Visual Ethnography: "Tools for Mapping the AIDS Epidemic" Margolis, Eric Journal of Contemporary Ethnography; Oct 1, 1990; 19, 3; ProQuest pg. 370

Visual representations, such as photographs, maps, and computer graphics, have much to offer ethnography. In the early 1900s, photojournalists and sociologists used photography to document poverty in rural America and urban slums. Nonverbal representations played an important role in bringing social conditions to the attention of the citizenry. This article reports on a street outreach project taking place in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. A variety of visual representations was used to illuminate the social processes, events, relationships, and meanings of both the subculture of intravenous drug users and the outreach workers who pass out bleach and condoms to prevent transmission of the AIDS virus. Maps are used to depict the drug users' view of the Tenderloin and the centers of HIV infection in San Francisco. Computer graphics describe the demographics of the client population, while photographs portray the reality of outreach work in a way that words cannot. The article sketches a paradigm for using visual material in ethnographic investigations.

VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Tools for Mapping the AIDS Epidemic

ERIC MARGOLIS

VISUAL IMAGES ARE POWERFUL representations of reality; they are intuitively convincing and they can all too easily overpower our critical facilities. Because of this, one critic has suggested that photography actually "constructs an imaginary world and passes it off as reality" (Sekula 1983, 193). I have even argued elsewhere that social scientists would do well to add photography "to the well known list that includes 'lies, damn lies, and statistics' " (Margolis 1988, 35). My quip, however, was offered

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in defense of the use of photography in the social sciences. Equating statistical representations with photographic representations is not far-fetched—each constructs a partial and one-sided view of reality. Like the social scientist who selects numerical data and statistical techniques to support a hypothesis and frequently constructs graphs to convince colleagues, the ethnographer with a camera chooses the direction in which the lens is pointed, and chooses photographs to illustrate points. In neither case does this invalidate the method. Skepticism that statistics do not tell the whole truth actually makes it possible for us to interpret quantitative data. In a similar vein, being aware that visual images distort and misrepresent reality can help us to define an appropriate role for the use of nonverbal images in qualitative studies.

ROOTS AND RADICALS

In *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (1957), the etymology of the word "ethnography" suggests a much closer affiliation to nonverbal data than is often considered:

> **Ethno-** [< Gr. *Ethnos* nation] a combining form meaning race, peoples. . . .
> **-graphy**, [L. *-graphia*; Gr. *-graphia*, writing, *graphein*, to write], a combining form meaning: 1. a process, method, or manner of writing, or graphically representing, as in calligraphy, photography. 2. a descriptive science or treatise dealing with such a science. . . .
> **ethnography** n. [*ethno-* + *-graphy*], the branch of anthropology that deals descriptively with specific cultures. . . .

Around the turn of the century, both photojournalists and sociologists were discovering the slums of America. Jacob Riis took photographs to document tenement life in New York City and Lewis Hine was using his camera to expose child labor in the Pennsylvania coal fields. Yet in "dealing descriptively with

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specific cultures," sociological ethnographers generally ignored the possibilities of graphic representation. The "Chicago Schooi" of sociology explored ethnic neighborhoods and street gangs without cameras (Harper 1988, 57). Only an occasional sociological paper included photographs. In his survey of the early uses of photography in sociology, Stasz (1979) uncovered 31 articles in the *American Journal of Sociology* that included photographs, all published prior to 1916. Comprehensive community studies like Lynd and Lynd's (1929, 1937) proceeded without photography (Harper 1988).

Similarly, documentary photography developed quite distinctly from ethnography and sociology. The great photographic survey of American life undertaken for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the Depression was developed without systematic ethnographic and sociological input. In 1941, toward the end of the project, Roy Stryker hired John Collier Jr., one of the founding fathers of visual anthropology, whose work for the FSA was critical in the development of what Collier (1967) came to call "photography as a research method" (p. xv). Overall, input from the social sciences was minimal. As Collier himself observed in 1986, "Stryker gathered an informal but dedicated photographic team, all with fine arts or music background" (Wood 1989, 8).

Anthropologists have consistently shown more interest in photography. In the late 1930s, as a central method in their ethnography of Bali, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead used motion picture and still cameras to record aspects of social life and culture. The images were later subjected to detailed analysis and were explicated in their monumental study, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, (which was published in 1942). In 1967, when Collier published his treatise on visual anthropology, he observed that the scope of the Bali study remained unequaled. In his germinal text, Collier developed a photographic methodology for the social sciences. With well chosen examples, he demonstrated "how the camera can be used to explore and to analyze . . . not only to *show* what we have already found out by some other means, but actually to

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extend our visual processes and help us to *find out* more about the nature of man and his multifaceted cultures" (Collier 1967, 6; emphasis in original).

