

PUBLIC 62

ART | CULTURE | IDEAS



The
**Gender-
Diverse**
Lens

WAYNE BAERWALDT EDITOR

Picturing the Gender Other

On Lissa Rivera's *Beautiful Boy* and Juan José Barboza-Gubo and Andrew Mroczek's *Virgenes de la Puerta*

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In 1966, when Diane Arbus photographed *A Young Man in Curlers at Home on West 20th Street, New York City*, she shot him in her usual square format, close up, wearing a casual V-neck sweater and holding a cigarette in one manicured hand. Beneath the languorous arcs of carefully plucked and penciled eyebrows, the young man gazes directly into the lens, at the viewer, with an expression of relaxed and open, if somewhat detached, interest. While clearly meant, like most of Arbus's sitters, to be read as "other" to the presumed viewer, he addresses us less confrontationally than conversationally. Arbus's iconic portrait may have placed this anonymous individual in the firmament of what she termed an aristocracy of "freaks," but unlike earlier images of gender-non-conforming people by Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, or Weegee, Arbus's sitter does not appear to perform for an audience. Caught during downtime, he seems, in Susan Sontag's words, "cheerful, self-accepting, matter-of-fact."¹ He looks at us—and we back at him—as an equal. For perhaps the first time in the history of photography, we see an ostensibly non-binary person as subject more than object.

Nearly fifty years later, Lissa Rivera began to shoot BJ Lillis, who soon became her romantic partner and primary muse. Willowy, with flowing blond locks and an aquiline profile, Lillis cuts an androgynous figure, and Rivera pictures him in various period interiors wearing vintage women's clothing—peignoirs and negligees, panties and girdles, caftans and gauzy gowns. She significantly others her significant other, who describes himself as "genderqueer," a neologism that seems to encompass anything falling outside of a traditional, conservative gender binary, and says he long felt more comfortable in dresses.² The extended series of photographs, collectively titled *Beautiful Boy*, depicts Lillis performing a host of feminine personae, from maiden to matron, and often as a kind of odalisque, sitting or lounging in various states of undress. He looks into the camera or appears lost in private reverie.

1. Sontag describes the affect of Arbus's sitters in general. Susan Sontag, "America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly," in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 36.

2. See, for example, Adam Lehrer, "Artist Lissa Rivera Explores Gender Fluidity in Modern Love at ClampArt," *Forbes* (May 31, 2017), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adamlehrer/2017/05/31/artist-lissa-rivera-explores-gender-fluidity-in-modern-love-at-clampart/#2acd19703e00>; and Daniel McDermon, "An Artist and Her 'Beautiful Boy,'" *The New York Times* (May 31, 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/31/arts/design/lissa-rivera-beautiful-boy.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=0.



The *Beautiful Boy* images deliberately conjure a range of associations, from old-master paintings to classic Hollywood cinema, from Cecil Beaton to Larry Sultan. But their most insistent antecedent is the work of Cindy Sherman. Like hers, Rivera's project stages an elaborate game of dress-up in order to flesh out an array of feminine constructs, trying on multiple aspects of the social configuration of gender to better understand its structural underpinnings and, presumably, loosen its constricting hold on our imaginations and lives. Instead of a woman investigating the construction of female subjectivity, however, *Beautiful Boy* embodies a collaborative search for liberatory gender roles undertaken by both female artist and male model. Indeed, Rivera's ability to convey Lillis's evident pleasure in the process and in the production of his own unconventional beauty, combines with the series' lush, saturated palette, delicately balanced compositions, and deft historical references to engender its considerable magic.

