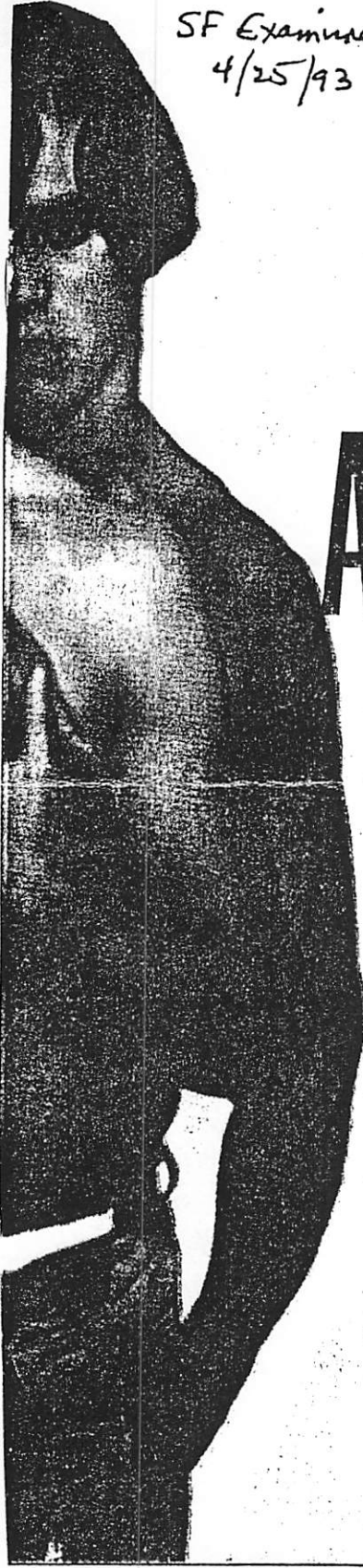


Part of the Examiner's campaign . . .

Frank Browning writes: "The (gay) sexual revolution has indeed probed the limits of wildness."

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# DEVIANT AND PROUD OF IT

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## Author revels in perversity, abandon of gay culture

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By Joan Smith  
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

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**D**IFFERENCE IS almost invariably disturbing. No matter how broad-minded we like to think ourselves, we feel safest when we can establish common ground.

But if deviance, the unexpected — the *other* — don't inspire feelings of security, they represent the essence of excitement, of feeling alive. The true test of tolerance is not how hard we will work to achieve accord, but how willing we are to allow *discord*, to welcome the blossoming of unruly life.

Frank Browning, who has for more than a decade distinguished himself as a reporter for National Public Radio, covering everything from the Iran-contra scandal to the AIDS epidemic, has in a new and very personal manifesto, "The Culture of Desire," issued a challenge

to that willingness. To what extent can we — gay or straight — acknowledge and accept perversity, difference, otherness, as intrinsic to gay life?

"I *am* a deviant," says Browning. "I'm abnormal in the denotative sense of the word. Most human beings in the world have sex heterosexually. Whether we represent 1 percent or 10 percent of the population is immaterial. When people use the epithet 'You dirty queer,' I say, 'Well, I'm not dirty, but yes, I'm queer. Now what?'"

In "The Culture of Desire," Browning explores queerness, both as reporter and participant, in all of its diversity. He opens a meditation on the subversive nature of gay sexuality with a personal account of a steamy, anonymous, nearly silent encounter in the woods at Lands End. He asserts that the rules of safe sex reflect the irrational biases of mostly straight researchers who were shocked by their discovery of certain gay male proclivities at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. Injunctions against anal penetration with a fist,

[ See BROWNING, D-10 ]

## ◆ BROWNING from D-1

**Deviant . . .  
and proud of it**

for instance, have little to do with preventing the spread of the virus, he argues. And why the injunction against multiple sexual partners? "By 1990, researchers had discovered through behavioral studies that unattached gay men were significantly less likely to expose themselves to HIV through risky sex than were men in serial monogamous relationships," he writes. Men in love are perhaps less likely to protect themselves than men in

heat.

At any rate, he says, sex is as inherently unsafe as driving. "We don't refuse to get into a car because it's dangerous," he says. "We just change our behavior once we're inside."