Since the 1960s, the world has seen a general explosion in nonprint media. Smaller cameras, faster films, and portable video equipment allowed virtually anyone to become a producer. As society became more visually literate and generations raised on television entered the social sciences, visual methods began to play an increasingly important role in both sociology and anthropology. In the mid-1970s, the first professional journal, *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, appeared. Howard Becker's essay, "Photography and Sociology," helped kick off the first issue of what became an intellectual forum (also see Becker 1981). During the 1980s, national and international professional organizations of social scientists were formed to promote visual studies and facilitate the exchange of information.

Today, the growing group of ethnographers who use visual methods are beginning to look at possibilities beyond photography. Thus Harper (1988) defined visual sociology as "a collection of approaches in which researchers use photographs to portray, describe, or analyze social phenomena" (p. 55). However, Harper also suggested that computers promised new possibilities for visual sociology. Photography is only one of several visual methods for "dealing descriptively with culture." Charts, graphs, maps, computer graphics, and videotapes offer enormous potential for the analysis and description of specific groups and subcultures. In this article, I demonstrate how graphic images and photographs can facilitate ethnographic mapping of AIDS community outreach.

VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY IN AIDS OUTREACH

Typically, ethnography begins in observation, proceeds analytically to deconstruct culture and social meaning, and then uses words to reconstruct reality as verbal description. Even the

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most carefully created ethnographies can only analyze, describe and gloss; at worst, they overintellectualize and romanticize their subject matter. Photographs and graphic images provide another window into the social world. Like words, graphic images are indexical expressions pointing to this or that thing in the world. But visual knowledge cannot be reduced to language. Graphic images can depict something about reality that words can only indicate. This is not to argue that photographs cannot mislead and lie like words—of course, they can—but they do it differently.

Pictures can help us imagine a holistic reality. They fuel our sociological and anthropological imaginations, providing another way to capture, translate, and render the synthetic totality that is social life and culture. Verbal and visual communication are perceived differently. Before we learn language, we learn to comprehend visual clues to our environment. We read and interpret body language, facial expression, and the built environment. The photographs of drug users, their sexual partners, and outreach workers—set against the streets in which they encounter one another—convey a human scale that is missing in volumes of words and statistics. In photographs, we can capture the essential human bond that we share with street prostitutes, junkies, crack monsters, and homeless alcoholics. Such graphic images speak to us deeply but cannot be translated readily into words. Photographs, maps, charts, and other predominantly nonverbal images have the potential to not just illustrate but illuminate; social processes, events, relationships, and meanings can be discovered in photographs and graphic images, just as they can be gleaned from written or spoken words.

An ethnographic study of an AIDS outreach project used all these media to synthesize information about the target population and the outreach activities. The Mid-City Consortium to Combat AIDS employs indigenous community health outreach workers (CHOWs) to "work the streets," explaining to intravenous drug users (IVDUs) and their sexual partners the steps that they should take to prevent getting or transmitting HIV

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infection. CHOWs pass out prophylaxis technology: bleach to sterilize injection equipment and condoms to prevent sexual transmission of HIV. Underlying the "reach, teach, bleach" model is an ethnographic and sociological perspective: The way to stem the AIDS epidemic is to ethnographically "map" the disease's spread, to identify groups at risk, and to thwart HIV transmission with specifically targeted outreach and education efforts based upon an understanding of clients' everyday life.

The word "map" is used to describe two aspects of the approach: (1) ethnographic and quantitative investigations of the social worlds of San Francisco drug users, and (2) the models or representations which are constructed to visualize and monitor the epidemic and the outreach effort. For more than a century epidemiologists have made specific use of maps to track and study epidemic diseases. During the great cholera epidemic of 1854, the British epidemiologist Dr. John Snow began to mark cases by sticking pins in a map of London. Outbreaks of the disease seemed to cluster around jack handle water pumps, particularly the Broad Street pump where a whole neighborhood got their drinking water. Dr. Snow's observation led to the discovery of vectors and routes of contagion, laying the ground work for Koch's 1883 discovery of the cholera bacillus itself (Hart and Smith 1909).

A mapping procedure analogous to Snow's, was used to plot heterosexual IVDU AIDS cases in San Francisco by neighborhood (see Figure 1). The data were provided by Susan Payne and Dr. George Lemp of the Surveillance Branch of the San Francisco Department of Public Health. With the advent of microcomputers and appropriate software, it is possible to construct dynamic and sophisticated maps to portray the AIDS epidemic and the details of outreach and education efforts. As shown in Figure 1, the Tenderloin has the highest incidence of heterosexual IVDU AIDS cases of all neighborhoods in the city, and the numbers are increasing rapidly—approximately one third of the cases were added between April and December 1989.

