Nancy GRAVES

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Nancy Graves

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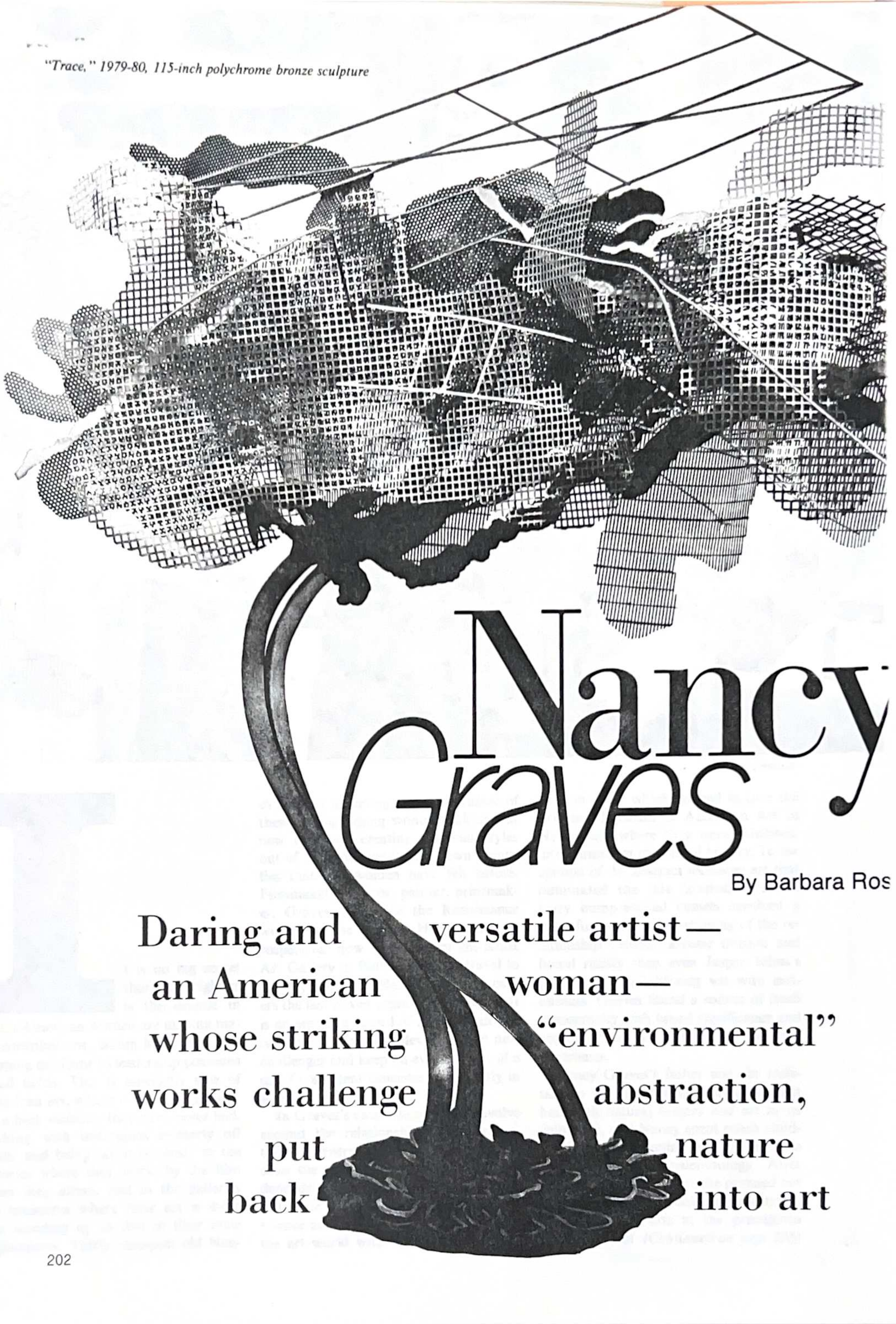

"Trace," 1979-80, 115-inch polychrome bronze sculpture

Nancy Graves

By Barbara Ros

Daring and versatile artist—an American woman—whose striking "environmental" works challenge abstraction, put nature back into art

