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Refocusing the Lens:

Photography by Lesbian Artists

by

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INTRODUCTION

Within the areas of literature and film there has been a significant amount of material produced concerning lesbianism. Troche's film Go Fish is a perfect example; written, produced, directed and acted by lesbians, this film has reached mainstream cinema as well as the fringe.

Within the realm of the visual arts, however, silence and obscurity prevail when it comes to lesbianism. This is because of the many problems that lesbian artists face, such as difficulties in obtaining funding to produce their work and in getting access to galleries in order to have their work seen. There is also a danger of lesbian images becoming subsumed under the titles of feminist or gay male art. However, despite the many barriers, lesbian artists are increasingly rendering lesbian lives and desires visible. Through the medium of photography in particular, artists are reclaiming lesbianism and the means to bestow meaning to it, taking back the power of the gaze which was used so negatively in the past to define and eroticise lesbians for the benefit of a male audience.

In this thesis I shall look first at the ways in which lesbian identity has been understood and documented in the past, particularly through the use of photography. In the second chapter I shall examine some of the issues and strategies concerning lesbians artists, who are now using photography as a

means to create their own definitions of themselves. Finally, in the third chapter, I shall look at the work of three lesbian photographic artists: Della Grace, Nicky West and Tessa Boffin, comparing the ways in which they approach these issues.

CHAPTER 1

The History of Lesbian Identities and Images

Uncovering Lesbian History

There are few positive role models of lesbians from the past. Trying to trace the history of neglected, less powerful groups would seem to be a daunting task. When trying to uncover the history of groups of people or events most historians rely on institutional records, Government statistics or extensive personal papers left to posterity by the wealthy and powerful. If lesbian experience was not seen as important, either by lesbians themselves or by others, lesbians living in the past are unlikely to have recorded their experiences. Unfortunately, as a result they were helping to create their own invisibility. Lesbians may also have destroyed written material in order to protect themselves and others.

There are many forms of lesbian experience identified in the past, including romantic friendships, Boston marriages, cross-dressers, passing women, bulldykes, butches and femmes, the androgyne and others, who may or may not have been identified as lesbians as we now understand the term. The majority of images that are to be found seem to conform to the popular view that lesbians were masculinized women, whilst lesbians who dressed according to the prevailing gender conventions were mostly

invisible, or passed over as pseudo lesbians. There are images of feminised lesbians from the nineteenth century, but these appear mostly in pornography for affluent men, such as the image in Plate 1.

There could be a number of reasons why many lesbians were cross-dressers, it enabled them to have some of the privileges reserved for men, such as the 'male gaze' over (other) women, and also allowed them to make visible their experience of being different. One such woman, who spent her adult life living with another woman and dressing in men's clothes, was the French painter Rosa Bonheur. In describing her life-long friendship with Nalpalie Micas, Bonheur was thankful that "two women may delight in an intense and passionate friendship, in which nothing can debase its purity".

Early theories of lesbianism and the role of photography

These cross-dressing women, along with homosexual men, became the objects of curiosity for the newly emerging disciplines of criminology and sexology in the nineteenth century. Havelock Ellis, the English sexologist adopted many of Richard von Krafft-Ebbing's theories of sexuality; he and the criminologist Lombroso turned their attention to the 'masculine traits'