Curiously, for an examination of gender ideals relatively detached from sex, Lillis's languid poses and skin-baring sensuality, coupled with the temporality of the carefully chosen settings and wardrobe, produce the sensation of gender roles preserved in aspic, as if *Beautiful Boy's* conception of what constituted the feminine dated to the Eisenhower era. Yet our knowledge of the gender-reversed or, better, gender-non-conforming subject positions of both photographer and sitter removes Lillis from the condition of a passive object displayed for the delectation of the male gaze and locates him instead as a full and active collaborator in his own representation. A recent series of photographs, *The Silence of Spaces*, is set in a former seminary and expands upon *Beautiful Boy* by including images of Lillis and Rivera together, similarly garbed and sometimes in poses that echo *sacre conversazioni* or other figural groups from Renaissance art, campily rhyming with the erstwhile character of the setting. These images seem to make explicit the idea that delving into archetypes of the feminine engages both halves of this couple, more than just a single sex, multiple genders.



Lissa Rivera, *Votive Portrait (Prayer Closet)*, 2018. From *The Silence of Spaces* series. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, NY





Lissa Rivera, **Pink Bedroom**, 2017. From *Beautiful Boy* series. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, NY



Juan José Barboza-Gubo and Andrew Mroczek, *Gaby*, 2014

The artist team of Juan José Barboza-Gubo and Andrew Mroczek also employs historical and religious imagery in a 2014–2017 project that portrays trans women in Lima. Titled *Virgenes de la Puerta* after a local Peruvian Marian devotion of particular importance to the trans community there,³ the large-format, large-scale photographs picture the women in the guise of Colonial-era figures, usually in historic and romantically crumbling interiors. Though often nude, many of the women wear gorgeously elaborate capes, veils, crowns, and haloes commissioned by the artists from the same craftspeople who make similar objects to adorn religious statues. Envisioning their subjects as equivocal icons, nonetheless worthy of praise, respect, and veneration, Barboza-Gubo and Mroczek indirectly point to the fact of these women's actual status as outcasts in their intensely patriarchal society, particularly in relation to the Catholic Church that still dictates much of Peruvian politics and culture. The figures in two of the portraits, *Pilar* and *Carol*, lack a religious theme but their partly obscured faces may refer to another archetype, known in part through antique photographs, the *Tapadas Limeñas*, women who, because of a local fashion for veiling, achieved a certain degree of social freedom in 19th-century Lima.

Coeval bodies of work by the artists similarly depict young, male, working-class gay activists, some with haloes, naked in a decrepit mansion (*Los Chicos*) or desaturated nondescript landscapes and cityscapes with accompanying text that identifies them as sites of horrific violence against gay men and trans women in Peru [*Padre Patria* (*Fatherland*)]. Taken together, these images of secular saints and banal places of evil picture a queer community besieged but struggling for safety and visibility within a society contorted by outmoded strictures of religion, class, and sex and gender roles.⁴

The deliberate provocation of nakedness in a religious context in *Virgenes de la Puerta* and *Los Chicos* conflates two opposing historical genres, the devotional image and the academic nude, perhaps echoing the code-switching required to navigate a repressive culture. But the exposure, or self-exposure, of the trans women also serves to simultaneously naturalize and sacralize their bodies, the sources, one might argue, of much of the apprehension and opprobrium they elicit in large parts of Peruvian society. Along with the frank gazes of the sitters in a majority of the images, and the aspirational effect and inspirational affect produced by the sometimes campy

3. For a discussion of the importance of the Virgin de la Puerta to trans women in Lima, see the essay by the artists on their website: Juan José Barboza-Gubo and Andrew Mroczek, "Icon: Redux/Revision, Defying the Patriarchy in *Los Chicos* and *Virgenes de la Puerta*" (2014), Barboza-Gubo & Mroczek, <http://www.barbozagubo-mroczek.com/icon>.

4. I first encountered these bodies of work together in the exhibition *Canon* (*Virgenes de la Puerta*, *Padre Patria*, *Anda*, *Los Chicos*) at the Museum of Sex in New York (October 19, 2017–January 15, 2018), organized, probably not coincidentally, by Rivera in her day job as curator of the museum. The *Padre Patria* series may be seen in full in the artists' book: Juan José Barboza-Gubo and Andrew Mroczek, *Fatherland/Padre-Patria* (Daylight Books, 2019).