Hans Namuth

It is no big secret that the 'eighties is the decade in which American women are making major contributions, taking bold risks, and stepping out front to leadership positions in all fields. This is especially true of American art, where women are achieving a high visibility they have never had, working with techniques formerly off limits, and being taken seriously in the factories where they work, by the film crews they direct, and in the galleries and museums where their art is more than standing up to that of their male counterparts. Thirty-nine-year-old Nancy Graves is among the most visible of these daring young women staking out new territory, creating personal styles out of a confidence in their own identities that few women have felt before. Filmmaker, sculptor, painter, printmaker, Graves looks like the Renaissance woman for the 'eighties. Her current retrospective, now at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo (later to travel to Akron, Ohio, and Houston, Texas), covers the last eleven years of her activity. It is an amazing record of how fast an artist can grow, change, develop, meet new challenges and keep on evolving out of a set of consistent concerns stated early in a career.

In Graves's case, the concerns revolve around the relationship of art to nature—a central theme in American art since the earliest years of American independence, when painter Charles Willson Peale opened his museum of natural science and art. At first, Graves stunned the art world with her life-size camels, done in 1969, which seemed to turn the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where they were exhibited, into a museum of natural history. In the context of the abstract formalist art that dominated the late 'sixties, Graves's hairy hump-backed camels involved a more fundamental questioning of the relationship between artistic illusion and literal reality than even Jasper Johns's painting "Flag." Mixing wit with seriousness, Graves found a source of fresh iconography with broad significance and apparently endless potential in her own experience.

Nancy Graves's father was the assistant to the director of a museum that had both natural history and art in its collection, and Nancy spent much childhood time inspecting stuffed animals and the relics of paleontology. After graduation from Vassar, she pursued her interest in art and took two additional degrees in fine arts at the prestigious Yale School of *(Continued on page 235)*

clubhouse, because you stand in a room with a light bulb hanging from the ceiling and they're all sitting there with their chins on their hands waiting for you to make a jerk of yourself, which is easy to do. I was very scared, but I think if you're straight with people they believe you. I guess I do have self-confidence, or maybe just a little more . . . I can only think of the word 'moxie,' which I think is the greatest word in the world," she laughs. "You only have maybe more moxie."

I wonder if she's strict with herself, if she pushes herself—to finish a job, or meet a deadline. "Oh, no, I don't push," she says. "I'm very good about myself. Nothing short of a revolution taking place around Manhattan Island will keep me from my daily swim. And I know how to stay whole. The way for me to stay whole is to get my swim every night at 6:00 P.M., to get to the hairdresser once a week—I don't let it go until I'm falling over and looking spooky. And I like to walk everyplace, so I always allow a little time in there. I don't cut it right to the bone.

"I think your health, your physical well-being, is a very critical part of your capacity to function well. I wouldn't be able to do anything as well as I do, if I weren't physically very strong, or as strong as I'm capable of being by virtue of my daily swim. I'm very careful about getting enough sleep, eating intelligently—nothing casual about it.

"And I like to look good, so I have to take a certain amount of time on my wardrobe. I don't want to sacrifice either my health or my appearance to make some great contribution somewhere—because, in my book, it will fail. And I'd probably be a very unsatisfactory wife, too. My husband is crazy about clothes, and how people look. I think he'd be unhappy if I were running around in yesterday's newspaper instead of tomorrow's new dress."

I suspect, then, that Robin sees no conflict between being a strong voice in a corporate board room, then coming home and playing the role of hostess at a dinner party. "How could there be a conflict? You're still the same person, and you're simply using more of yourself. There is so much more in all of us than we actually draw upon. We are capable of learning so much more. We have so much more competence in us—and all I'm saying is, the best fun in life is to use your whole person. I still ski a lot and probably it's too hardy skiing for my age," she laughs. "Maybe I'll wrap myself around a tree one of these days. But that's the way I like to live. I want to ski and I want to be totally involved. And I'm saying to you that most women—and men—have all of that within themselves: the demands are never put there, that's all. The potential is there: I insist that it is. I've seen too many really able women running all kinds of big, nonprofit operations who would then come home and have a dinner party for twenty. This is no big deal."

There is also no conflict between the serious strong voice and what she calls her "decidedly frivolous side," the side that adores Chinese export porcelain and is not beyond sneaking pieces into the house ("You know how that is? Even if you paid for it yourself, it seems superfluous to some people").