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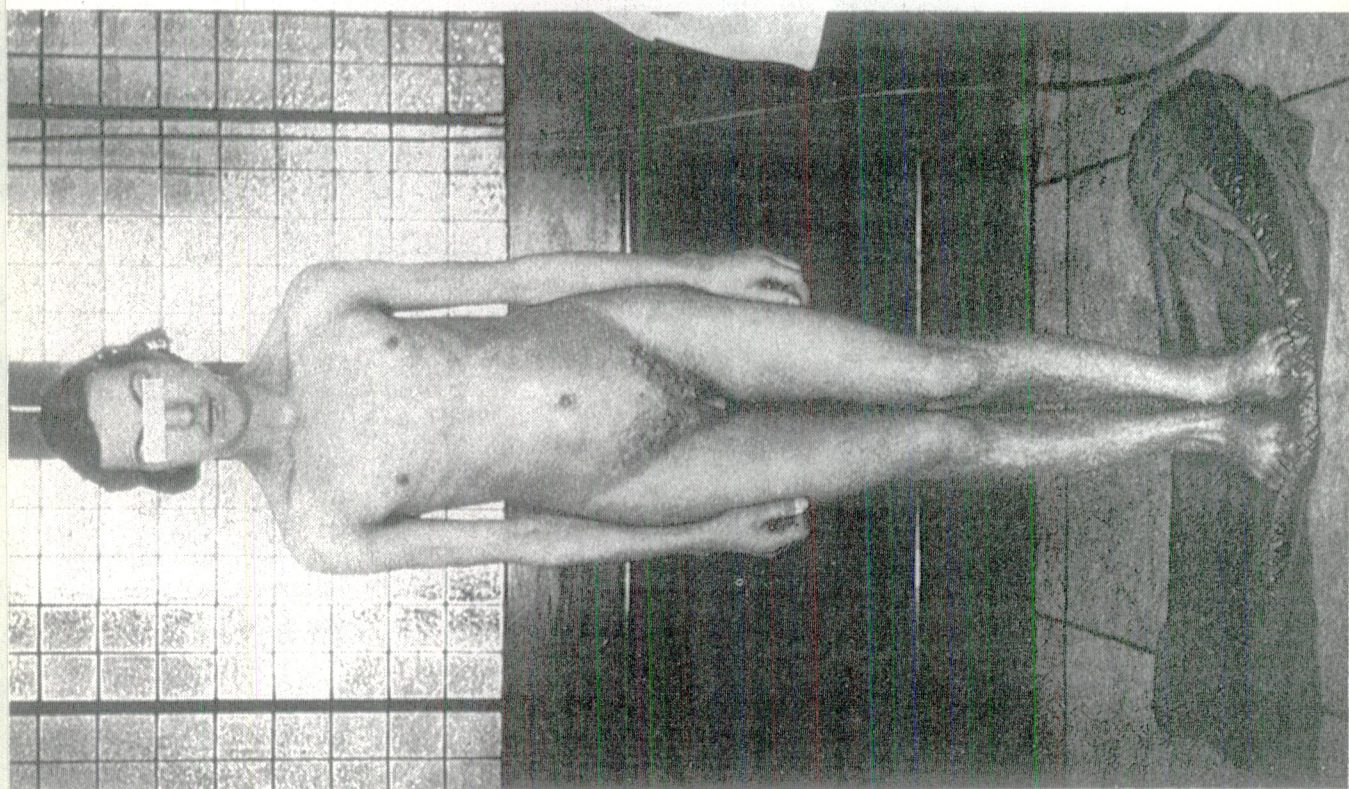
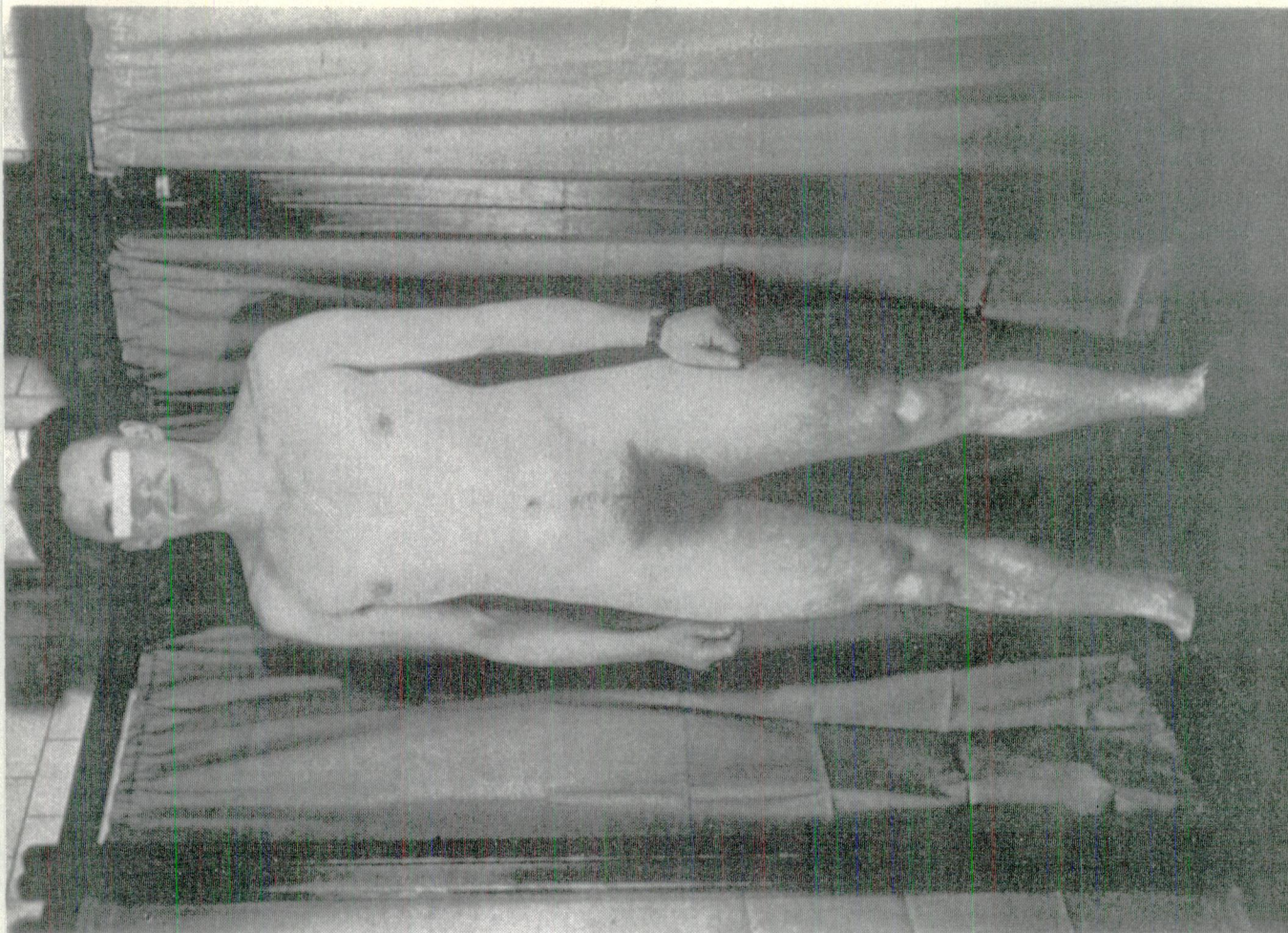
Plate 1

