

## **Instagram's Perfect Lie: How The Social Media Platform is Aiding The Extreme Right**

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The most recent Pines Conservation Society [lecture](#) focused on the ecology, history and culture of the Meat Rack—a bucolic half-mile of dunes and forest on Fire Island, situated between the queer hamlets of Fire Island Pines and Cherry Grove. The Meat Rack is a storied cruising ground, but its tracery of pathways can also be thought of metaphorically—verdant arteries infused with decades of eruptive encounters, cultural traumas, and community celebrations that comprise a collective experience, both local and national. The cataclysm of AIDS, felt so keenly here, has added a wistfulness to the dappled woodland atmospherics. This writer was a panel member at the event, and spoke about some of the art that has been made in, and about, the Meat Rack.



Pines Conservation Society panel discussion, 2022. Image courtesy of Stephen Tracy/Pines Conservation Society. Images courtesy of Gabriel Martinez.

Slides from the presentation were posted on Instagram, then quickly removed for violating the platform’s guidelines on “nudity or sexual activity” (two quite different terms, despite Instagram’s dissonant mashing of them). In this case, the images ought to have been permitted under Instagram’s own exemptions for educational subject matter and public awareness. It’s just one of an increasing number of such deletions that are disproportionately affecting LGBTQ+ artists, while revealing a troubling disparity: Visuals of gay bodies and erotic intimacy which are a fundamental aspect of the queer canon, Instagram considers “harmful” content to be slung out with the bathwater. But discarding such material chips away at a vulnerable cultural edifice that took untold sacrifice to build, and is under renewed attack from a resurgent conservative movement.



Kyle Meyer’s diaphanous work displayed in the Meat Rack, before its burial, gestation and exhumation, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.

Sex was not only about pleasure for gay men: It was a mode of connectivity, empowerment and brotherhood in a murderously hostile world. It was a righteous political act—and remains so. Artistic exploration of it was among the limited tools available to record our histories and construct a social architecture. This was in lieu of fundamental rights enjoyed by those in the heterosexual majority, who didn’t need to seek each other out in clandestine gathering spots and illicit clubs

subject to raid, arrest, personal ruin or death. It is by design that Fire Island, Key West, Provincetown and even Manhattan's Westside Piers, locales of queer congregation, are on geographic peripheries. Their locations are a safety feature. The banned posts included work by photographer [Gabriel Martinez](#), who also creates installations and objects; textile and combined-media artist [Kyle Meyer](#); architectural interventionists [Cruising Pavilion](#); and electronic music and performance pioneers [The Swimming Pools](#) (Daniel Smith and Christophe Doloire) whose Meat Rack events (2009-2014) are now fabled lore. But it was the removal of an image by photographer [Robert Andy Coombs](#) that seems most egregious. Coombs, who is disabled, rawly narrates his life—medical circumstances, friends, strangers, natural and urban environments—in pictures of visceral and gripping emotion. He also documents his appetites as an unapologetically sexual human being. He is enduring an exhausting battle on social media for trying to claim a modicum of the space that able-bodied people can take for granted, and see affirmed in their likenesses everywhere.