She turns on me again now: *I* should be in political life. "Because when you're there, you *can* do something. That's one of the reasons I just prod, push, stomp, and holler to get people to go into politics. I'm very interested in the Senatorial race this year. Why? It's the same why as your question and the same answer, which is really, 'I don't know. I'm just interested.' It's tomorrow and, like you, I've got a stake in tomorrow. I don't think it's just that I have children. I always think, well, I'll be here quite a long time."

Congresswoman Liz Holtzman will be speaking at the house of a friend of Mrs. Duke's this week. Do I want to go to hear her? Robin is going "because I just think you should go." Is she acting from a sense of duty? "It's duty only in the sense that I think everybody is accountable. If the whole thing is a bust, that's because you didn't pull the lever and vote. And if you did vote, you didn't think and you didn't listen, so you didn't know whom to vote for. There's got to be some duty. This is such a marvelous country, and there are so many opportunities here, and yet we have incredibly serious problems. But I have a feeling we're at a crossroad now, and one ought to be very responsive in the next year to elections and to being a participant in the system. Everyone of us is responsible for every bit of it." ▽

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Art and Architecture. A Fulbright fellowship took her to Paris; but it was a trip to Italy, however, that changed the course of her art decisively. In Florence, she visited not only the Uffizi art gallery, but also the Museum of Natural History, where she discovered the work of the eighteenth-century anatomist Susini.

Graves had been looking at Botticelli's paintings; and, in Susini's life-size wax casts of animals and the human body and its parts, she found a level of craft and an integrity of form that reminded her of Botticelli but was at the same time eerily unfamiliar. She began to think of ways to create life-size sculpture whose forms would relate to natural history. She took photographs of Susini's works and studied them closely. "I felt as if I were seeing a body of my own work in the future," is the way she described the encounter.

Throughout her career, Graves has continued to use photographs to transform imagery, to focus on certain kinds of information and to create images that, although in some way derived from natural forms, appear abstract. Because one intuits the connection between art and nature in Graves's iconography, her work resonates with a richness of content that strictly abstract work does not have.

Returning to the United States in 1966, Graves continued making sculpture (which she had in fact never studied). The camels led to further exploration of works incorporating animal skin and hair applied to wax and acrylic built up over a steel armature. These works reflected an increasing concern with primitive forms and rituals, which also had interested the Abstract Expressionists. Delicate, refined, but striking environmental works of bones, skins, feathers and fossils established Nancy Graves as one of the most original and accomplished artists of her generation.

In 1971, Graves used her drawings and colored gouaches as a way to get back into painting. Once again, she hit on an original point of departure to *(Continued on page 236)*

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translate her three-dimensional vision back into two dimensions. This time, her inspiration was camouflage, the technique man learned from nature to disguise forms, causing them to disappear into their backgrounds.

Often Graves went back to photographs for inspiration; she was attracted especially to the latest techniques science had devised for mapping the skies and the seas. To get a better sense of advances in mapping, she spent time at NASA and brought home a stack of their photographs to study. Although her recent paintings continue to have their origins in maps—in themselves a means for conveying selective information about the natural world—painterly and pictorial concerns are at the forefront of the work.

If it appears that Nancy Graves is something like the whirlwind forms that often appear in her paintings, the fact is that she manages to work harder, to get around more, and to respond more to opportunities for learning new techniques and media than almost any other artist one could think of. While pursuing her own interests in science and natural history and the complex iconography that they have produced, she has enlarged her vocabulary as an artist by beginning to work in bronze, the material of great sculpture. Her latest piece—"Trace"—an over-life-size polychrome bronze (shown on page 202) that thrusts metal out into three-dimensional space, is a courageous attempt to create art that is both within the tradition of sculpture and a challenge to it. ▽

ENDLESS LUST

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and in the mass fantasy he packages as *Playboy*—the two realities connected by Bunnies hopping from Hefner's round bed to *Playboy* page. Hugh in Wonderland. You, vicariously, in wonderland, if you happen to be a boy.

This is the territory of *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. This is its true subject: getting it. Getting more of it, more easily, with less guilt and no strings.

Who's getting it? The cast of characters is large, but most of the voices are male, from lower-middle-class backgrounds, and all are white and heterosexual. An inordinate number were either born or have roots in Chicago. Why? Talese, who apparently has a reporter's terror of drawing conclusions, ventures only: "It was as if that strongly Irish-Catholic town were destined to produce sex-obsessed native sons. . . . Chicago is America's Dublin." Not what I'd call illuminating, but I suppose it's a start.

