



# Vents

Photographs by Laurence Salzmann

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The vent series pictures were made during 1983-85.  
Prints from the series are available as vintage silver & pigment prints.

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# Vents

Laurence Salzmann

































































# Vents

## A bit of background

Much in my life as a photographer has come about through serendipity including the vent series. In 1982, I returned from a year living with Transhumant Shepherds in Transylvania, Romania where an early on heart attack almost ended my life. An invitation to join friends Flash (Susan Rosenberg) and Peanut Butter (Robert Woodward) along with Candy (Carmelo Di Carlo) dressed as a chocolate kisses providing party favors in the form of Polaroid photos to attendees of the opening of the Hershey Hotel in downtown Philadelphia on November 8, 1983 seemed like a good way to celebrate my still being alive.

For the occasion Peanut Butter applied white pancake makeup to our faces and we were off and running. On the way home from the event still spoofing Candy posed nude on a steam vent we had passed on our way. That first photo served as the inspiration for what would become my Vent Series. The small group I worked with that night became my first

models. In time, many others joined to pose on steam vents at night. It was something of an adventure. The collaboration with many people made possible the Vent photographs. I worked on the project for about a year and half making perhaps a 1000 exposures on 6x6 film at first with a Rolleiflex and later a Hasselblad camera.

I dedicate this book to the many people who posed for my Vents series. In particular, Mr. Blue (Randy Dalton), who helped me to find a secluded steam vent behind the University of Pennsylvania's Palestra. Out of view and with a permission from Penn's security office, I was able to photograph most times without being bothered by passing security patrols. Other venues in more public spaces required more caution.

Laurence Salzmann

## Michael and Randy

Randy Dalton and I had been a couple for about three years when we were photographed for the steam vent series. We weren't that young (in our early 30s), but we felt like kids in love. It was a particular moment in gay history, with the urban libertine liberation scene of the late 1970s and early '80s morphing into the AIDS crisis. Were we too late for the party? We had found each other; we would have our own party.

The nudity of the photo sessions was never an issue for us—we were nudists after all—but the sub-licit setting created an undeniable frisson. It well after dark, over a steam vent inside a chain-link-fence rectangle on the fringe of the University of Pennsylvania campus. There was a lot of black plastic—for privacy, as a photographic backdrop for the steam, as a windbreak to keep the chill down. Supposedly there was an arrangement with a campus guard to let the photo shoots happen without a hassle, but what if someone else came along? What if we were busted? There was a charge in the air.

Some sessions involved others in addition to Randy and me; once, maybe twice, we two, the kids in love, were the only models. Spontaneity, not set poses, prevailed, with Laurence clicking away. He had to change film. We two were into each other by now, not the photography. When he resumed shooting, the erections did not go down.

Laurence selected one image of Randy and me, our kissing faces mostly out of the frame, our tangent erections dead center. It was to be in a show at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. That gave me the willies—I worked only a few blocks away. The Academy got the willies, too, and it was pulled. (This was a few years before the great Robert Mapplethorpe flap at the Institute of Contemporary Art.) Some time later that photo of us appeared in *Art in America*, and then in a modest photo book titled *The Kiss*. By now we were rather proud of the picture, but no one said anything to us.

A large-format print of that frame has hung in our, now my, bedroom ever since Laurence first printed it. Two kids in love, in the steamy dark.

Michael Martin Mills