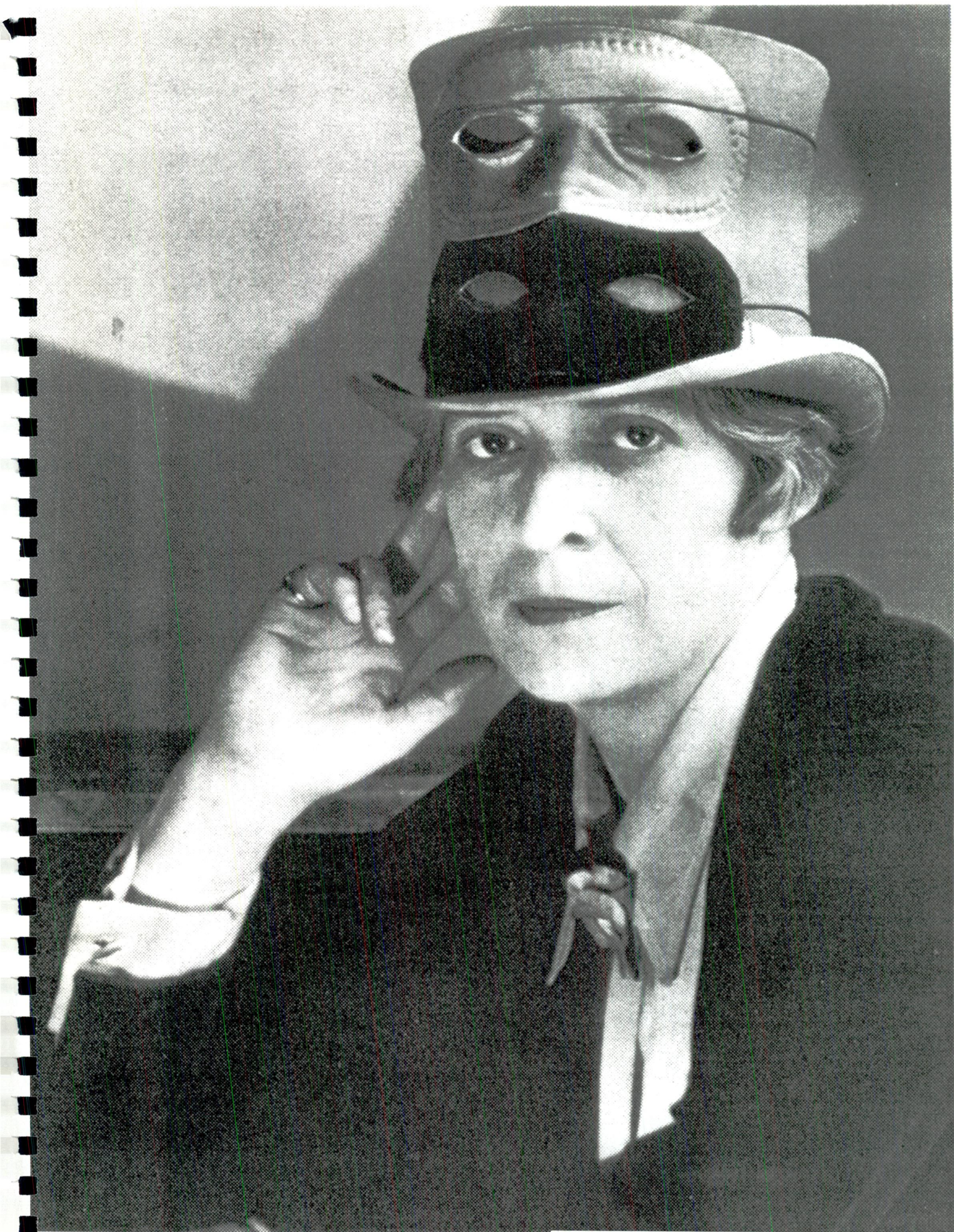
Photograph, Anonymous, c. 1930, Amsterdam Historical
Museum (in Boffin & Fraser, 1991)