Browning suggests that frequent, casual sex is a part of gay life that deserves to be acknowledged. When CBS did its 1979 documentary on the San Francisco gay community, "Gay Power, Gay Politics," it focused among other things on sex in Buena Vista park and on an S&M shop that the show's producers were later forced to admit was patronized mostly by hetero-

sexuals. Though justified, community outrage was perhaps a bit disingenuous, Browning says.

"As a credentialed, respectable, middle-class professional — an ordinary person who reports, writes and speaks through the airwaves about conventional social issues of family, economy, health, and politics and who pursues the limits of lust in parks and sex clubs — I continue to wonder whether CBS was really incorrect in its characterization of gay men," he writes. "The sexual revolution upon which the gay social movement built itself has indeed probed the limits of wildness."

Queerness, says Browning with delight, is *about* subversion. "It is a rather delectable word," he says. More than the image of men doing forbidden things to one another in private, it represents the unspeakable, the perverse, the peculiar and creative in all of us. "I think there's a bohemian intention in a lot of urban queerdom," he says. "But of course bohemian style is always in danger of being turned into a Macy's ad."

Which is why the open acceptance of gays into the military would be subversive. "If you see your captain as a sexual object, as somebody's boyfriend, it subverts

the whole notion of authority," he says.

And which is part of the paradox implicit in the question Browning raises in "The Culture of Desire": Do urban gays share a culture in the way that, say, African Americans do?

Traveling from Fire Island to the Hollywood Boy Party in Palm Springs, to a shopping mall in Concord with protesters from Queer Nation, Browning found no clear answer to his conundrum. Rather, his investigations exposed the essential paradox of a culture founded in desire. If gay liberation is about sex, about the right to ex-

plore the forbidden, it is intrinsically subversive. But the dream of culture is a dream of "at-homeness," of normalization. It is "the dream of a world where your own particular loves and desires are just as ordinary as those of boys and girls dancing together at a senior prom."

#### **Intermediate tactic**

Browning feels the same way about the legalization of gay marriage — which, because it does not allow for any but the two-person unions favored by homosexuals, he favors only as an intermediate tactic to eliminate discrimination in health insurance and other benefits now extended to legal family members — as he did about National Endowment for the Arts funding for homoerotic material. "If you want freedom for your bohemianism, you can't expect the state to subsidize it," he says. "It's like the revolutionaries asking the king to be their patron."

Gay culture, Browning suggests, is a culture of reaction. "In the 19th century, there weren't homosexuals. There were homosexual acts that anybody might commit. If you go to coastal Brazil today, it's very unlikely that you'd find a 22-year-old man who had not had sex with another guy. Brazil is one of the most sexually liberated places in the world, yet you could be shot for calling someone bisexual or homosexual. It is the abhorrence of life inside the category."

What gay men really desire, Browning says, is not another gay man. "It's a straight man, which the politically correct line holds is simply a symptom of gay self-hatred, but which is really just about wanting maleness in that moment before one is even conscious of desire."

When gays try to define themselves, Browning says, the culture collapses. "The paradox of queerness is that it survives by continually collapsing and recreating itself," he writes. "Queer culturalists recognize and realize one another through disruption and sabotage of their inherited traditions."

Browning has been variously denounced by a number of reviewers for further marginalizing gay life, for focusing on the sensational and the exotic, for simply popularizing ideas that are old news in the gay community. But "The Culture of Desire" has not only made mainstream best-seller lists in New York and Boston, it is also selling at local gay bookstores as well as new books by the ever-popular Randy Shilts and Armistead Maupin.

#### **Extremes of self**

Browning is asserting not just the possibility of culture, but the many possible extremes of self. His assertions are disturbing at times. He seems to dismiss almost casually the role rampant sex has played in spreading the AIDS virus. And it is difficult, as a woman, to warm to the idea that some men are finding comradeship in "sex as a form of bonding not unlike an intense game of racquetball."

But even the idea that intimacy necessarily requires intensity, constancy and/or some kind of verbal connection is just another assumption. Perhaps the kind of sexual abandon Browning chronicles is not for all of us. But why, he makes us wonder, do we tend to believe that the way of the majority is necessarily better than any other?

And like any daredevil, Browning challenges us to consider what each of us is willing to risk to live life more fully.

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