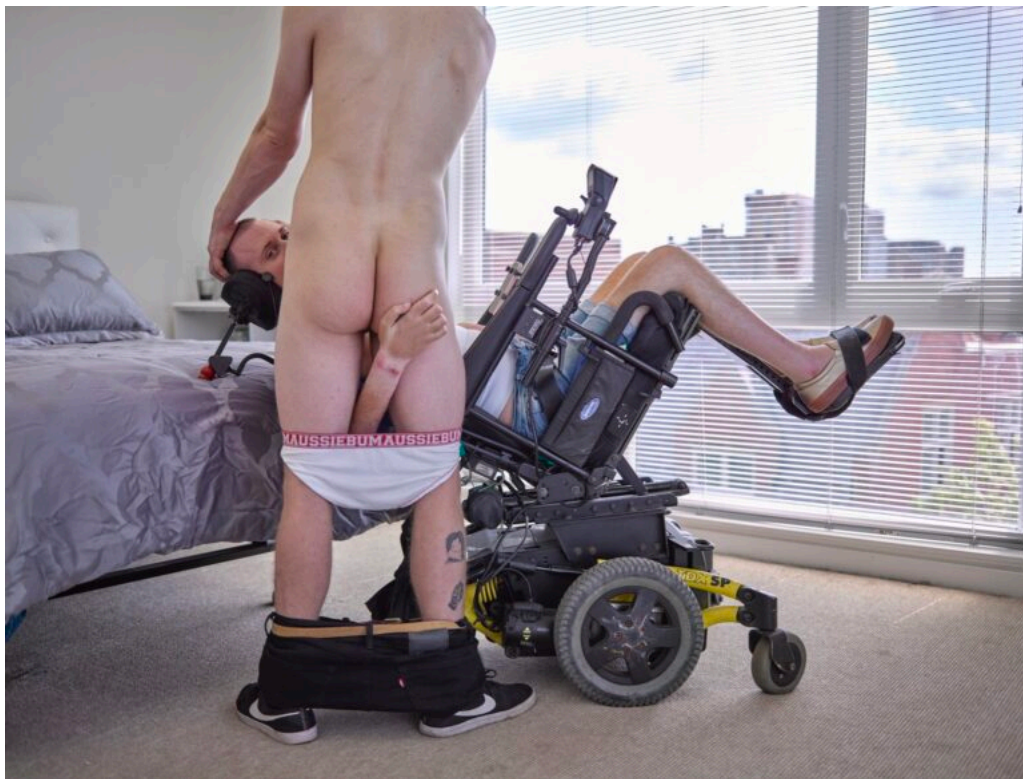


Robert Andy Coombs, Untitled, 2022.



However, this image—taken during his 2022 [BOFFO](#) Fire Island Residency—is benign. It is a shot of the boardwalk in the Pines, under a dour sky, where it ends at the entrance to the Meat Rack. Most of us just hop unthinkingly onto the sandy road that continues into the forest. But that is as far as Robert could go that day. The work's poignancy is revealed only with the knowledge of who took it.

Disseminating the output of queer artists online is a bulwark against their disappearance, a goal pursued relentlessly by fascist politicians and religious zealots. LGBTQ+, women, BIPOC, and Latinx artists often center the body in their work because their bodies have been the target of so much persecution. It is a way to reclaim the flesh which should have been sacrosanct, but was turned into a theater of war. Without digital access to our continuing archives, on the farthest-reaching platforms, entire social cartographies (and the lessons that future generations can learn from them) could be lost. This is one of The Right's principle objectives.