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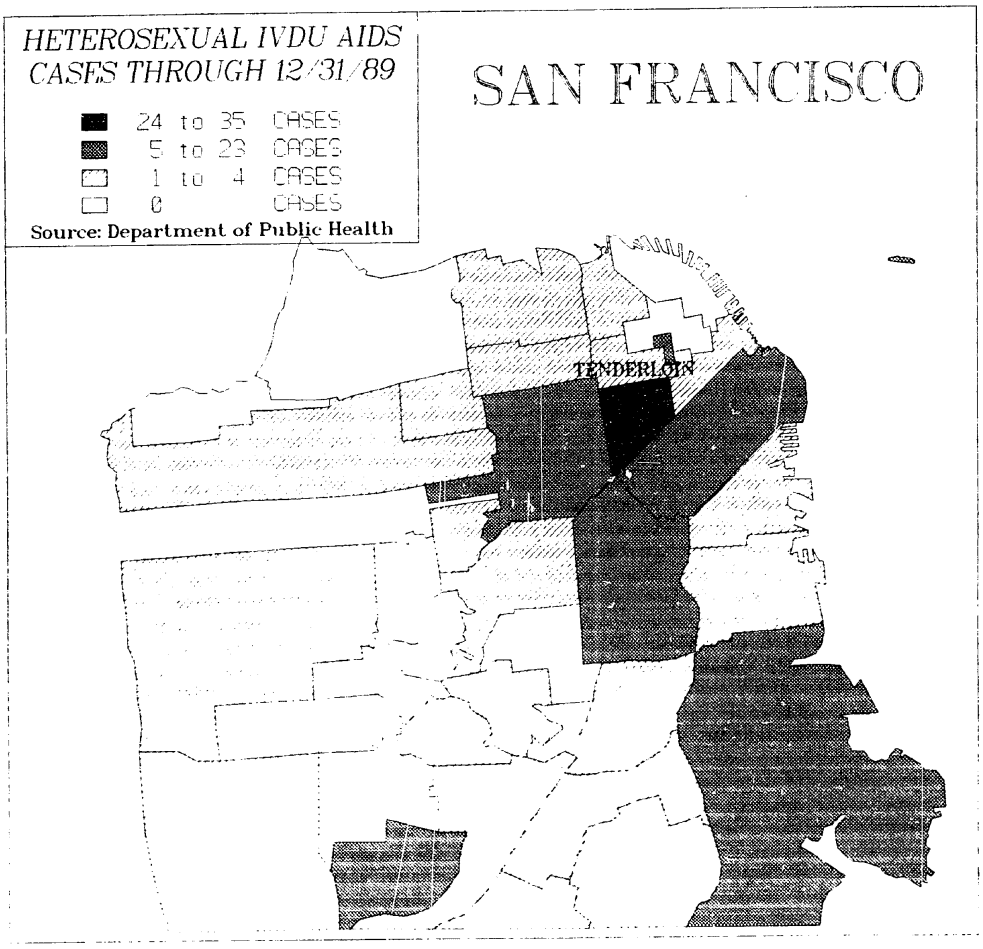

Figure 1: San Francisco Heterosexual IVDU AIDS Cases Through December 31, 1989, by Neighborhood

THE TENDERLOIN

In the 19th century, the word "Tenderloin" was coined to describe lower Manhattan west of Broadway, an area known for prostitution, crime, and police graft. The name came to characterize any similar district, and since the 1880s, a section of San Francisco's downtown has been known as the Tenderloin. Bordered by prestigious Nob Hill and the financial district to the northeast and the civic center to the southwest, three streets—Eddy, Turk, and Ellis—form the central corridor of a district which