Juan José Barboza-Gubo and Andrew Mroczek, **Mariciclo**, 2014



Juan José Barboza-Gubo and Andrew Mroczek, *Pilar*, 2014

costumes, props, and staging, the nudity lends a sense of the women's agency to the portraits. Here, artists and models use masquerade not to try on gender roles—the women have already acted decisively in that regard—but to reclaim a space for gender “others” within their own faith and culture.⁵

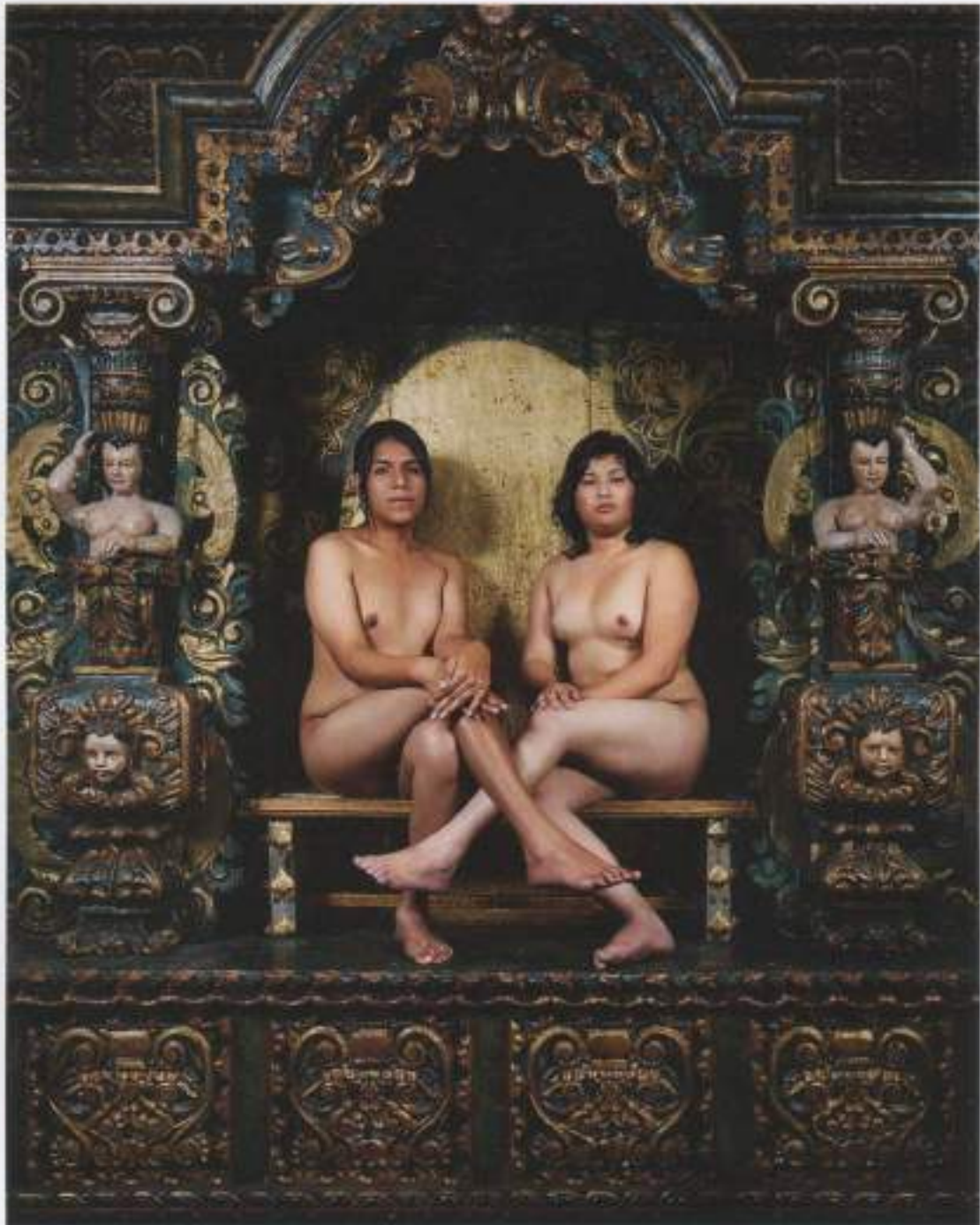
Yet, we live in a moment when we see the subject position of the artist as the determining factor in the interpretation and evaluation of works of art. One has only to remember the controversy surrounding the inclusion in the 2017 Whitney Biennial of Dana Schutz's cartoonish, expressionistic rendition of the horrifying photograph of Emmett Till's tortured body in his casket. Criticism of the painting centered not on its failure to register the artist's intention of conveying one mother's empathy for another or to comment meaningfully on contemporary violence against Black Americans, but rather on the idea that as a white artist she had no “right” to depict Black suffering.⁶ We occupy, Megan O'Grady has observed, “a particularly earnest moment in the arts, in which conversations about the ethics of representation are dominant and the social utility of art is emphasized.... everyone is expected to speak only from their personal ethnic experiences, as though cultural identity is a form of intellectual property.”⁷