A disproportionate number of the leading characters were born between 1928 and 1932. Why? Talese (b. February 7, 1932) never asks, never notices. But the effect is to restrict the view of contemporary sexuality to that of your average middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual male. Raised with sexual taboos, in sexual shame, most of the men in *TNW* grow up to defy the rules of church, state, and "common decency." Sometimes they get away with it, sometimes not; but whether they make fortunes or are jailed or harassed, they persist, compulsively.

Many of these men are pornographers or publishers of erotica; and Talese outlines, through their life stories, their war against the censors. This strand of the book is valuable to me. A few years ago, another woman and I were offended by the prime placement of sex magazines on our local newstand. We started a petition to boycott that stand, asking the owners to shift those magazines to a discreet corner. The petition didn't get very far for reasons too complicated to go into here; but the point is, my friend and I were bloated with righteous indignation. We had not thought very much about censorship and had not thought that what we were doing in the name of feminism was in fact censorship.

The Women Against Pornography movement pits women's dignity against First Amendment rights; and, after reading *TNW*, I find myself on the side of free speech, convinced that censorship is a blind man's knife. Watch, through Talese, one of the censors fanatically cruising through Hollywood, hunting down smut. Watch Nixon reject the report of his own 1970 commission, which advised that pornography really wasn't a national problem, did not cause violence, and was best ignored. The censors are as sex-obsessed as the pornographers, and somehow nastier.

I still don't like being accosted by porn magazine covers, but so what? I will survive the visual insult.

A question raised by Talese's treatment of porn, however, is: how come he never mentions the Women Against Pornography? He consider's the Women's Movement only to attack "man-hating feminists" who wish to eliminate certain "red-light districts."

"Man-hating feminists." What a piece of nostalgia—I haven't heard that phrase in ages. (*TNW* could do for feminism what Afghanistan is doing for national chauvinism.) I myself am trying to resist the temptation to sum up Talese with the word "macho," another blast from the past. Let me put it this way: one reason for my discomfort is that while reading this book I am stuck behind eyes that see women as pieces, hair color, a body. Such are Talese's powers of description that he identifies one women as "an elusive, pretty co-ed," and another as "a perky young brunet." "A heavy-breasted blonde" is distinguished from someone who's "very blond and comely . . . a lissome woman." Hefner's girlfriend, you should know, is "one of Texas' most curvesome blondes."

The esthetics are 'forties sweater-girl and the vocabulary is of the period.

Someone asked me if Talese were "the wave of the future." I'd say he's the wave of the past. When he was writing in the early 'sixties, a phrase like "the two blondes" was appropriate to the time, and the subject—Frank Sinatra, a male power symbol. Talese has spent his career tracking male power, flourishing and spent. Profiles of champs and losers. Studies of male institutions like *The New York Times* and the Mafia. Portraits of

"Given: Marriage means monotony"

the tough guys who built New York's Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Perfect subjects for Talese.

Read the beginning of *The Bridge*, an early book:

> They drive into town in big cars, and live in furnished rooms, and drink whiskey with beer chasers, and chase women they will soon forget. They linger only a little while. . . .

Supermales on the road!

> On weekends some boomers drive hundreds of miles to visit their families, are tender and tolerant, and will deny to the heavens any suggestion that they raise hell on the job—except they'll admit it in whispers, half proud, half ashamed, fearful the wives will hear and then any semblance of marital stability will be shattered.
>
> Like most men, the boomer wants it both ways.

What annoys me so much is that *TNW* is like "most men"—which is not how most men are, necessarily, but how Talese assumes they are and how I fear they are: untrustworthy. "Half proud, half ashamed," indeed—chicken-hearted, that's what they are. Making their wives into consciences (nagging) and the weekday women into bimbos, whom they regard with some contempt: the contempt (shame) they feel for themselves for raising hell.

My tolerance for adultery is not great.

But to return to our story. The man's-man tone Talese used in *The Bridge*—that set-'em-up-Joe voice—sounds dated in 1980 in a book about such a mixed-company activity as heterosex. His voice is oddly constrained, searching for polite phrases for . . . uh . . . dirty words. Reaching for the high-toned