

*Queerbaiting, Wannabes,
and Entrepreneurs covered in Blood.**

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*notes written for the exhibition "*Alfred Hofkunst: Garbage Bodies*", Les Bains-Douches, Alençon, May 2025



James Franco for *The New York Times*, 2010

Queerbaiting: An Introduction

“Ok bye gurlies have a beautiful day.” — Arca, Instagram Live, 2011

In a self-interview for *FourTwoNine* magazine in 2015, American actor James Franco made the following statement: “*I like to think that I’m gay in my art and straight in my life. Although, I’m also gay in my life up to the point of intercourse, and then you could say I’m straight. So I guess it depends on how you define gay. If it means whom you have sex with, I guess I’m straight.*”

This declaration came two years after the release of *Interior. Leather. Bar.* (2013), co-directed by James Franco and Travis Mathews. A 50-minute film, it aimed to reconstruct the deleted scenes (deemed too explicit at the time) from another movie: *Cruising* (1980) by William Friedkin, a thriller in which Al Pacino plays a cop infiltrating New York’s gay scene in the 1980s. Franco’s film presents itself as a docu-fiction, following the actor-director and his team as they attempt to recreate what audiences were denied. To do this, they hire an actor resembling Al Pacino (who takes the role despite his friends’ disapproval) and a slew of “gay men” (their sexual identity defining their function in the film), more or less dressed and ready to reenact *Cruising*’s missing scenes.

Soon, it becomes clear that despite its subversive promise and purported mission of rehabilitation, *Interior. Leather. Bar.* revolves around a single question: *Are we going to fuck James Franco?* He appears frequently on-screen, always behind the camera or in meetings, but never participates in the reenactments. Like a black hole at the center of his own film, Franco unwillingly absorbs its subject matter. In truth, no one sleeps with James Franco on-screen, and the film piles on clichés about “gay culture”—the BDSM accessories worn by the actors suggest Franco’s team raided the nearest sex shop 30 minutes before shooting, and the most explicit “sex” scenes involve actors who were already intimate before filming.

*Queerbaiting*¹ is a technique of disseminating hints or signals that lead an audience to project or interpret a queer (gay, lesbian, etc.) relationship between characters, while never explicitly depicting it on-screen—or even outright denying it later. James Franco’s filmography and public appearances are marked by queerbaiting episodes, where the fantasy machine and the interplay between industry (Hollywood) and its operator (The Playboy) operate on dual registers. If you don’t sleep with James Franco directly, a trail of clues will keep reigniting the fantasy that maybe, just maybe, James Franco is gay—or that his sexuality is ambiguous.²

The history of homosexuality in cinema, and American cinema in particular, is one of subtext and cultural codes

1. The definition of the term ‘queer’ may vary according to context, but it is generally used to refer to individuals whose sexual or gender identity does not fit in with social norms or conventions. In the field of art, the term queer can encompass a range of practices and strategies that challenge dominant artistic representations or manners.

2. Another recent example can be seen in the film *Alien Covenant* (2017) in a scene where actor Michael Fassbender kisses himself / his double.

invisibilized on screen.³ Gay, queer, and trans cultures, like other marginalized or oppressed communities, have also formed in real life around strategies and subtexts—whether through clothing, attitudes, or language.

Modern applications of queerbaiting primarily involve scriptwriters, advertisers, or data analysts who view gay, trans, and queer audiences as just another consumer demographic to target. For example, Netflix, through online data collection, can statistically infer your sexual orientation and adjust its interface accordingly. A presumed gay man might see more thumbnails featuring homoerotic scenes, only to realize upon watching that those scenes were incidental to the film.

Yet it's often hard to distinguish conscious queerbaiting from clumsy representation. If queerbaiting is frequently denounced by fan communities, it's likely because it breaks the tacit contract between the work and its audience—first inviting identification, then abruptly revoking it. In Franco's case, one could argue he's sincerely interested in gay culture, and that an artist shouldn't be reduced or essentialized to their identity. However, given his social background, nationality, industry clout, and platform, his point of view is ultimately dispensable.

Garbage Bodies

*"You can call me, a small business owner
living in america
while trapped in the body of
an operatic diva."* — *Diva*, Model/Actriz, 2025

"Gay in art, straight in life" closely mirrors my feelings upon discovering Alfred Hofkunst's *Garbage Body* series. *Garbage Body* (1988) is a hybrid project at the intersection of publishing, sculpture, photography, and performance. The work consists of unnumbered editions of clothing prints on plastic trash bags. These two-dimensional objects can be filled to become sculptures—bodies that don't stand perfectly straight, dismembered or reduced to their garments. By nature, these bags are literally marked by inconsistency, inadequacy, and perhaps—to borrow a term from Judith Halberstam—a form of "radical passivity"⁴. This passivity clashes with their assigned titles: *Big Boss*, *Worker*, *Playboy*... Most of Hofkunst's chosen names refer to functional social roles, while others (*Santa Monica*, *Hortense*, *Harry*...) resemble a sitcom cast.