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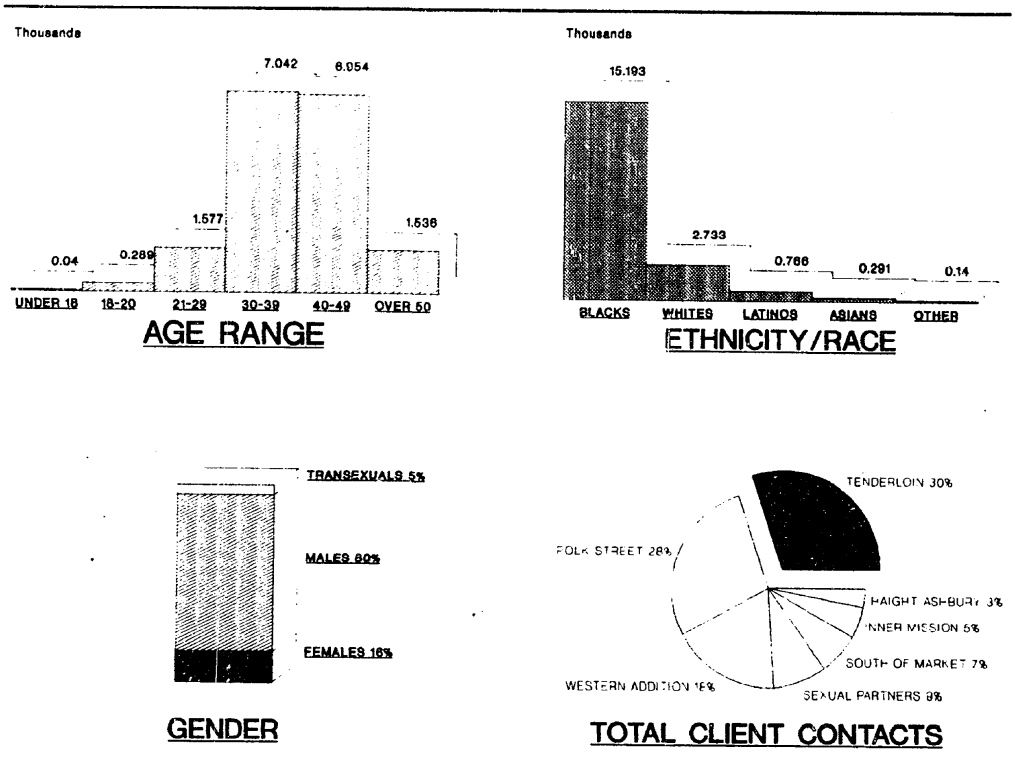

Figure 2: Demography of the Tenderloin, June 1986 Through April 1989

has a population of 35,000 to 40,000 people, including large numbers of homeless. The Tenderloin has one of the highest crime rates in the city.

There were more than 550 diagnosed AIDS cases in the Tenderloin as of December 31, 1989. The vast majority of these cases were gay or bisexual men who did not inject drugs; about 20% reported drug use as a risk factor in addition to gay or bisexual behavior. Only 6% of the Tenderloin's AIDS cases were heterosexuals whose risk factor was intravenous drug use or sex with an IVDU. The ethnic breakdown of heterosexual, gay, and bisexual IVDU risk cases is 77% White, 14% African American, 7% Latino, and 2% Filipino. The Tenderloin CHOWs concentrate on identifying and changing the at-risk behaviors of this specific subpopulation and their sexual partners.

The demographics shown in Figure 2 are based on information from the weekly reports that CHOWs complete. They indicate client contacts, not individuals, and are a good indication

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of the nature and scope of the outreach effort. About one third of the entire Mid-City outreach is concentrated in the Tenderloin. Tenderloin clients are typically older males, ranging in age from 30 to 50 years. Almost 80% of reported contacts are Black and a little more than 14% are White. CHOWs reach a tiny but significant number of Native Americans, many of whom are homeless, use drugs, or have substantial risk factors related to sex and alcohol. During the 3-year period being reported, the Tenderloin team reported almost 19,000 client contacts and distributed nearly 50,000 bleach bottles and 100,000 condoms.

Mid-City clients in the Tenderloin are generally "marginal" people, those who have lived on the fringe for most of their lives. Included are IV drug users, alcoholics, gay and heterosexual hustlers and prostitutes, drag queens, pre- and post-op transsexuals, transvestites, and many with serious psychological problems who have been "deinstitutionalized" to the streets. They pass in and out of institutions ranging from prison to detox programs. Some are homeless, either living on the streets or in the single-room occupancy hotels that force people to move every 30 days, lest they establish claims to residency (see Photo 1).

The Tenderloin is a unique neighborhood because of its community awareness and organization. Denizens of the Tenderloin have been very supportive of the outreach efforts. They willingly provided self-report information on needle-sharing behavior and welcomed participant observers and other researchers. CHOWs have worked the Tenderloin streets since 1986 (Photo 2), and today the Tenderloin consumes the largest proportion of the outreach effort. There are a number of community organizations working on issues of drugs, homelessness, and AIDS. The Tenderloin AIDS Network (TAN) and the Mid-City Consortium are community umbrella groups formed to coordinate social services.