In such a formulation, where the only good representation is self-representation, the projects by Rivera and by Barboza-Gubo and Mroczek might appear suspect, exploitative appropriation of the experience of non-binary people for purposes not entirely their own, despite the collaborative aspects of either body of work and despite the potential for advocacy either might possess. Do these artists have the “right” to represent their subjects? We can peg the question as a straw man, of course—no such complaint has surfaced—but in this time of “allyship,” when we expect struggles for equality to be led by those oppressed, with everyone else in a supporting role, what might it mean for non-trans or non-gender-non-conforming artists to author these portraits?

5. Mroczek has stated that he and Barboza-Gubo “are simply presenting, or creating a platform for the women, specifically, to fight for their own equality. I don't think any of the women were interested in working with us so that we can be their voice. They were interested in being a part of this project because they wanted a new platform, a different platform, that can be heard. . . . They've really used the publicity that this work has had so far as a means to prove to other Peruvians that this is legitimate, that their lives are legitimate.” Quoted in David Clarke, “First Bilingual Museum of Sex Exhibition Highlights LGBTQ Life in Peru,” *Out* online edition (October 20, 2017), <https://www.out.com/art-books/2017/10/19/first-bilingual-museum-sex-exhibition-highlights-lgbtq-life-peru>.

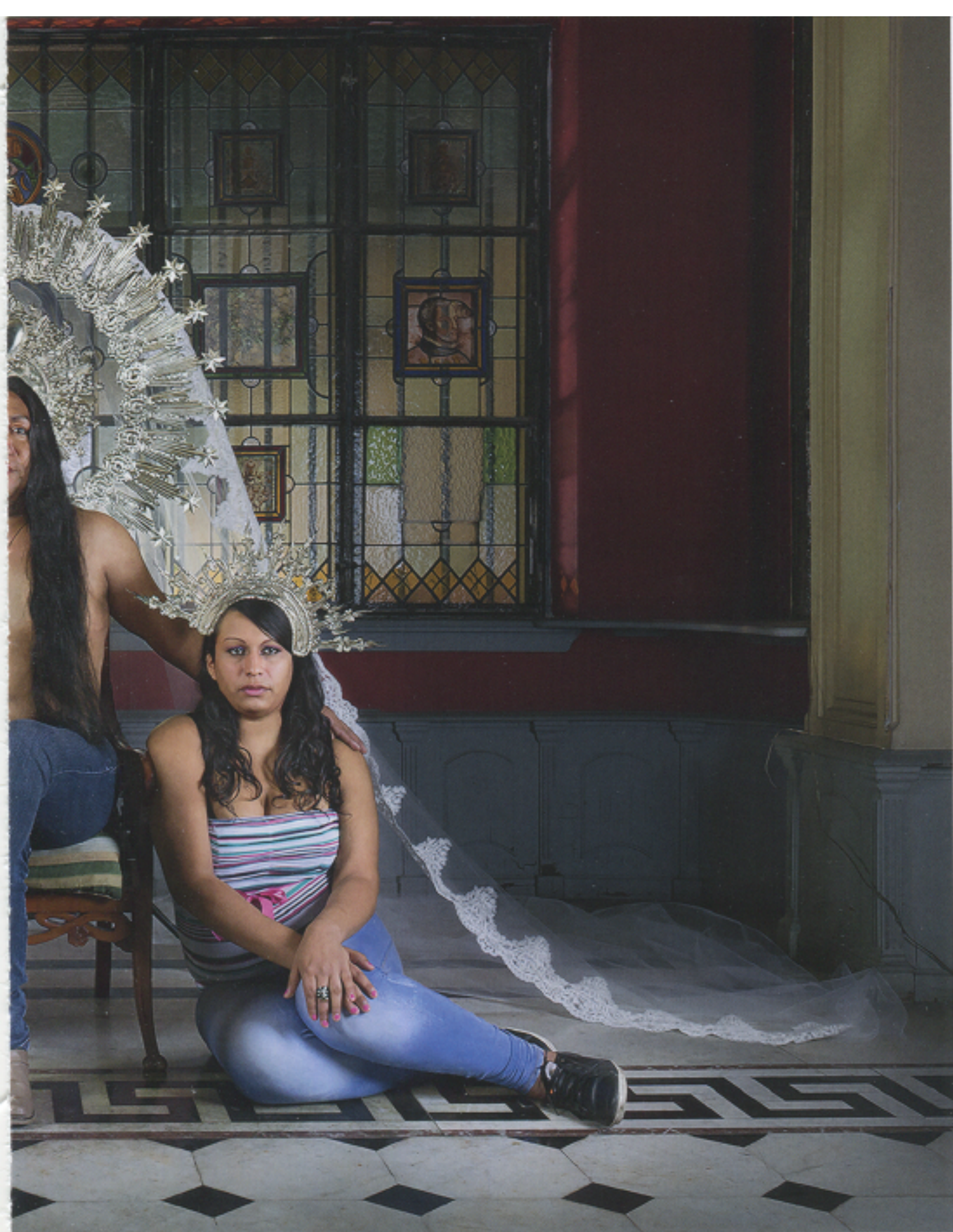
