

Jessica Tanzer

Spencer Reece

The Lazarus Lotteries'
Carly McCarthy &
Malcom Gregory Scott

Brian Malloy

**Chris Hewitt Award
Winners**

David Mohan
Carolyn O'Donnell
Paul William Kruse
Christina Robertson

sarah SCHULMAN

In *Let the Record Show*, the Writer & Activist
Traces the Trials & Triumphs of ACT UP New York



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Beauty not Fear

Photographer Jessica Tanzer Finds Teachable Moments in Her Activist Past for a New Generation

by Chael Needle

That San Francisco-based artist Jessica Tanzer would start our e-mail interview not only with generous written responses but also with a spate of images, clippings, and scans makes perfect sense. She works in a visual medium—photography. Or, to put it another way, and perhaps she might agree, we need more than words to express ourselves.

She shared the jpegs with me as one might go through a box of mementoes:

A Marc Geller photo of her, face upturned to the sky as she strides in belted distressed denim shorts, combat boots, and white socks to match a white bra-like top, circa 1990.

A family portrait snapped: Jessica with her two sisters and their mom when they visited San Francisco for the 1990 Pride parade.

An image of her Tank Hill Crew T-shirt from her soon-to-relaunch social justice e-commerce site: gray and short-sleeved, with the words, 'Cunts Are Not Supposed to Be Orange: Vote Planned Parenthood.'

A portrait of the band 4 Non Blondes, with an introductory caption: "Linda Perry of the 4 Non Blondes was my best hang-out friend and on again/off again roommate in those days. 'What's Up?' was really an anthem of the time. The 4 Non Blondes' first show was a needle exchange fundraiser for ACT UP: this was the original band."

A photo from her days in ACT UP and Queer Nation: a woman gazes out of a full-body cocoon (or mummification?) made out of "Caution" tape.

A newspaper clipping of a photo of a window ledge, showing a dramatized spanking as police protest at the Bad Cop, No Donut Castro Street Party: "Here is my old window ledge (the pulpit) on Castro where we did the ACT UP headcount that became [the first] Pink Saturday, and realized there were thousands of us. It was a plan [that] me, Michael Goff, Alan Klein, and Ken Woodard came up with at Cafe Flore as we were marveling at how many people were showing up in town for the [6th International] AIDS conference with ACT UP T-shirts from all over the world. We had many political rallies off of that ledge; we had stage lights wired in; we would rent huge sound systems parked on trucks down below and plugged in to my bedroom outlet and we would throw toilet paper over the bus wires so the buses couldn't pass; the toilet paper would cause little fires. The last rally we had was counted on the news as at least 10,000 people."

A constellation of her glorious photographs collaged recently above a magazine rack in the Castro's Dog Eared Books (previously A Different Light and right across the street from her window ledge). She emphasizes that having a "local bookstore as a hub for organizing, pre-cell phone, for activists was great and that having the ledge as a pulpit directly across Castro made for the perfect storm of gathering people for unpermitted street rallies. The link between ledge (with stage lights and sound system) and bookstore made for some very powerful Castro history. 'Rally at 8, meet outside of A Different Light.' The staff was made up of activists who all went on to do great and substantive work as performers, authors, magazine publishers, fellows, professors; Justin Vivian Bond,

Alexander Chee, Frances "Franco" Stevens, Rachel Pepper, Richard Labonté, Pansy Bradshaw, Betty Pearl, Ed Moreno, Terence Smith (Joan Jett Blakk)."

Another image: her iconic photos hanging in "The Rebel Dykes Art & Archive Show" exhibit at Space Station Sixty-Five in London (through September 17), portraits of women, studies in desire and empowerment and self-definition. Kissing. Gazing. Embracing. Claiming space.

Her photos are also featured in the new documentary, *Rebel Dykes*, to which the exhibit is companion. One of her images of woman-centered desire featured in the film/exhibit graced the cover of British lesbian magazine, *Quim: for dykes of all sexual persuasions*, and one can understand why—two women kiss in a passionate embrace, focused intensely on each other, protecting their intimacy.

Cornell University acquired Jessica Tanzer's archives as part of its library's Human Sexuality Collection in June 2013. The archives include traditional dark-room 16 x 20 master prints of about forty of her iconic 1988-1996 images. The collection, its assemblage completed thanks to the lockdowns, left for Ithaca, New York, earlier this month.