Street corner societies reflect communities of shared values norms and mores (Whyte 1955). In the context of this study, this translates into common drug use patterns and life-styles. But more than this, street corner societies serve as a place where people establish a semblance of family relations through strong

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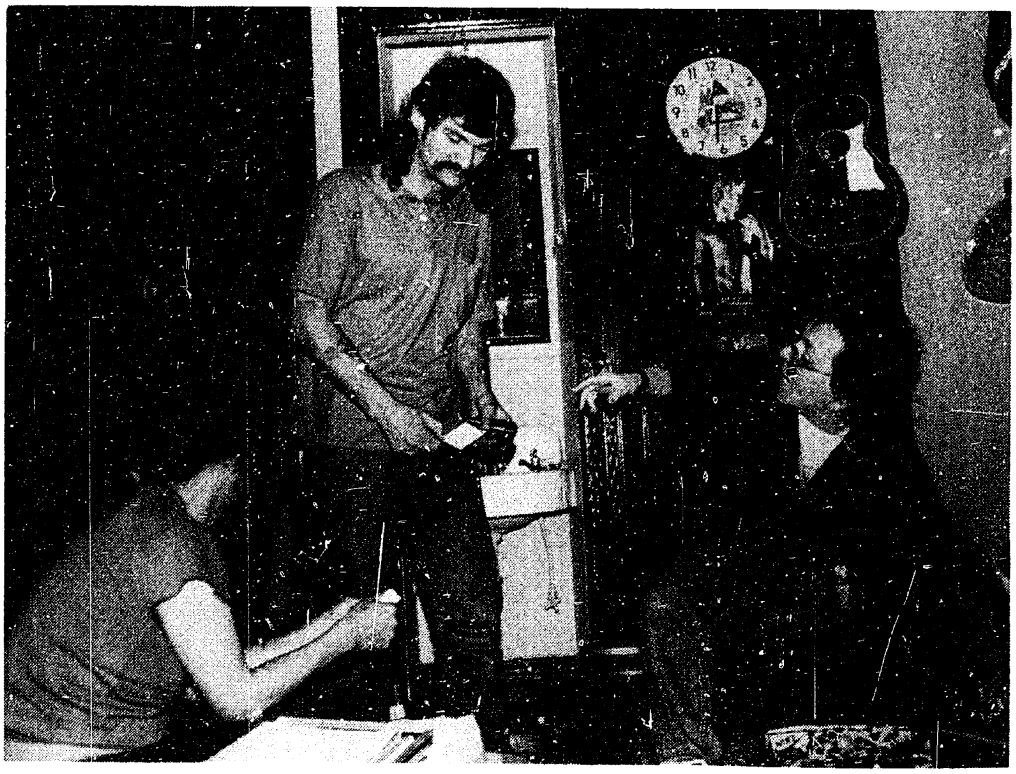

Photo 1: Two Males in Hotel Room Being Given Referral by CHOW (right)

personal ties with friends. One can readily see this in the mutual aid that "homeboys" provide one another: exchanging street lore, looking out for police and "narcs," sharing food, "copping" and using drugs, and participating in various "scams" or jobs. Figure 3 depicts the locations of some of the street corner societies in the Tenderloin and also pinpoints the locations of some of the bleach and condom depots serviced by CHOWs. Depots are community agencies and businesses where prophylactic supplies are left so that people can get them when the CHOWs are not available.

Drug users gather on street corners and in Boedekker Park (see Photos 3 and 4). The hotels and single rooms that line Eddy Street are well-known copping areas and home to numerous users of IV heroin and cocaine. In a neighborhood needs assessment completed in March 1988, TAN counted approximately 800 "hard-core" heroin addicts and an unknown number

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Photo 3: Drug Users Gathering on Street

The Tenderloin is not just an underworld. A door-to-door survey by the Bay Area Women's Resource Center (1987) estimated that the number of children under the age of 19 years had doubled between 1980 and 1985. Single parents of all ethnic backgrounds are attracted by reasonable rents. Black, White, Asian, and Latino families with children occupy the single-room flats. Photo 7 shows a group of Asian children

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Photo 4: Latino on Bench in Boedekker Park

marveling at "Bleachman," a larger-than-life cartoon figure developed by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation to spread the word to IVDUs about cleaning their injection equipment.

Forty percent of the Bay Area population is Asian, and the largest concentration of Southeast Asian refugees live in the Tenderloin. Asian communities are typically family and small-business oriented. Grocery stores, restaurants, and cleaners are successfully competing for space with bars and porno shops.

Recently, an Asian-American woman was hired to work as a CHOW with the Asian/Pacific Islander population. She began visiting places where Asians gather—grocery stores, barber shops, and senior centers—to develop contacts with a varied population including Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Chinese, Filipinos, and Pacific Islanders (see Photo 8). She provides Asian-owned massage parlors with condoms and bleach (Photo 9).