6. For summaries of the debate and its circumstances see Roberta Smith, “Should Art That Infuriates Be Removed?,” *The New York Times* (March 27, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/27/arts/design/emmett-till-whitney-biennial-schutz.html>; and also the Wikipedia entry “Open Casket,” Wikipedia (last edited June 19, 2020), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Casket.

7. Megan O'Grady, “The Photographer Capturing Unvarnished Truths,” *The New York Times* (August 27, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/t-magazine/heji-shin-photographer-babies.html>.



Juan José Barbosa Gobo and Andrew Mroczek, *Janny and Nuria*, 2015





Juan José Barboza-Gubo and Andrew Mroczek, **Denise, Yefri and Angie**, 2014



Juan José Barboza-Gubo and Andrew Mroczek, *Leyla*, 2014

Allyship, as Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds us, however, has had limited application historically to the liberation movements of marginalized peoples, and the “myth of self-deliverance,” he argues, elides the alliances necessary to effect political and social change.⁸ Indeed, while we might imagine that Lillis could have created Rivera’s photos, should he have chosen to become an artist, we cannot suppose the same for the women in Barboza-Gubo and Mroczek’s works, given their lack of access to employment and education in general, not to mention the specialized skills required by large-format photography. To become visible in this way necessitated the intervention of artists from outside their community. Between the concept of a necessary, salutary visibility and that of an ethically preferable self-representation lies something of an impasse.