Also during the past year, Tanzer "did a 'Virtual Pride' with Cornell in 2020 of Pride pictures from 1990 that had never been published....I participated in some other virtual shows as well, all old work....There's definitely a hunger for that history right now, which makes me happy."

During the course of the interview, I ask about Tanzer's own resiliency and its connection to the fight for social justice, and she delves deep into personal history. Her grandparents, Russian-Jewish immigrants, escaped the Ukraine (the Russian secret police wanted to arrest her grandfather for his socialism and support of intellectuals). Their first child, a daughter, died of starvation as Tanzer's grandmother held her in her arms in an Austrian hard labor camp. Separately, they made it to America, settling in Portland, Oregon.

In her parents' home, Tanzer remembers "a house full of palpable excitement, politics, art, style, and voter registration. I didn't understand it but knew something important and exciting was going on." Her parents, both Reedie (Reed College) intellectuals, were best friends with another couple, Pulitzer-winning journalist Jack Rosenthal and editor/linguist Marilyn Rosenthal. Deeply involved in the civil rights movement, Tanzer's dad was a lawyer (and then judge) who campaigned for John F. Kennedy and signed people up to vote, and later, as a grand jury expert hired by Robert F. Kennedy's Department of Justice, worked on the "Mississippi Burning" legal case, writing and securing indictments against Sheriff Rainey, Deputy Price, and sixteen others.

Tanzer notes: "From my four year old eyes, life was ideal, but that changed in an instant when my parents split up. I was just five, my dad was out of the house which absolutely crushed me as a daddy's girl and my thirty-nine year old mother found herself a single mother of four kids under the age of seven, heartbroken and financially crushed. That was when I grew up and when I became instantly deeply sad and invisible."

Hardships ensued, but through it all, her mother created a nurturing learning environment, turning a small room in their new house into "a library full of literature, art books and record albums." Notes Tanzer: "Food stamps, art classes and free breakfast and lunch programs got me through school but in my



Monique Popstite. Courtesy Human Sexuality Collection, Cornell University



San Francisco Pride 1990 Chaos.
Courtesy of Cornell University's
Human Sexuality Collection

opinion our real education came by way of home schooling. Our mom kept us learning, chose our role models (Radcliffe Hall, Sarah Bernhardt, Blondie, etc.); taught us sensibly and realistically about drugs (how to do them responsibly) and sex (how to be good and safe); and stopped her daughters from walking with our arms crossed or from talking with squeaky voices so that we would grow in to strong women. Our mom wasn't a soccer mom, but she would gladly drop us kids off and pick us up from the midnight showings of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the Clinton Street Theater."

Recently, Tanzer created another opportunity to pass along what she learned from her mother. During the lockdowns, Tanzer built and tested an e-commerce beta site with designer and photographer Alexx Conroy (also her husband), designer Ken Woodard, and writer Suzanne Finnermore (whom she hopes will return with other guest contributors when the site is relaunched). "We are getting ready to relaunch it in the spirit of my mother's home-schooling with home decor, jigsaw puzzles, clothing, etc. with art from movements that came from war and strife and activism like Dada, Bauhaus, vintage unionizing sexworkers, role models, some bits of my work and all with teachable moments, explanations of what the art and movements were about. This is such an important time to home-school by way of trickery."

As we corresponded, it became clear that Tanzer carries forth this creative and educative approach to life and work, reflecting on what she has learned and searching for teachable moments along the way.

Chael Needle: What have you been working on lately, during this latest pandemic?

Jessica Tanzer: I was just coming off of twelve years of life-threatening illness(es) when we were told to stay inside and, with the future being an uncertainty, we started an [e-commerce] business....We took everything down after the Orange monster was voted out and haven't finished the store for it to go live....

Most art that I did during the pandemic was a pivot to e-commerce with a politics/history educational slant and catching up on the interest and commitments of my known activist body of work from San Francisco ACT UP/Queer Nation days, which is now finally and for the first time a full body of museum-quality prints for exhibit. I am really excited about what we are creating for our shop and I am really excited about having a printed body of my old work; I never had the money to do that. In the old days I would trade the oh-so-lovely and generous Danny Nicoletta prints for darkroom time and studio time; photography is an expensive craft so to have this now is a new and exciting prospect even though the work is from a different era.