The demographics of the four other Tenderloin CHOWs roughly reflect the population being served. The supervisor is a

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Photo 5: A Transvestite of the Tenderloin

Black male who describes himself as an ex-dope fiend and ex-con. He has lived in the Tenderloin for years. An effective outreach worker, he is also a serious artist who paints brightly

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Photo 6: Prostitutes Receiving Condoms From CHOW (right)

detailed paintings of street life in the Tenderloin. His canvases are in high demand. Another CHOW is a New-York-born Puerto Rican male who makes daily deliveries of bleach, condoms, and information to at least 50 establishments, including hotels,

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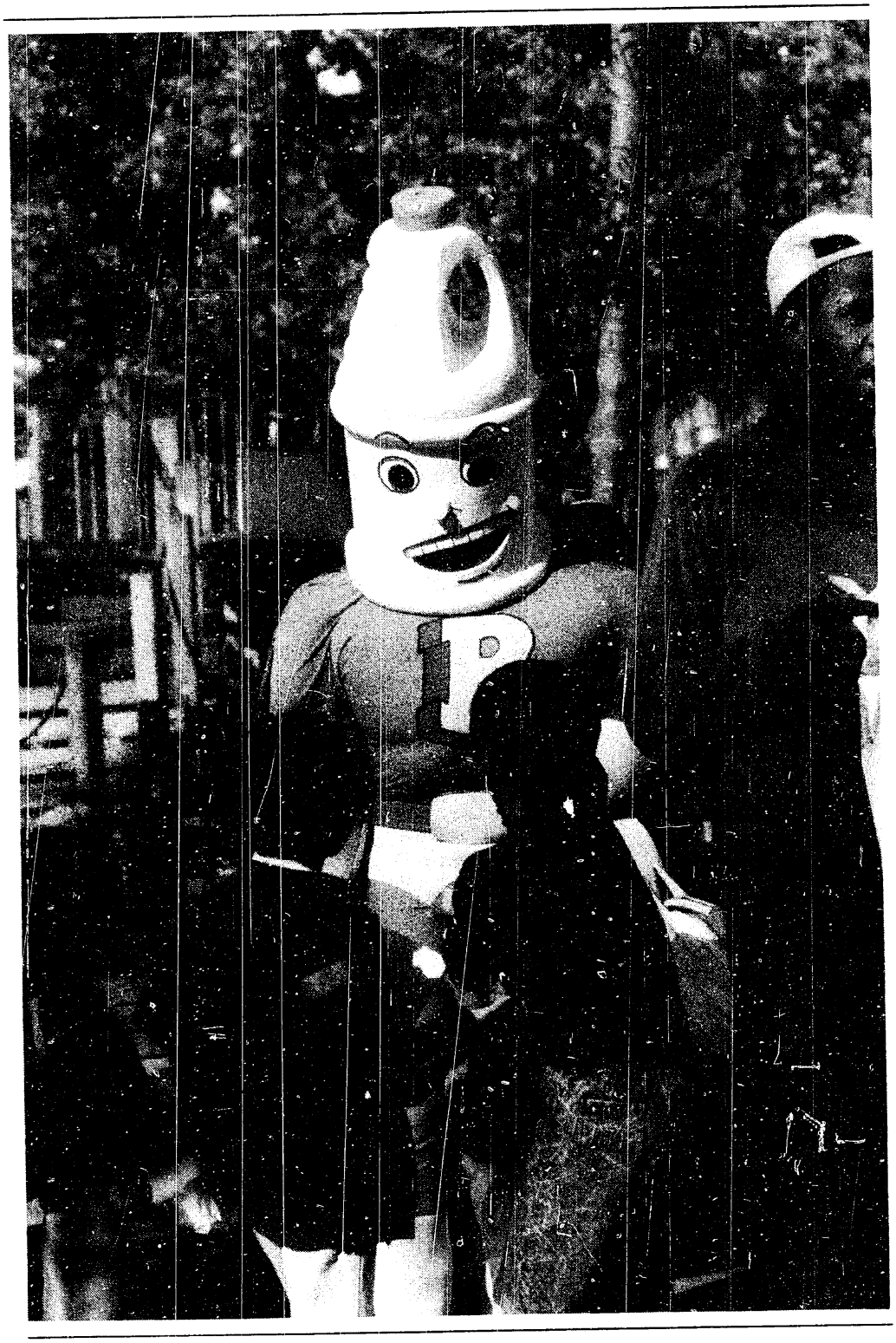

Photo 7: "Bleachman"

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Photo 8: CHOW (right) Delivering a Supply of Bleach and Condoms to Vietnamese Market's Video Counter

poolrooms, markets, and prostitutes' hangouts. He has a "straight-up" street reputation and has developed a large "caseload" of IVDUs. Formerly employed by the parole department, he is sometimes able to intercede with the criminal justice system to get clients assigned to work furlough programs.