of their female subjects, giving these as evidence for their ideas of 'delinquency' and 'inversion', or that these women were of a kind of 'third sex'. Lesbianism was seen as an expression of an essential inner nature, Havelock Ellis believed that this inner nature could be identified through clues in a person's physical make-up, such as the distribution of body hair or the width of shoulders and hips. The views of experts in these fields became very influential at the time, while those less powerful became the object of their scrutiny, and were stigmatised by their 'scientific' gaze.

Photography was also a relatively new technique at the time when these theories began to be developed, and it was utilised and exploited by both sexologists and criminologists in order to define deviant groups, including lesbians (Merk, 1991, p. 24). The camera was used to give visual evidence to back up their ideas; people were measured, categorised and checked for pathologies through the photographic gaze, as in the examples in Plate 2. This evidence was not neutral; photographs have to be decoded and can be read in different ways. The pioneers of photography argued that the camera recorded what was there in reality, that it was impartial and 'never lies'.

There is no doubt that the camera was used as an instrument of control by sexologists among others, but even with the aid of photography sexologists had major problems trying to define a lesbian couple according to the theory of inversion. What kind of a woman was the invert's lover? If she





was 'feminine' merely to be the opposite of the invert's 'masculine' sexuality, why did she choose a woman as her lover? These questions puzzled the sexologists; according to their own theories they had to view only one of the partners as a true lesbian, the other was never really defined.

There were lesbians at the time who agreed with the theory of the invert, looking on it as a logical justification for being a 'masculine' person in a female body, or for their sexual preferences. The writer Radclyffe Hall held this view and portrayed the theory of the invert in her novel The Well of Loneliness, which caused moral outrage when it was first published in 1928, and was subsequently banned. Photographs of Hall and her lover appeared widely in the popular press at the time; her lesbian identity was the reason for her notoriety and her fame (Boffin & Fraser, 1991, p. 37).

Photography had a large part to play in the definition of lesbian identity at this time. Photographs of affluent or well known women who identified themselves as lesbians were often taken by famous photographers. Not all of these women held Hall's views of the 'invert' and many were highly critical of the sexologists. One such woman was Janet Flanner, shown in Plate 3. Flanner was an American journalist who lived in Paris from 1925, with a community of women which included other famous names including Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Flanner found Hall naive, and her view of sexuality over-simplified. Recalling the scandal surrounding The Well of

Loneliness in later life, she wrote that the book "excited very little admiration as a literary or psychological study", calling it a "rather innocent and confused book". Radclyffe Hall in turn disapproved of Janet Flanner and her circle.

The photographs taken of women like Flanner were mostly individual portraits in studio settings. It is in these portraits that their lesbian identities can be seen, through conscious formal composition, as it was thought that individual portraiture would give clues to a person's character. This ran parallel with the theories of lesbianism as something intrinsic to a person. There are also photographs of women together in portraits, but these would not have held any sexual connotations at this time, mainly because of the prevailing theories that only one partner was a 'true lesbian'. These photographs do not represent the majority of lesbians, who leave no records or traces of their lives, probably because of their economic or social conditions. Contrary to many sexological mythologies, the search for the 'true lesbian' is redundant.

In the 1920s and 1930s the modern understanding of lesbianism was only just emerging as a sexual identity, and the camera had a large part to play in the development of lesbian identity. The society in which lesbians live today is a very different one from that in which those lesbians lived; homosexuality is no longer classified as a mental illness, having been eliminated from the psychiatric profession's list of pathologies in the

1970s. There are now lesbian institutions and networks which help to make lesbian identity visible in society. However, lesbians still face pigeon-holing and discrimination; photography is now being used by lesbians themselves to present their own visions of lesbian identities and lifestyles.

CHAPTER 2

Photography and Contemporary Lesbian Artists

Issues and strategies in lesbian art

Photography today still has a large part to play in producing lesbian imagery. The work of lesbian photographic artists is seen more widely, in all its diversities than work by lesbians in any other medium. This is partly due to the authority that the camera still commands as being impartial, and also because of the documentary qualities photography possesses.

Another possible factor is the variety of formats in which a photographic image can be exhibited, for example, in newspapers and books, or as slides, as well as in galleries. In many of these formats a photograph can make a bigger, or wider reaching statement than other media.