This isn't my first pivot to support myself during a crisis; I grew up getting knocked down a lot, so I'm a pro at picking myself back up. [First] I learn about what I am fearing; it is an outstanding tool for anybody. During the crash of 2008 I was very sick on chemotherapy and work stopped. I asked my history buff father to send me a book that would help me learn about what businesses

flourished during the Great Depression, to learn from what I feared, and from my very, very sick bed I pivoted our photography business to a model that could succeed through a great recession, five kinds of chemo, ten surgeries, three pulmonary embolisms, a compromised immune system and chronic pain and it really did....

How was this sense of resiliency forged in your early adult life, including the early AIDS epidemic?

[As I recounted earlier] mine was a very troubled and difficult childhood and, by the age of sixteen, I was out of the house, not by my own choosing. I knew my only way forward was to graduate high school, so I kept my situation a secret and did much of my junior and senior year while sleeping on the street or in punk-rock houses...and graduated.

When people comment that breast cancer must have been so hard—yes, it was hard, but it was a walk in the park on my scale of life. Life has always been about pushing forward, finding solutions, being careful to not self-medicate and to not ask "why me." If there is a problem, roll up your sleeves and get to work.

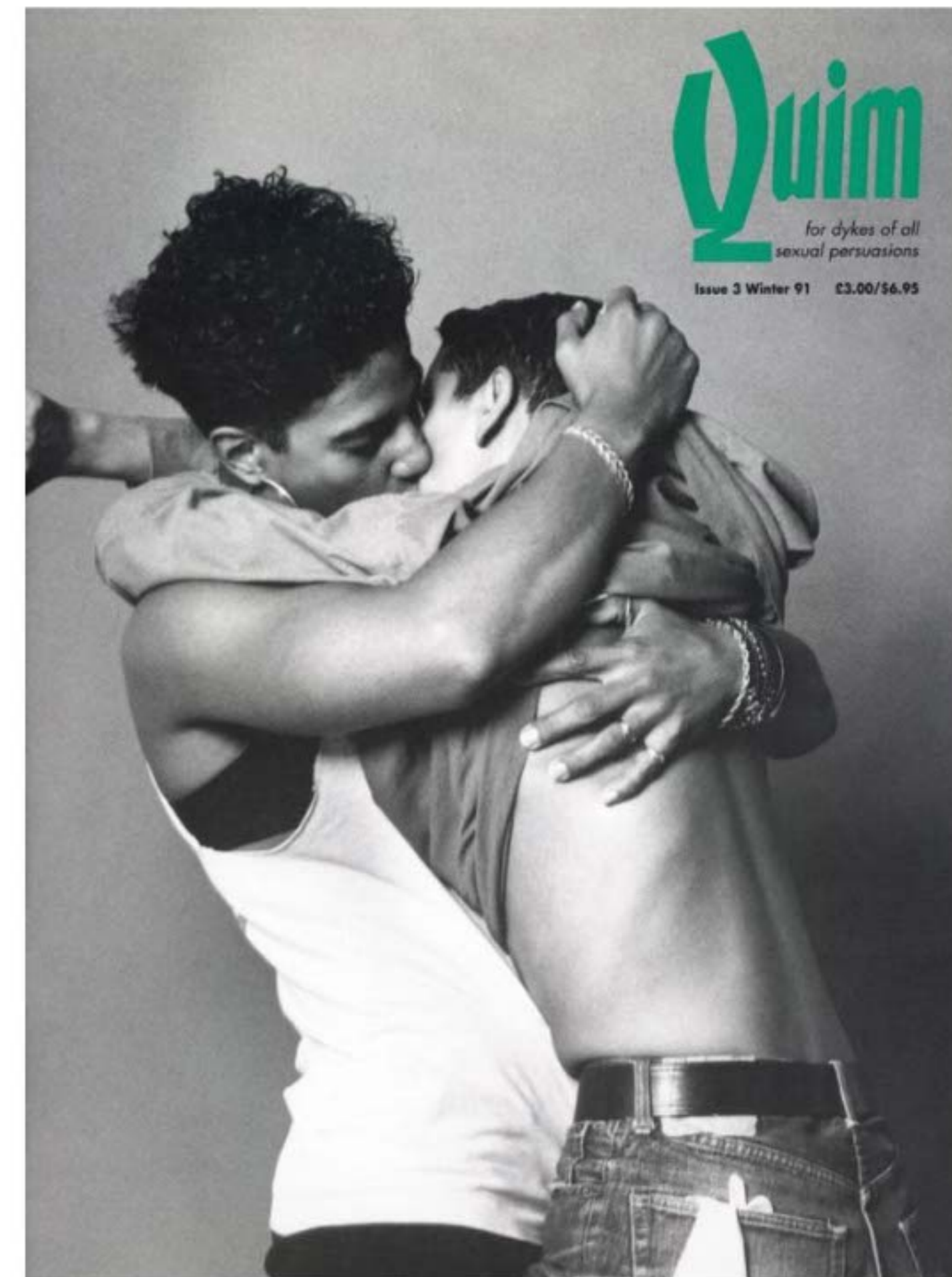
Our mother came out of the closet when I was in my early tweens, during the Women's Liberation Movement. Our house became a gay epicenter in Portland and morphed in to a house full of radical separatist feminist lesbians. (In those days, in our area, "lesbian" was an offensive word. The preferred term was "gay." There was so much angry energy and offense taken [about] appropriate terminology...that I have never been PC or militant, but I do my best to be respectful.)