One way we might think through that blockage comes from the critical theory of Ariella Azoulay, who writes that photography creates a “citizenry” that includes all of us, and that we incur moral and ethical obligations towards those in need, people under the conditions of “catastrophe,” through our spectatorship of photographs of them. Thus, it follows that everyone renounces “exclusive ownership of his or her image” and everyone has a “willingness and right to be photographed and become a photograph.”⁹ Certainly Lillis has exercised that right, over and over again, in pursuit of claiming a space within culture for non-conforming gender expression, but so have the women in *Virgenes*, who, dispossessed by their families, society, religion, and state, and subject to near-constant violence, may well be said to be living under “catastrophe,” as are the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories who are Azoulay’s primary example. This right to be photographed, to be seen *as* a photograph, stands quite apart from an artist or photographer’s right to certain categories of imagery or representation. We might even concede that the subjects’ moral right to demand aid and assistance, however vague or unfulfilled that may prove to be, takes precedence over the supposed lack of a right to represent. The creation of Rivera’s and of Barboza-Gubo and Mroczek’s portraits becomes less a gesture of appropriation of identities not held by the artists and more of an act of reparation.

Perhaps we can further complicate this right to be photographed by considering Édouard Glissant’s notion of the “right to opacity.” By this, he means a “right to

8. Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Stonewall and the Myth of Self-Deliverance,” *The New York Times* (June 22, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/22/opinion/sunday/stonewall-myth.html>.

9. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 128. See also, in relation to a Palestinian woman exposing her wounds from rubber bullets to a photojournalist, 147: “She knew that her wound was singular, that her right to be photographed does not oblige anyone to see the photo, and certainly that she could not demand that an editor publish it. But she acted, nonetheless, as if it was her right to demand her photo be taken and that it is everyone’s duty to witness it, a duty that does not stem from the law, the state, or the sovereign, but from the civil contract of photography. She is seeking to be recognized as one of the governed by means of, through, and with photography.”

difference,” a right of the “other” to elude transparency and Western ideas of “understanding” that he sees as reductive and hegemonic. “Thought of self and thought of other,” he writes, “here become obsolete in their duality.”¹⁰ Glissant suggests that an acceptance of opacity undergirds solidarity and “nonbarbarism,” and holds the key to perceiving the other as an equal subject. We might see opacity in Lillis’s introspection, lost in the personal dreams of the feminine, or in the very bodies of the women in *Virgenes*, inscribed by experience unknowable to the cis-gendered. Notwithstanding elements of self-revelation, Rivera’s and Barboza-Gubo and Mroczek’s staged portraits do not aspire to promote personal, political, or cultural understanding so much as to allow a view onto a world that in many respects remains closed. Upholding the sitters’ right to be photographed along with their right to opacity, *Beautiful Boy* and *Virgenes de la Puerta* picture the gender other in possession of a fully realized subjectivity—just like everyone else.

10. Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190.

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Lissa Rivera is a photographer and curator based in New York. Rivera received her MFA from the School of Visual Arts, where she became fascinated with the social history of photography and the evolution of identity, sexuality and gender in relationship to material culture. *Beautiful Boy* and *The Silence of Spaces*, Rivera’s latest projects, take her interest in photography’s connection with identity to a personal level, focusing on her domestic partner as muse. www.lissarivera.com

Juan Jose Barboza-Gubo (Peru, 1976) & **Andrew Mroczek** (USA, 1977) produce collaborative work which focuses on aspects of marginalization as the result of patriarchy as a social system, along with themes of masculinity, gender identity and gender roles as they affect LGBTQ2+ communities, most recently, in Peru. Solo exhibitions include Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Lima, Peru; Museo Lugar de la Memoria, Lima, Peru; The Museum of Sex, New York; Museo Colonial, Bogotá, Colombia; The McClain Gallery, Houston; Chicago’s Schneider Gallery; and AS220 Gallery of Providence, Rhode Island; as well as numerous group exhibitions in the US, Cuba, Spain, Italy, Bolivia, Peru, and India. Barboza-Gubo & Mroczek were included in the 2019 Bienal Internacional de Fotografía in Bogotá, Colombia, and the 2016 FotoFest Biennial in Houston.



Lissa Rivera, **Court**, 2017. From *The Silence of Spaces* series. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, NY