There are some fundamental issues that have to be addressed by a lesbian artist when trying to make lesbian life and lives visible, issues that involve representation, identity and power. Lesbian artists are trying to change the perception that society has of lesbians as well as challenging the power that heterosexual society holds. These lesbian issues share much common ground with feminist theory, as they reflect the present political concerns within feminism. The fulfilment of these aims of lesbian artists necessarily involves complications in the production of visual images, some of which

are described below.

Art is made to be viewed, and it is the viewer who forms an opinion of the work of art. The piece has to involve the viewer, because if it is to be in any way effective it has to cause some sort of reaction in the viewer. It must stimulate, capture the imagination and challenge. The viewer needs to know that it does all of these things, and it must also involve representations of identity and power in the image. However, a piece of art does not simply speak for itself and have its meaning heard; even in the case of a photograph produced by a lesbian artist one cannot necessarily assume that all lesbians will understand it in the sane way, or that an experience of one lesbian will speak for all. To reiterate, there is no true representation of 'the lesbian' that an artist can produce. In order to represent lesbianism, lesbian artists must find images that demand to be seen as lesbian images - with all the diversity that entails - , and also avoid being pigeon-holed into the terms of heterosexual stereotypes.

In an article on lesbian photography the writer and critic Jan Zita Grover analyses another problem. Lesbian imagery, lesbian sexual imagery in particular, carries what she terms a 'burden of scarcity'. Within mainstream culture lesbians are either represented as sexual deviants, used as a component of male sexual fantasy, or simply rendered invisible. The lesbian sexual body remains a taboo outside of the stereotypes of patriarchy. Grover suggests that the limited amount of alternative images

there are that explore lesbian desire and sexual practices carry a huge burden of expectation: "so few representations, so many expectations: how can any image possibly satisfy the yearning that it is born into?" (Grover, 1991, p. 187).

Cultural representation of lesbianism is important but the question remains of how to go about representing. There are many obstacles and the artist has to develop strategies to subvert them. An image in which lesbians are not represented in the mode of the expected stereotype risks not being recognised as an image of lesbians. The spectator has to be made aware that it is a lesbian image that is depicted, and this can be achieved by the use of particular elements in the imagery. The artist using herself as a model is one such strategy, and is used by several feminist artists to counteract the traditional objectification of women in ideology and art. In taking herself as a model the artist does not objectify another lesbian; the lesbian depicted controls how she is represented, and any fantasy in the image is her own. By constructing an image of themselves these artists can use it to stand as a symbol of difference and of lesbianism, rather than assuming to know the realities of the lives of others (Schneermann, 1975, p. 67).

Another approach open to artists aiming to challenge conceptions of sexuality is to use motifs from canonical masterworks of male artists, or other discourses in heterosexual culture, and to appropriate them into

lesbian imagery. Often this is done through gender reversal of male figures from art past and present. This employs a subversive strategy often used by lesbians and gay men, whereby the characteristics and roles of the opposite gender are appropriated with ironic intent, pointing out that gender identities presented by dominant ideology as 'natural' and biological are really just constructions of thought. This approach takes on board the theory of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, that "once a category has been set up, those defined must group together and use it to speak for themselves, creating a 'reverse discourse'" (Boffin & Fraser, 1991, p. 17).

Pornography, censorship and self-censorship

The use of the visual codes of pornography by some artists is an extension of the theory of 'reverse discourse' described above. Lesbian artists can use these codes to give a different definition to heterosexual sites and customs. Their work challenges the assumption that the expression of same-sex desire should only take place between consenting adults in private. The Butch-Femme roles and lesbian sado-masochism are central to a lot of the visual imagery produced by photographers who take this approach (Boffin & Fraser, 1991, p. 14). The issue of pornography has provoked major debate amongst feminists and lesbian feminists; in recent years a concern with resexualising lesbianism has become more evident. Debi Sundahl, co-editor of On Our Backs, the first American porn magazine

for lesbians, believes that a political and social revolution has begun, since there is more erotica and pornography being produced by lesbians, for lesbians. This liberation stance is not only a reaction to the historic desexualization of lesbians, but also a response to the way that feminist discourses place a danger on portraying the sexuality of women, as this could be viewed by men who would get pleasure from the image; this links the issue to debates around the possible connection between pornography and sexual violence. Feminists have been for a long time divided over the importance placed on sex as danger/sex as pleasure. The central question being asked is whether lesbian porn/erotica is liberating or constricting to lesbians (Nead, 1992, p. 108). Quite clearly some believe that it is the former and it is certainly the case that recent lesbian pornography has challenged the soft-focus romantic imagery of lesbianism that can be regarded as oppressive to women. It is a fact that lesbian pornography differs in certain respects from heterosexual pornography; for example, male genital satisfaction is often the only focus of importance in heterosexual pornography, whereas in lesbian pornography the woman's desire and pleasure are the things of importance.