Another team member is a Black female who carries on a continuing dialogue with many of the prostitutes in the Tenderloin. Her job includes making referrals to AIDS test sites, conducting support groups for prostitutes who want to leave the business, and obtaining referrals for those seeking respite from the streets. The last team member, a White, openly lesbian female, does most of her work in the residential hotels where most of the residents are HIV positive and many have ARC or AIDS. She visits six or seven hotels on a regular basis.

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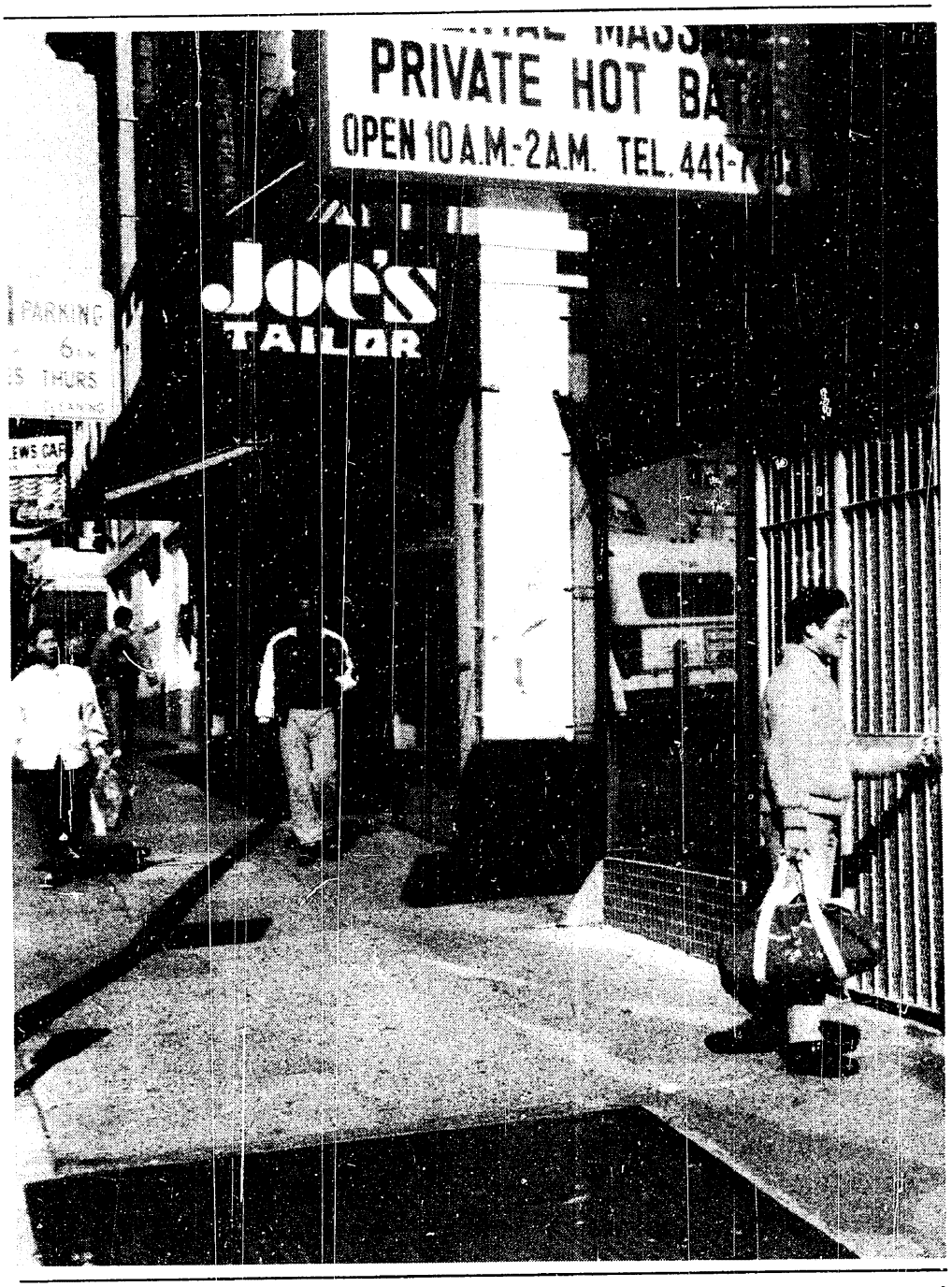