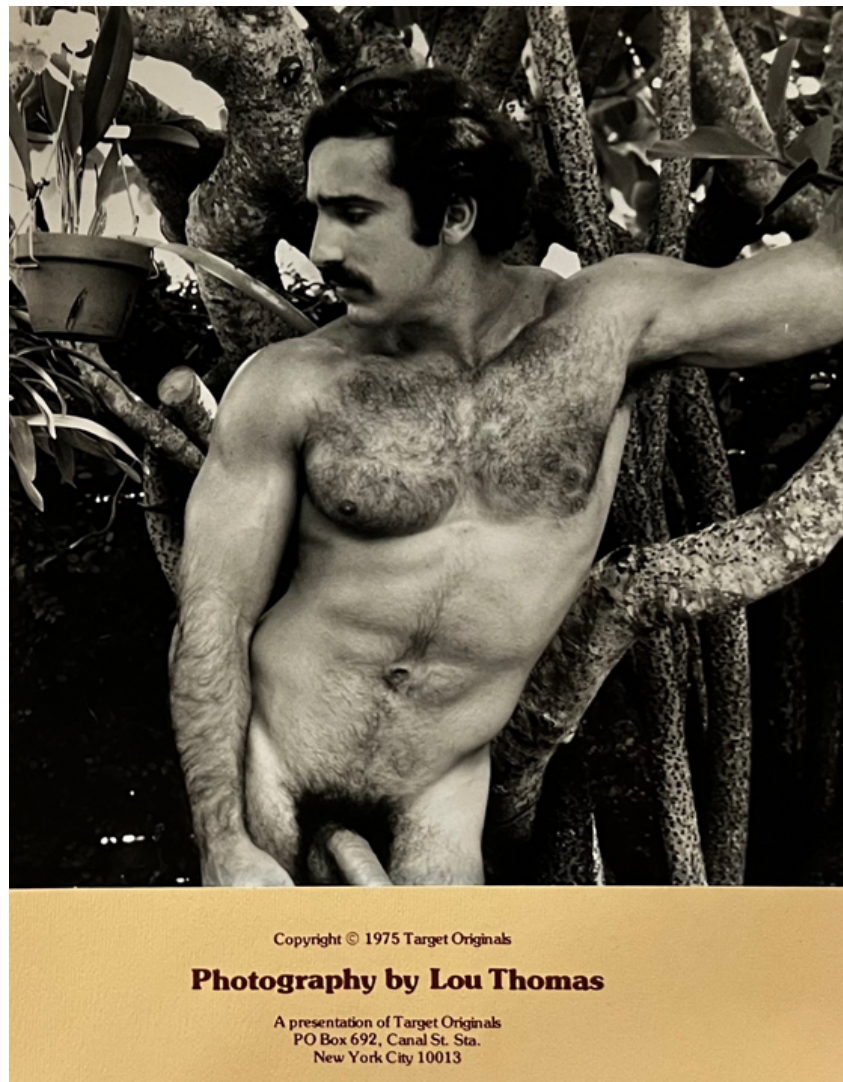


Robert Andy Coombs, *Blowjob*, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.

Blanket social media policies that hide behind the feeble certainty that someone somewhere will be offended at *something* are a cowardly avoidance of meaningful discourse on presenting nakedness, sex and art about them. The late polemicist, Christopher Hitchens, addressed this stance with the disregard that it

deserves: “In this country (The United States) I’ve been told, ‘That’s offensive’ as if those two words constitute an argument. Not to me they don’t.”

If a viewer is “sensitive to this type of content” it would take less effort to unfollow it than report it. Furthermore, it’s improbable that Instagram would “suggest” the gay channel Logo TV, for example, to the family account of biblical fanatics hunkered inside in a gunpowder keg awaiting Armageddon, or a government snatch of their guns—let alone more explicit feeds. One questions then, the motivations of those who commit time to lodging grievances. The only “harm” is caused by complainants who are searching for and victimizing those they’d otherwise be unlikely to come across on Instagram.



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**Photography by Lou Thomas**

A presentation of Target Originals  
PO Box 692, Canal St. Sta.  
New York City 10013

Lou Thomas, Bruno, 1975, for Target Studios. Image courtesy of Target Studios.

Like any business, Instagram seeks to increase revenue and expand its supremacy which aren't good bedfellows for sexual content in our woefully puritanical America. While Instagram states, in short, "don't post nudity," it goes on to twist itself in knots with the tortured language of its community guidelines which tiptoe around insulting any constituency, while satisfying none. The diction is specific yet cloudy, informational but unclear, declarative and contradictory. For instance, there are two versions of one regulation pertaining to art: "We also allow photographs of paintings, sculptures, and other art that depicts nude figures". Elsewhere we read that "nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is ok, too". The missing "and other art" in the latter phrase sneakily delegitimizes performance, installation and more conceptual (risky?) art forms. With more than a touch of misogyny, female nipples are only allowed in some circumstances—"birth, breast-cancer awareness" (is that worthier than AIDS awareness, no less associated with sexual or reproductive parts?). Interestingly, female nipples are also allowed in the context of "protest," which again, should apply to much queer bodily art, that motivation being intrinsic to its aesthetics. Male nipples, obviously, are ubiquitous. Of course, a heterosexual, white male artist might also have his nude-art post taken down, but while frustrating to him individually, it cannot be seen as part of a larger erasing of personal safety, that group's collective identity, or a governmental attempt to annihilate it, because there is no such movement underway.

Employing the term "guidelines" is also untruthful. They are not guidelines but a promise that if you disobey them again you *will* (not "may") forfeit your account, global audience, allies and colleagues. The resulting confusion from these baffling missives serves Instagram well, creating a grey enough area for its engineers to decide on a post's suitability without consistency and with impunity. You can appeal Instagram's removal of your post "if you believe Instagram's decision is damaging for a group or issue you care about" but its shadowy review panel of "independent experts" issues final decisions with suspiciously robotic speed. META (which owns Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook) includes a misstep in its explanation of how to make an appeal: "Explain how Facebook or Instagram got your decision wrong". Surely they mean, "our decision".