There is also another problem which has been voiced about this strategy of reappropriating images from pornography; it may be asked whether this simply replicates the male gaze, limiting women to a role as objects of another's desire, or whether they manage to disrupt this gaze through irony. In her work Sexual/Textual Politics Toril Moi questions the use of

irony as an approach. She suggests that the artist "seems not to see that sometimes a woman imitating male discourses is just a woman speaking like a man. Margaret Thatcher is a case in point". This confusion can arise if there is no sense of political content in a piece of work and Moi stresses that "it is the political context of such mimicry that is surely always decisive".

Annie Blue , a member of both Women Against Violence Against Women and the Campaign Against Pornography, argues that "Porn is the central way men control women. Violence is choreographed from porn". She would like legislation reform on porn because it censors women. However, annie Blue maintains that she is against censorship because she believes that this is a tool which oppresses women. She argues that male violence and rape are censorship, and thus forbid women the right to express themselves and dress as they choose.

Censorship of pornography is problematic as a solution to the violence highlighted by Blue. Surely before anything is censored it needs to be discussed and criticised; often when something is banned or censored outright this promotes it and makes it something that everyone wants to see, maybe simply out of curiosity to see what all the fuss is about.

A more important reason for the argument against censorship is the way it can have a damaging effect on people's lives. Lesbians and gay men are particularly aware of the effect censorship can have on their life-styles and

culture, especially since the introduction in May 1988 of Section 28 of the Local Government Act in Britain. The first half of this section prohibits local authorities from funding activities (exhibitions, workshops, meetings or the production and distribution of leaflets etc...) which could be deemed to 'promote' homosexuality. The second part prohibits the teaching in state-funded schools of the acceptability of relationships between lesbians or gay men, defining them as 'pretended family relationships'. The first part of the section has a major effect on lesbian and gay artists as their main venues for exhibition space are often controlled and funded by local authorities; these authorities will now think twice before making this space available with the risk of prosecution hanging over them. This in turn puts pressure on artists to make their work appear safe, in order not to become invisible, as promotion, not censorship is what is desperately needed for these artists. To date, as far as I know, there has not been a test case brought under Section 28, but indirectly it has made an impact, and created an even greater breeding ground for homophobia (Boffin & Fraser, 1991, pp. 19, 135).

CHAPTER 3

Case studies: Della Grace, Nicky West, Tessa Boffin

Having talked previously about the different strategies artists take when producing visual imagery I now want to examine specific artists' work and look at how they put these strategies into practice through their work.

Della Grace

Della Grace is an American born photographer now living in London and is sometimes known as Della Disgrace. For many years she has been photographing the Anglo-American Lesbian lifestyles from the punk, leather, S.M., and bar communities. Since 1991 Della Grace has become a very prominent figure in lesbian and gay culture. This prominence is partly due to the controversy surrounding the publication, in 1991 by Gay Men's Press, of a book of Della Grace's photographs called Love Bites. Some London feminist bookstores decided not to stock the book; Sisterwrite banned it for ideological reasons, and Silver Moon declined to stock it for fear of being prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act. Book Trader

and Feminists Against Censorship member Linda Semple said

Although I support Grace's work, I can't take the risk of staff losing their jobs and Silver Moon closing down. If the Obscene Publications squad raided us and found the book on the premises it would mean the end of Silver Moon because we are such a small business and don't have the funds to fight a court case.

Feminist Review, Spring 1994, p. 77

Della Grace describes her work as sexually exciting, and commenting on the censorship of her work she says "censorship stifles the freedom of self-expression, it enhances the belief that sex is wrong and nasty" (Feminist Arts News, 1982). Despite the selling restrictions on this book it was on sale in mainstream and alternative bookshops in 1991. The book was a first in that there had not been any lesbian artistic erotica previously published, while similar publications had long been available to heterosexual and gay men. Love Bites is about sex, but also about a community. The photographs are of staged sex scenes set in clubs, at demonstrations and meetings, relating to a subculture within the lesbian subculture. Although the photographs are of lesbians, not all lesbians engage in or can relate to S.M. practices, and some do not see themselves as fitting into the Butch/Femme aesthetic. The tough and sometimes scary-looking butches and the slutty-looking femmes are important elements in Grace's work, as is the use of leather, dog collars, harnesses, chains etc... Grace says that her use of these are as "protective armour to make women feel tough and strong" (Feminist Arts News, 1982). The images reinforce the role of the S.M. Dyke as the sexual outcast, who has affinities with gay men and

heterosexual S.M. practitioners, also subject to censorship under the law.