Photo 9: CHOW Visiting Asian-Owned Massage Parlors to Deliver Condoms and Bleach

CHOWing in the Tenderloin is not simply a matter of handing out bleach and condoms. In order to establish the reputation of trust needed to make the educational message believable,

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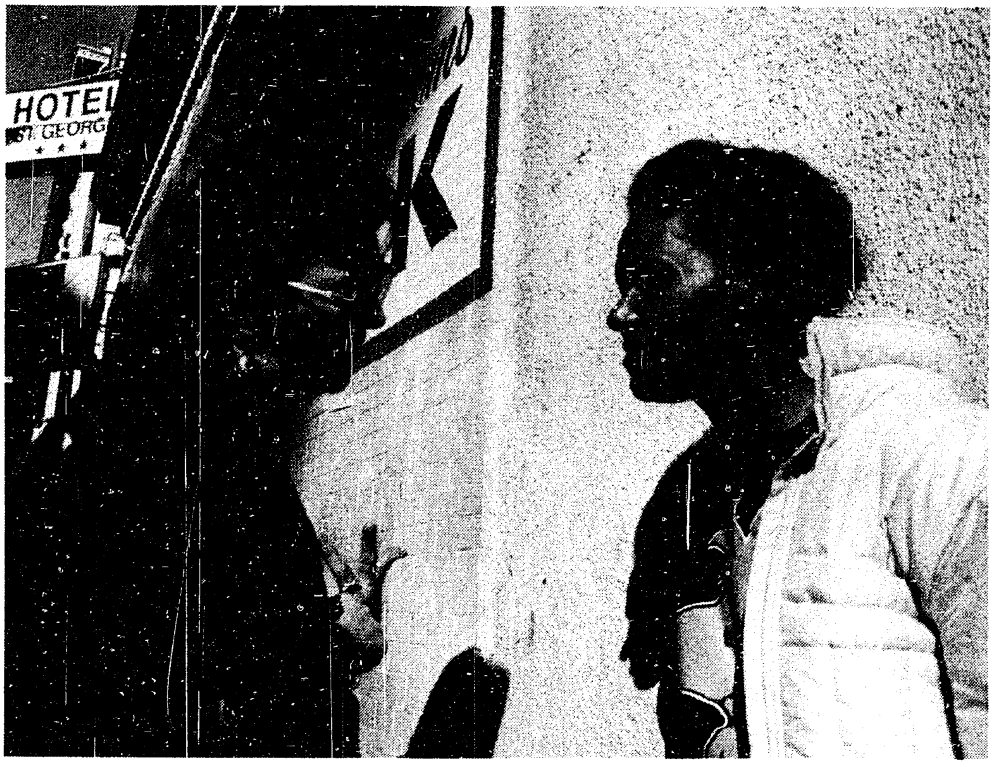

Photo 10: CHOW (left) With Client Who Has AIDS

CHOWs work to be "neighborly." They do what they can to intercede on behalf of their clients in their relations with the social service agencies that control and circumscribe their lives —housing, food stamps, detox programs, medical and legal systems, and so on.

One afternoon, a female CHOW encountered one of her clients leaning against a wall in the sun, standing guard over a sidewalk sale of used knickknacks and kitchen utensils spread out on a blue blanket while the owner had gone to get lunch or to get high or something. The client, a die-hard dope fiend, was obviously sick. Thin as a rail, she looked like she had AIDS. The CHOW urged her to go to the hospital (Photo 10), giving her the phone number of a contact person. The woman argued for a while, citing bad past experiences with hospital personnel who took one look at her collapsed veins and turned her away. But on the CHOW's insistence she went. When we visited her at the

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Photo 11: Hospitalized AIDS Client Being Visited by CHOW

hospital the next day, she looked better—not good, but better. Amidst the scars and abscesses of chronic IV drug use, the nurse must have found a vein, for an IV dripped food and antibiotics into her arm. One small human contact had made life a little easier for this woman of the Tenderloin.

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ERIC MARGOLIS has written articles on visual ethnography and produced media programs. In 1977, he received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities to record the oral history of western coal miners on videotape. "Out of the Depths—The Miners' Story" was aired nationwide as an episode of the PBS series *A Walk Through the 20th Century With Bill Moyers*. In 1985, he produced a photogrpahic exhibit of Colorado's coalfields which included historic photographs and "re-photographs," taken from the same angle as the historic views. His work on miners was published as a special issue of the *Journal of the West*. He began doing research on AIDS outreach in 1988. Currently, he is conducting a study of alternative education programs in California.

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