AIDS, before it had a name, was a big subject in our house. My mom and some of the others were nurses so it was a very prevalent topic and taken seriously by us from the earliest discussions.

Our house was also like a giant closet. It was gay on the inside, sometimes on the porch and, every once in a while, for a fleeting moment, in the car. I was still in middle school. One day in the car my mom's lover Deb had her arm across the front seat playing with my mother's hair; it was as if a very private act accidentally happened in the open. Shortly after, I was confronted by a boy down the block.

The women would wear lavender-enameled stars to identify each other and they would wear their button-down shirts buttoned just a bit further down to their cleavage and it was discreet and so powerfully beautiful. We young sisters knew and still know all of the words to Cris Williamson's *The Changer and The Changed*.

When I was thirteen, I developed a gut-crunching, out-of-my-mind lust for one of the women in the house, Rainbo. It lasted for decades. She was my first love. I loved Rainbo and later other women [but because] bisexuality was still a taboo subject and "not real," my coming out as bisexual was as difficult for me as I could imagine coming out gay is for those coming from straight families. My body and brain thought something was wrong with me that I couldn't understand and, when I finally was publicly with a man in 1996, I



Quim Cover, London. Courtesy of Cornell University's Human Sexuality Collection



was shunned by much of my lesbian community and told by many that it would "ruin my career."

My siblings and I grew up as a very tight and close foursome. We still are. We needed to be then to take care of ourselves and each other, to stay fed and protected. Now we've all moved on to such interesting paths and all with social justice ingrained in our fabric; mine in San Francisco, [where] I studied at San Francisco Art Institute....

During the AIDS crisis my work was to promote safe sex, some quite graphic but beautiful, and to address homophobia in a way that was as beautiful [as it was] inside my house as a teenager and of course to fight art censorship with grace and beauty. To me, this has all been an organic, fluid continuation from my grandparents' struggles and successes to my parents' to my siblings' and mine.

Most of my work from 1988-1996 was in the studio and directly for political purpose. In my off-time I was a part of something that was going on in San Francisco that is indescribable, although many try. The energy and creativity and blowing off of steam from our desperate days of fighting for our friends' lives and taking care of them as they died very ugly deaths was such a sight to be seen and experienced and I never brought my camera with me. Instead, when I wished I had a picture of what I was seeing I would look around to make sure that my friend Marc Geller was getting a picture and as usual, he was. I predict Marc will be the Vivian Maier of San Francisco's AIDS Crisis days. I practically froth at the mouth, imagining getting in to his years of negatives.

My next yet-to-be-seen chapter of work will be 1997 through 2004 when I finally took my camera with me to capture my life and my friends. I am so excited to get to this part. It is rich in imagery and in survivors and also importantly in friends who survived AIDS but, with their HIV status, did not survive other serious illnesses. I think that's a very important point to make in whichever pandemic we might be in; it's never over and needs to be treated with thought and care. We aren't invincible, but we are resilient.

You mentioned today's "hunger for [that] history." What do you hope present-day viewers take from your work from ACT UP/Queer Nation/Pride as well as your 1997-2004 period?

In the nineties, we were nostalgic for the Summer of Love and the Vietnam War protests....I think it's the same nostalgia now for a time not yet named...our [1990s'] Summer of Love, [and] the activism that came from our [AIDS] war.

[Tanzer noted a vital difference in communication between then and now.] In 1996-97, when email was just becoming *the* tool for communicating I started strongly imagining, predicting even, that people as a global society were going to lose their social skills. I used to imagine that one day there would be chaos on the streets after a global power outage because people wouldn't know how to communicate with each other in person any more. I would say at this point my prediction is not too far off.