Alfred Hofkunst among *Garbage Body*, 1988

Wannabes

"Modern Americans want to look sincere and spontaneous; but at the same time they don't really like to give themselves away (...)" — Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits*, 1994

The 1988 book *Garbage Body*⁵ documents Hofkunst's creative process. We learn that in the summer of 1988,

3. The *Hays Code*, created in the 1930s for the American film industry, stipulates that only images conforming to the 'natural laws' and moral values of good American society are to be shown on screen. It also stipulated that the viewer's involvement should never be positively directed towards the figure of the criminal, evil, or sexual perversion. In this sense, many of the antagonists or 'villains' of twentieth-century American films have taken on the appearance of figures accumulating queer or homosexual clichés. Antagonists in Disney films and James Bond movies, for example, are regularly cited. The Hays Code was officially repealed in 1968, although its effects persisted beyond that date.

4. cf. *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam, Duke University Press, 2011

5. cf. *Garbage Body*, Alfred Hofkunst, Benteli, 1988

Hofkunst was in New York, producing and arranging a large number of bags, which he placed in public spaces or his studio. The book traces his experiments, past and updated versions of the bags, and their staging in photo series resembling short photo-novels. Among them, an army of bag-people in suits and evening gowns parody the social landscape of late-1980s New York—a city emerging from danger to embrace financial capitalism’s orderly, metallic, straight forms. In one photo, the bags are arranged like a family portrait, crowded on the steps of a New York brownstone. Neither fully inside nor outside. Through Hofkunst’s varied stagings and lack of strict instructions, we grasp that the work takes shape in the (often absurd or parodic) social relations it reenacts.

Whit Stillman’s *The Last Days of Disco* (1998) follows two young women (Chloë Sevigny and Kate Beckinsale) navigating early-1980s New York with the ambition to succeed in the world of publishing. By day, they pursue careers; by night, they dance in disco clubs with friends, debating cultural shifts and conflicts between tradition and modernity—all with a dose of snobbery and — as the character of Des mentions at the end of the film: “*fashionable cynicism*.” Though their attitudes, movements, and clothing strive to match their aspirational selves, the film subtly exposes their insecurities, jealousies, and the impossible quest to climb the social ladder while remaining “original.”

“*You’re plenty original without having to order something weird to drink.*”
— Charlotte Pingress (Kate Beckinsale), after *also* ordering a vodka tonic.

The characters are *wannabes*. They’re at the crossroads of their lives, not knowing whether their today’s ambitions and convictions will match up with their love lives and friendships tomorrow. Their limbo mirrors disco’s last gasps—the end of an era, the dawn of yuppies (*Young Upwardly-Mobile Professionals*): a dynamic middle class in tune with the times and its new technologies, visually defined by men’s suits and slicked-back hair. In *The Last Days of Disco*, these motifs haunt the frame under Chloë Sevigny’s unimpressed gaze. The suits grant the male protagonists an assurance of status they don’t yet possess, a functional citizen, oblivious to their own interchangeability.



My Last Breath Before Turning 21, Puppies Puppies
(Jade Kuriki Olivo) 2011 : bag “Forever 21”, DNA

Mary Harron’s *American Psycho* (2000) parodied this metrosexual yuppie archetype in its goriest form. Patrick Bateman, a serial killer disguised as a yuppie, embodies all the anxieties of modern man seeking to control all the parameters of his environment.⁶ His cosmetic obsession peaks in a business-card comparison scene, where typography becomes a weapon of dominance.

Hofkunst’s 1988 New York presence likely influenced titles like *Playboy* or *Big Boss* for his bags. The attitude that emerges from Hofkunst’s absurd photographs and stagings reveals his mockery of the entrepreneurial seriousness that had already invaded the world in 1988 (He’s often seen lounging amid piles of bags.) In today’s media environment where surface, image, and identity production blur, Hofkunst’s glossy bags still carry a mocking, muted presence. They bear his meticulous care in giving them personality—one that can stare back or reflect us. The question isn’t whether they should be used as trash bags or treated as “serious” sculptures. Garbage Body works by visual contamination: by analogy, it transforms all the world’s rubbish bags into sculptures

6. Bateman’s delusional, psychopathological masculinity now finds its aesthetic ramifications in American and European neo-masculinists. At a recent conference in Lisbon, Portugal, critic Ana Teixeira Pinto recalled the link between the chainsaw cutting scene in *American Psycho* and Elon Musk’s recent public appearance on stage at an American conservative convention, chainsaw in hand.