These policies revolve around Instagram's core tenet "community". But, like Facebook's "friends" system it is another con. Communities *do* exist on Instagram, but this is quite different from Instagram—at 1.5 billion users—*being* a





Tom of Finland, Bruno, 1979, for Target Studios. From Lou Thomas' photograph.

community. No one is loyal to Instagram, it's just today's most effective channel for image-sharing; sooner or later it won't be. Awareness of these corrupted definitions undermines the platform's nudity and sexual activity defense—if Instagram isn't a community, then who are its stakeholders protecting?

Of course, it's Instagram's world; Instagram's terms and conditions. Artists who work with themes of sex and the body can remain in compliance as neutered versions of themselves and their art, or choose to leave Instagram and post elsewhere. But this is to miss the point. META is not just a social media juggernaut; it's an exponentially expanding encyclopedia; a propellant of daily



Image, courtesy of the Swimming Pools.

life; it owns and controls the most immediate nexus of information and visibility; and it is the principle pop cultural repository—and broadcaster—of our age. It rivals the influence of governments. Until there is an equal alternative, to post on lesser models is to commit digital suicide and disappear oneself, which would be to do META's dirty work for it. These dynamics diminish the company's mission statement: "People deserve to be heard and to have a voice—even when that means defending the right of people we disagree with." What of defending the right of people we do agree with?





## Violations



Reviewed •

### You can appeal the decision to take down your content

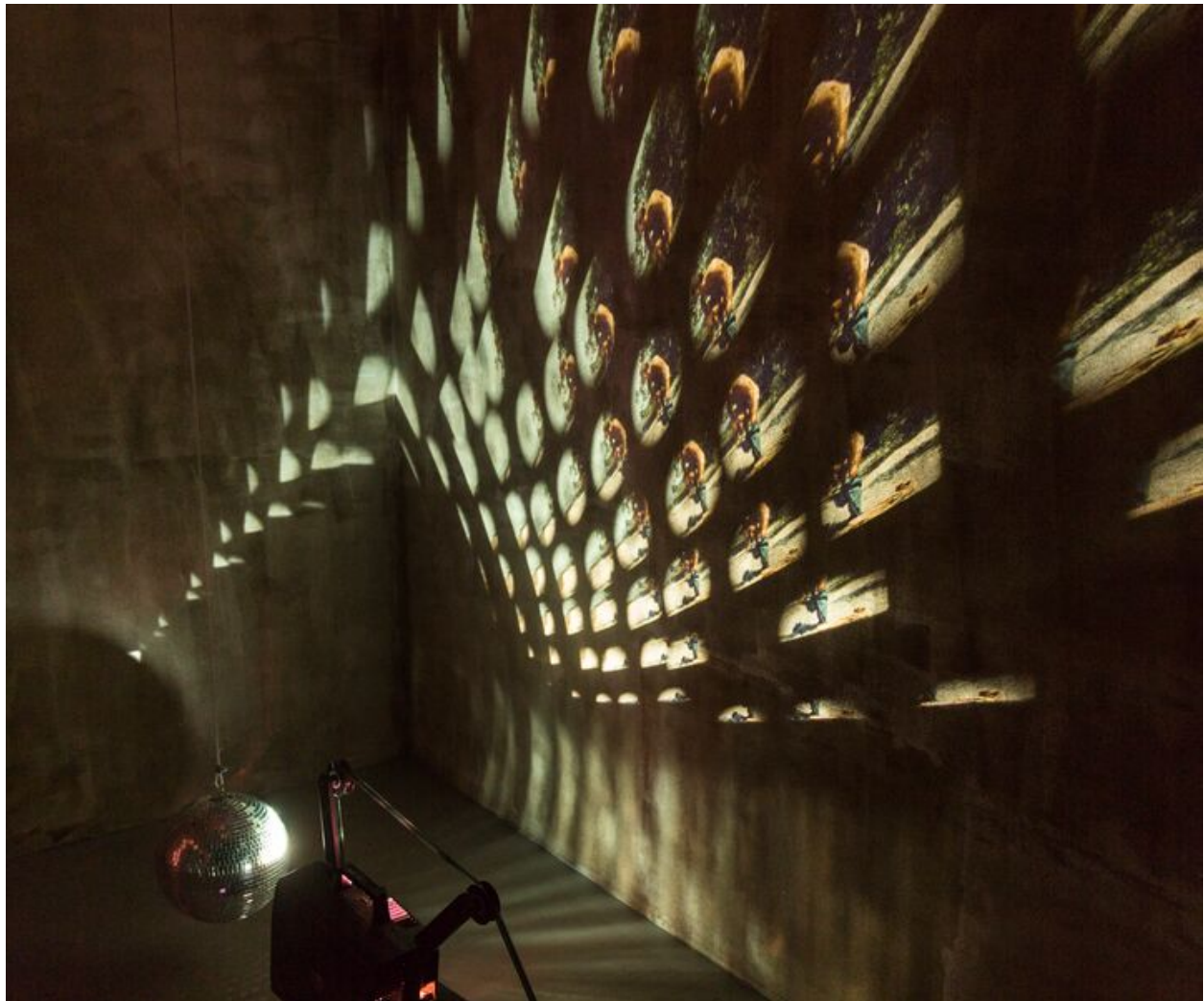
If you believe Instagram's decision is damaging for a group or issue you care about, you can appeal to the Oversight Board.