We now communicate with people we don't know, people without a face, without a common ground and we communicate impulsively. People attack, people complain, people see an article about some way that the world is going to destruct and they post it on social media with no productive suggestions about what the reader of that post can do to help said doom and gloom problem. It chips away slowly at the soul, at the majority of the world's population's souls and feelings of hope. We have a whole generation who has known nothing but war, PTSD sufferers, poverty, people using opioids to self-medicate and we are all talking at each other.

And comedic snark is not allowed.

To respond to someone with good humor or less-than-careful verbiage is inevitably going to cause others to attack. Everything is serious, everyone is serious and everyone is offended. We don't know what or who we are going to offend but someone will be offended, and in the name of diversity but creating grand-scale division. Political correctness and walking on eggshells so as to not offend someone from some pocket of a movement that we were once all in together is in my opinion doing the opposite of its original intention and instead making all of these small pockets under our large rainbow umbrella, where, if you use a word that is fine in one, [it's] guaranteed you will come under attack from another small pocket. Shutting down a conversation instead of opening it up to questions does not encourage learning and growth; it discourages asking and understanding.

That's not to say that I don't recognize such important progress being made, but I do also recognize people wanting to broaden their scope of acceptance without feeling they can ask about what they don't yet know and receive an answer grown from kindness. These are beautiful missed opportunities for teaching moments....



The Box. Courtesy of Cornell University's Human Sexuality Collection

Recently I was accused of not being diverse enough by not putting a biracial kissing couple in my photograph of The Box for Page Hodel's nightclub, which was taken in 1990 and not set up, simply an organic statement of the time.

I have a young cousin who married her POC girlfriend and, as is the way of the generation, she wrote something very serious on Facebook about how serious this was and she was praised by her friends for her seriousness. Everything she said was right, of course, but I watch these new crops of adults being so serious. I grabbed on to this as a teaching moment. I commented on her thread; I said that we worked hard and tirelessly for her and her girlfriend to have the freedoms to live the life they are living, but that we didn't mean for our successors to take these freedoms as a no-laughing-matter matter. I said we worked hard but we also had fun, we partied, we did a lot of drugs and that I hoped that she and her future wife would go out to the woods, do some mushrooms and have some fun. A little while later she posted something about camping and added "and cousin Jessica, you would have been proud of us" and I was!

When people look at my work, I want them to see warriors during and after a war. I want them to notice that nobody is holding a phone....That people of every color were living a colorful life together under our beautiful and incredibly diverse umbrella. That we were asking for acceptance with honey, not with vinegar. That we were inclusive, not exclusive, and creative and engaged with our environment, not staring at screens, not attacking strangers with impulsively typed words. The job of my work was to invite the viewer in to face their fear of a world they didn't understand and to see its beauty without threat. A teaching moment.

To be offended is a choice. How it is handled is a choice. We chose to lead with love and humor and filth. We fought hard and decompressed hard. We were grabby and sexual and completely inappropriate and misbehaving madly,

taking offensive terms and owning them. We put our big boy pants on when changing our friend's diapers and talking them to their other side because, in those days of ugly disease and daily death of friends shunned from their childhood homes and biological families, our families of choice had to be so intimate and so strong and we are still bound by those ties.

I am so disheartened to see what is happening now, our younger communities are intentionally divided. When asked how I prefer to be identified, my answer is usually either a respectful non-answer or, to those who know me, "Cock Sucking Lesbian" tends to sum me up. I hope those who choose to be offended put down their screens, grab someone from another pocket of our enormous and colorful umbrella and go to the country, do some mushrooms, have some fun, enjoy life and be one again.

Our umbrella has grown a honeycomb of barriers since I took these photographs; we are fighting with each other.

It is beautiful to see people becoming comfortable in their own skin, but it's hard to see those open to learning not feeling comfortable in trying to do so for fear of the blowback.

The nostalgia, the hunger to learn [about] that time is I think a hunger to learn of our many-years-long Summer of Love and Death when "something happened," that I had the good fortune to help capture in images.

Log on to tanzerphoto.com for more info and join the mailing list if you would like to be notified about upcoming exhibits, news, and when the e-commerce site (tankhill-crew.com) goes live. Follow Jessica Tanzer on Instagram @jessica_tanzer.

Chael Needle is Managing Editor of A&U.