Grace's work presents itself against feminist sensibilities, some feminists seeing her work as purely pornographic and demeaning to women. Those feminists who hold this view, are in turn labelled by S.M. Dykes as 'lesbian sex police', 'Vanilla Dykes', or 'Lesbian Puritans'. Grace's tactics can backfire, as the culture industry recycles images and moods rapidly, which could make her work lose its original meaning. This is the case with 'Soho Sister' from 1989 (Plate 4), this image might have been shocking then, but no longer holds this status. Even Dr. Martens, which were so much part of the lesbian codes of dress, have been assimilated into mainstream fashion. Conversely, make-up that was not part of lesbian dress has been taken into the dress code, hence the emergence of the 'Lipstick Lesbian' (Cooper, 1994, p. 85). Another aspect of her work that I found disconcerting was in the 'Ruff Sex' series of images which refer to acts of violence. It is hard to know whether these are real sex scenes or not from looking at them. The image shown in Plate 5 evokes the feeling that a gang rape is taking place and it conjures up all the associations of violence, domination and degradation. An image like this can be dangerous, giving a negative portrayal of lesbians as a group. The problem I have already highlighted regarding the scarcity of images, combined with the publicity surrounding Love Bites meant that S.M. lesbians came to hold a rarefied status beyond their ability to be representative of the lesbian community as a whole, something that they are often seen as doing.



Soho Sister 1989

Plate 4

'Soho Sister', by Della Grace, 1989 (in Walter, 1991)





Plate 5

One of a series: 'Ruff Sex', by Della Grace, 1988
(in Walter, 1991)

Grace's subsequent collection, 'Lesbian Boys', looks at identity through the representation of cross-dressing and altered gender positions. I could relate more to these images and feel that they are capable of appealing to more lesbian identities than the 'Ruff Sex' series is able to. One of the photographs from the 'Lesbian Boys' series, 'Robyn'(1989), Plate 6, shows a woman wearing a biker jacket and tu-tu, her identity hidden behind sunglasses. This image is challenging dominant ideologies of sexuality and gender; it is ambiguous, cannot be labelled specifically and there is great diversity of meaning in the image.

Another series of photographs of Grace's, where the strategies of irony and parody come into play successfully is 'The Ceremony' (Plates 7 & 8). This series was exhibited in 1988 as part of a group show entitled 'The Lesbian Gaze', the photographs also appeared in Square Peg magazine with text written by Sophie Moorcock. It is a parody of the conventional wedding ceremony, a ceremony most people can relate to in one way or another, most have photographs of the event in family albums. In this series we see the same two women in their early twenties taking on the roles of bride and groom on what appears to be their big day. The butch and femme are very much present, as is bondage gear, but within this context, and without the direct reference to acts of violence, the images do not create the dangers or concerns seen in some of Grace's other photographic work. The butch groom is a powerful figure: topless and with a leather harness, wristband, a studded belt around black leather trousers and a leather cap



Plate 6
'Robyn', by Della Grace, 1989 (in *Feminist Review*,
Spring 1994)