American Psycho, Mary Harron, 2000



Elon Musk, 2025

Entrepreneurs

“*Quand on est mort, c’est qu’on est mort*” — *Le Chat du Café des Artistes*, Jean-Pierre Ferland, 1970

What’s in the bag? In 1994, Lutz Bacher’s sculpture *Talk to Me*—a crudely sewn pink bag—was labeled: *fabric, fetus*. Often deemed indescribable, Bacher’s work evokes Lovecraftian cosmic horror: an *ambient* art rearranging disjointed fragments of the world (especially the U.S.) to reveal its sick structure, subtext, and find a kind of transcendence in its decomposition/decay. Here, horror isn’t just the monstrous, the frightful—it’s in the air, lingering between people.

David Cronenberg’s *The Shrouds* (2024) portrays another figure steeped in soft, perpetual horror: a middle-aged entrepreneur named Karsh (Vincent Cassel), who, after his wife’s death, perfects a technology to monitor corpse decomposition via ultra-HD tomb cameras. Karsh grieves through his obsession with possessing his wife’s body—even in death—until intrusions disrupt his technological necropolis.

While critics highlight the film’s autobiographical parallels (Cronenberg, like Karsh, lost his wife recently / in the film, Vincent Cassel resembles Cronenberg), Cronenberg often uses heavy-handed tactics (especially *body horror*) to divert attention from his films’ sharper critiques. Beyond its sci-fi plot, *The Shrouds* paints Karsh as a regional Elon Musk—a “connected” entrepreneur (Tesla-driving, AI-dependent) devoid of culture. His apartment, “Japanese-inspired,” is merely *Japan-esque*, aligning clichés about Japanese lifestyle. When high-tech graves are vandalized, Karsh spirals into conspiracy theories, dislocating the film mid-flight. Through this lost entrepreneur, *The Shrouds* criticizes the modern individual adrift in globalization - Karsh believes he controls everything without understanding anything, collapsing into the void of cosmic horror. This void is literally represented on screen when Karsh slithers into a BDSM-inspired leather bag produced by his company, *to see how it feels* to be in the bag. Cronenberg’s heavy silence over this wrapped, motionless man underscores Karsh’s total lack of empathy—already in the bag, already dead.

Demographic Rearmament

On January 16, 2024, Emmanuel Macron slipped the expression “*demographic rearmament*” (“*réarmement démographique*” in French) into a national address—a military metaphor urging citizens to have more children.

7. The term ambient defines an atmospheric musical genre, often characterized by long sound tracks and a so-called “visual” approach to composition - in contrast to traditional musical structures. The genre originated in the 1960s and 70s with the democratization of electronic instruments, particularly the synthesizer. Brian Eno, says of ambient music that it “must be able to accommodate all levels of interest without forcing the listener to listen; it must be unobtrusive and interesting.”

This unprecedented phrasing illustrates Foucault's 1973 definition of biopolitics: "*What is essential in all power is that its ultimate point of application is always the body. All power is physical, and there is a direct link between the body and political power.*"

In the case of "demographic rearmament", we can see the not-so-subtle shift in language in Macron's speech. It's a mixture of registers, perhaps akin to the language shortcuts sometimes used to explain something more quickly to a child. It also revives the 19th-century term "*chair à canon*"⁸ (cannon fodder), coined by Chateaubriand in 1814. Here, Foucault's biopolitics meets Cronenberg's body horror. Macron, a man in a tie who has not personally participated in France's "demographic rearmament" (he has no biological children), invites French women to become incubators for future soldiers. In 2025, the body subjected to algorithmic logic becomes a formless mass of production and reproduction, its strength lying only in quantity.



The Shrouds, David Cronenberg, 2024

Looking at Hofkunst's bags, gathered with Sophie's help for the exhibition at Les Bains-Douches, I think *Démographique Rearmament* might have been the right title for the show. Like a zombie film where decadent half-corpses pose as trash bags, waiting to avenge the social conditioning that shaped them when they were alive.

8. Original quote : « On en était venu à ce point de mépris pour la vie des hommes et pour la France, d'appeler les conscrits la matière première et la chair à canon. »

ich möchte Ihnen aber vorhe~~ten~~ noch
schnell meine Idee der Weg-Gestaltung
im Holderbankgelände illustrieren.

Ich
stelle mir
vor,

den ich die Wege zu
unseren Ausstellungen und Essgeländen
mit meinen Garbage - Bodies
flankiere.

Eine Art

SACK - ALLEE.

Eine Schnitzelbank im Holderbank,
mit Müllbänken, Abfallsäcken, Garbage Bags,
sac poubelles oder SAC plus Belles?
Sacco di Rifiutti tutti belli?



oder mit Ur-Säcken, wie ich sie heute,
kravatisiert,