The Oversight Board is not part of Instagram. It is a group of experts who make independent judgements about what should be allowed on Instagram.

Instagram's opaque appeals process.

Instagram's success comes with responsibilities that cannot be shirked by a gutless sanctioning apparatus that pretends fairness to all while perpetuating the shame, displacement and prejudice that have been employed for centuries to oppress queer people. Instagram and its parent company may have to meet financial goals and shareholders expectations, but they exploit the content of posts and reels to do so, plundering our lives as grist for the mill. We're often uncaring of the back-office consequences of posting, but while we may not be able to have it both ways, neither should META. LGBTQ+ citizens are the favored, demonized cudgel with which Republican despots scaremonger votes, and the practice is as virulent today as ever. Florida's "Don't Say Gay" [bill](#), signed into law by crepuscular Governor, Ron DeSantis, and Supreme Court Justice, Clarence Thomas' [terrifying](#) comments that the law establishing gay marriage (among others) was "demonstrably erroneous" and should be reconsidered, are just two examples. Tennessee lawmakers' new ban on [drag](#) acts is the latest of

these attacks. That someone with a heart as dark as DeSantis' leads the Sunshine State is a hideous irony. Freakishly, "Clarence Thomas" can be anagrammatized to read "coalescent harm". It's a hidden truth of this ominous character, and his wife, Ginni Thomas, a feral Trumpist moll who fought tirelessly to overturn the 2020 presidential election results.



Gabriel Martinez, Installation view of *Bayside Revisited*, Print Center, Philadelphia, 2015. Image courtesy of The Print Center and the artist.

If Instagram is to accommodate and protect marginalized artists and the vital commentary they disseminate, then its algorithmic capabilities have to be made sophisticated enough to parse and understand the differences between intentional, authentic artistic expression and more superficial or sinister intentions. That's tricky of course, but difficulty doesn't justify inaction when the status quo that benefits the company damages the most targeted groups.

This conversation could be rendered almost moot by applying “sensitive content” banners to posts containing nudity or sexual activity so that viewers can choose whether to see it. Instagram could go further, by accepting that nudity, consenting sex and related art, are a normal aspect of life, denied for too long by bigoted hypocrites in seats of power. In doing so, it might remain relevant, and avoid the fate of Myspace.



Gabriel Martinez, Installation view of *Bayside Revisited*, Print Center, Philadelphia, 2015. Image courtesy of The Print Center and the artist.

The Far-Right is not far anymore—it is the Republican Party, and Instagram’s dithering policies are compounding its tyranny. Until the platform stands *against* such abuses, it is complicit *in* them. Instagram’s lie is perfect because it is so many lies. It nods to care, reason and understanding, while trafficking in manipulation, deceit, and exclusion. But most insidiously, because it knows (and bases its maneuvers on) the probability that users care more about being liked by strangers, than advocating for themselves and catalyzing en-masse to usher progress. By this charter—and to our disgrace—Instagram divides and conquers. As frustrations build, perhaps sufficient momentum will grow, and positive change will come. One hopes that Instagram’s operators will heed the current problems, but for now the site has become snagged on a moral hook of its own making. We might ensure that it dangles there until its dangerous precedents are resolved.