

BUTT

By Hilton Als

Is *Butt* magazine the greatest publication in the world? After a nearly two year hiatus, the magazine has returned to the stands, and its importance — its beauty and uniqueness — are more evident than ever: absence makes the eyes grow fonder. In part fiscally supported by small ads from merchants ranging from American Apparel to Marc Jacobs, *Butt* couldn't make it on quarterly guest spots alone, and more or less suspended publication in 2010. While this dismayed various fans — "Where's my *Butt*?" — I for one was admiring of the co-publishers and co-editors, Gert Jonkers and Jop van Bennekom's, unwillingness to compromise. If they couldn't publish their "magazine for homosexuals," as they bill it, in the way they wanted, why put out anything at all? Finances must have improved, because now we're the happy owner of *Butt* No. 29, with a cover by the largely London-based photographer Wolfgang Tillmans — a portrait of a beautiful young boy named Karl, the sides of his thin head beautifully shaven. Working out of Amsterdam, *Butt* is as much about dick and ass as it is about language. Printed on pink paper that always seems to have an inky smell, I love the literalness of the story titles: "Normal Bodies," "Embarrassing Interview With A One Night Stand," "Boring Interview with a Random Gay Stranger." What you read in *Butt* is what you get. The Q and A format is the magazine's standard, but the contents aren't. Whether a spread, so to speak, is devoted to gingery drummers, ears, or guys with a plush fetish, *Butt* details aspects of sexuality, of play, that wouldn't necessarily occur to one, like the guy who gets off on covering his body with sports socks. Fetishes are interesting to read about, but repetition is boring to deal with in conversation. What I tolerate in *Butt*, I couldn't take over the phone. Looking at *Butt*, I fall down the rabbit hole of sexuality. The simple headlines and questions help get me there; my mind works overtime to fill that flat language up. Do I like butt? I am falling down the hairy rabbit hole of indiscriminate slightly shitty smelling ass looking at myself, my needs, my "issues." My mother didn't have much of a butt; she was teased for having a body like a twelve year old boy, albeit one with large breasts. Did I like my mother's butt? Do I have my mother's butt? My mother's butt — why does Mia Farrow's body, not to say butt, in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, in particular make me remember how much my mother must have dreamt because her children became dreamers — one of them even dreams for a living. He's doing it right now. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Mia Farrow plays a woman who's abused by the exigencies of the so-called real world; her kindness is a burden that others want to abuse her for. She has no butt to speak of, but what little she has finds itself sitting, as often in possible, in movie theatres, where she falls in love with worlds not her own. As she watches a movie set in a black and white atmosphere, Mia Farrow can dream away the abuse heaped on her almost non-existent butt. She can be loved, but in the dark, and at a distance. Sometimes men look at one another's butts this way — in the dark, and at a distance. Does the dark make a butt more alluring? Can you feel a butt without seeing it? If a butt falls in the forest, can you still hear it? Would you still want it? *Butt* magazine features personality profiles, too. John Waters. Rufus Wainwright, etc. But it's the unexplored that piques my interest — and the documentation by people like Tillmans and Marcelo Krasilcic, who act as the magazine's house photographers. (They're Annie Leibovitz at *Rolling Stone*, in the seventies, but only if she knew she was gay, and Jann Wenner, too.) Their pictures aren't à la Deborah Turberville atmospheric, but more obviously documentary-like, albeit framed by kink and unusual beauty. In this issue, for instance, a

handsome Brazilian drummer named Adriano who works with a lesbian band does nude yoga for the benefit of the camera, but you don't see his junk — and very little of his butt. It's his beautiful eyes and not his butt that take up much of the portrait (in my eyes at least) and spell a kind of trouble. He will love me, but only for a night. Truth to tell, I will only let him love me for a night. He will love my butt because I have high, proud, Negro buttocks, unlike my mother, who had something else in addition to her movie logic. If Adriano touched my buttocks with those thoughts in mind — here is my Negro, here are his buttocks — would I flinch? Would my butt collapse? Would I be put off by his fetishization of my butt? We meet for coffee the afternoon following the night Adriano feels my butt for the first time. He wants to know what's wrong with me, why didn't I call him back? How to tell him that my butt felt what he didn't say? I want to show him other butts, not at all Negro, but high and proud just the same, butts he might fancy just as well as mine, butts that are free of the knotty race issue, which is to say, free of me. Would white butts, say, mean as much to Adriano, my butt lover, the drummer who can't see the forests for the Negroes falling in trees, as my butt? Adriano sips his coffee as I try to fuck with his butt perspective. I begin by showing him white butts that are prominent, like a Negro's. He is quiet. I take in Adriano's eyes, his bare butt in his underwearless jeans. I want to break up with him, but I can't: separation insults me. I don't want to separate from anyone, I don't want to lose one memory. The quiet loveliness and light in Adriano's eyes reminds me of other eyes, other butts, and one set of eyes and buttocks in particular, both belonging to the beautiful former dancer Joseph Lennon. YouTube reacquainted me with what I shall never forget: Joe's swift and slow poeticism on the dance floor. The first clip features Joe partnering a woman he worked with a number of times over the years: the dancer and choreographer Karole Armitage. Karole sports a sleeveless sweater, and Joe, a brown leotard. I met them after Karole had split from Merce, where she was, along with Valda Setterfield and Carolyn Brown, one of Cunningham's five or six peerless female dancers. One of the things I loved about watching Cunningham, always, was how nearly PHYSICALLY impossible his work was for men. No matter how "skinny," men simply have bigger thigh and ass muscles — bless them — than women, not as long a reach, or as high an arch (in the foot, and often not in the eyebrow, either). If you're a boy, you're just weightier, which, on stage, particularly in dance, translates as slower, certainly in terms of the speed with which Cunningham saw movement in space. For men to perform Cunningham, they have to accept and deal with the limitations of the male body, and what their ass can and cannot do. This can result in audience sympathy or ridicule. I think Cunningham must have felt the former because he relied on dancers like Joe to push past what they were born with while supporting extraordinary physical creatures like Armitage, who cut through space for their male partners, allowing them in to rebuild it as they passed through on something like pointe. Watch how Karole leans on Joe, and how he moves past her as he moves with her. Free your mind, and your ass will follow. Part of Cunningham's great genius, of course, was in knowing how to partner his dancers up. Not to mention finding those artists who could make cinema stars of them, too. *Channels/Inserts*, was directed by Charles Atlas, who was not only one of the first videographers, but the artist responsible for Cunningham's costuming, and lighting, for nearly two decades. (At the time this film was made, he was also Joe's partner.) I first saw Joe and Karole perform together at the Dance Theatre Workshop in a piece that Karole choreographed, and that Charlie dressed, lit, and more or less directed. In that piece, Karole wore black stilettos, and Joe wore a *Saturday Night Fever*-like white suit and black shirt, thus capitalizing on his innate glamour, a presence that said everything through being; he didn't need to say much; he had himself, and an audience of eyes that rested on his butt, then his eyes, then his beautiful black curls, as I do now. And tomorrow the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as formed by the late master performs its final gig in time for the New Year. *Butt* magazine costs \$9.90 in the U.S., and is available at St. Mark's Books. Just buy it.

STUDY. A consideration of a phenomenon in art or culture.