy, City of Night (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 178; Rechy, Numbers, 25; Jim
34. Rechy, Numbers, 178.
35. Rechy, City of Night, 179.
36. Rocco, author interview.
37. On the Yippies, see James Miller, Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the
   Siege of Chicago (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 285–86; on WITCH, Alice Echols,
   Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975 (Minneapolis: University of
38. Rocco, author interview.
39. On Disneyland, see Eric Avila, Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and
   Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 106–44.
40. Pat Rocco, video interview by Jim Kepner for ONE Institute, April 27, 1983, UCLA
   Film Archive; Patricia Zimmermann, Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film
   (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
41. On the sign at Barney’s, see Faderman and Timmons, Gay L.A., 174–75.
42. Moira Rachel Kenney, Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics
   Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation, eds. Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York:
   Douglas, 1972), 341. On gay liberation, see Terence Kissack, “Freaking Fag Revolutionaries:
   104–34.
44. Rocco, author interview.
45. On Rocco’s part in the alleged “conspiracy,” see Affidavit for Search Warrant, January 4,
   1974, box 20, folder 6, Rocco Papers; “Porno Witnesses — Free Ticket for Vice Informants,”
   Advocate, February 13, 1974.
46. For a listing of 2009 Rocco events in Los Angeles, see The Outfest Legacy Project for LGBT
   August 26, 2011).

48. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Rocco’s use of black and Latino performers was certainly more inclusive than physique culture had been and deserves further investigation.


56. Mayor Tom Bradley, City of Los Angeles Commendation, February 18, 1976, box 8, file 1, Rocco Papers.