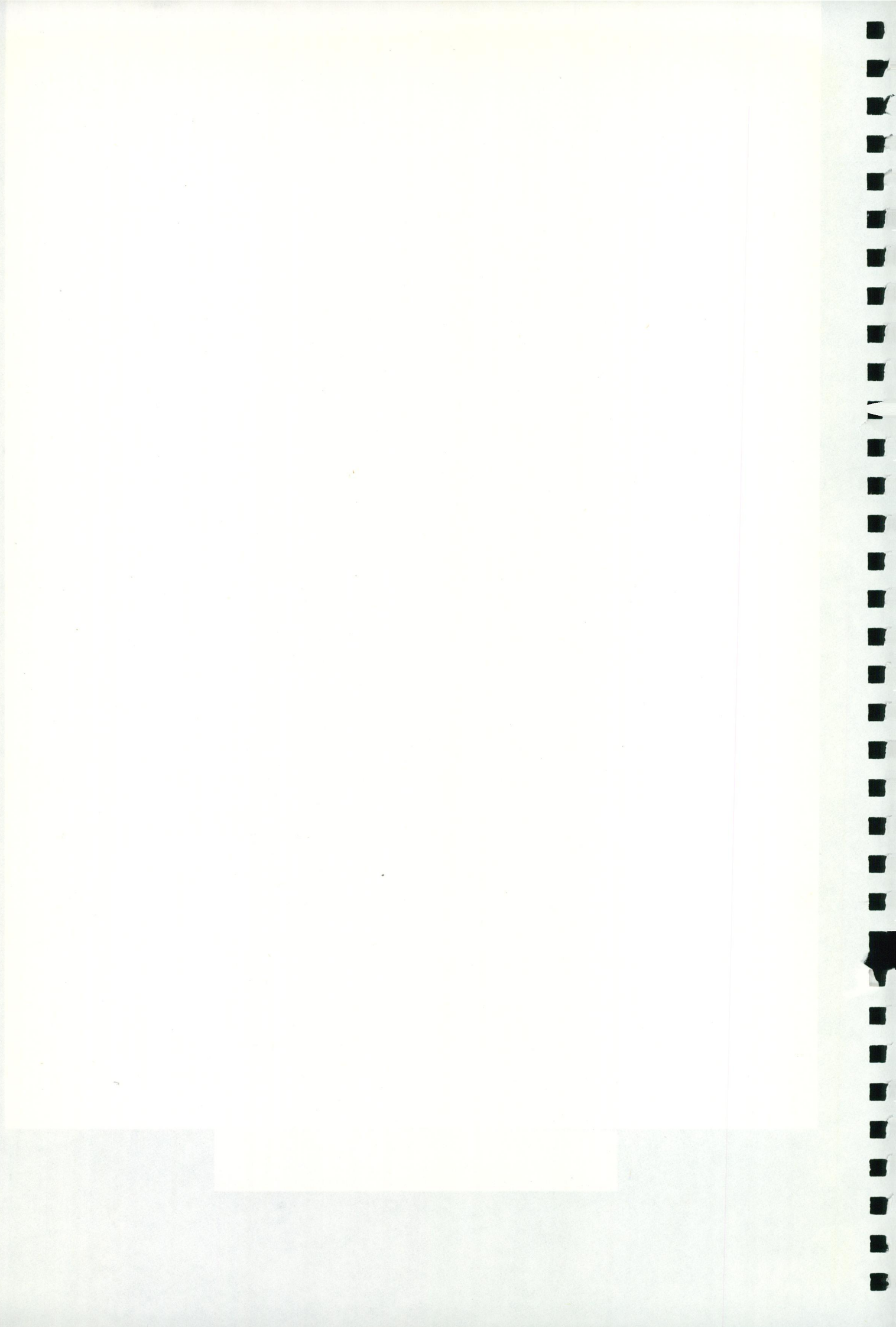




1988

Plate 8

One of a series: 'The Ceremony' by Della Grace,
1988, (in Walter, 1991)



covering a shaved head. In one of the images (Plate 7) we see the double women symbol tattooed on her arm, viewed by all lesbians as a positive symbol of their identity. Above this tattoo we see a good luck horse-shoe tattoo, which could be looked on as mocking conventional wedding ceremonies and maybe heterosexual pornography. The 'feminised' bride is dressed in a tight fitting bodice, long rubber gloves, wristbands, lipstick and a white veil covering her face. In another photograph (Plate 8) we see the bride baring her teeth through the veil, reading perhaps as a ridicule of the idea of the passive bride, who waits to be dominated by her husband. Despite the problematic S.M. references, 'The Ceremony' is, I think, Della Grace's best work; the use of parody and irony is not lost here, there is a diversity of issues raised by the images, questioning dominant cultural ideologies of sexuality and gender.

Della Grace has become an influential photographer within lesbian society. Although her work could be perceived as showing the life-styles of the lesbian community as a whole, this is not the case and Grace never claimed or set out to perform this impossibility. Rather she is portraying what she knows about as a part of this S.M. lesbian community. It is these lesbians that her work is aimed towards and this is where she finds the main audience for her work.

Nicky West

I regard the audience as everybody, but it is important to me that lesbians who see the work can actually associate themselves with it and feel like they're being spoken to - for a change.

Nicky West, 1992, (Catalogue: Occupying Territories)

This priority forms part of many other objectives Nicky West has in her work. As both a lesbian and a photographic artist she is aware of the need for more sexualized lesbian imagery. Nicky West has exhibited her work throughout England, and in September 1994 her work formed part of the M.A. show in Fine Art at Newcastle Polytechnic. The ways in which the female body is sexualized and exploited through visual imagery by dominant culture were the focus point informing her photographic panels in this show. The panel shown in Plate 9 is made up of different photographic panels; blank black panels separate each photograph of a different image as well as bringing them all together, the whole appearing as one large panel. By using this layout Nicky West is addressing many different issues concerning sexual pleasure, through each individual image and the relations between the images; she is challenging the viewer to look closer at each, whilst reminding them through the use of blank panels that they are in the process of looking, Whoever they happen to be. The blankness could also be a signifier of the scarcity of lesbian visual imagery.



Plate 9
Nicky West with her series of colour photos: 'No
Title', 1993

In the first panel we see a woman putting her finger into a soft-boiled egg, the egg symbolising fertility and working as an analogy for the female genitalia and the fluidness that is part of the female body. This image also portrays the expression of touching as sexual pleasure. The next photograph is of a tattoo of an eye placed above bright red lips, stressing the link between 'looking' and oral pleasure. This follows to the next image of a naked woman leaning over the naked body of another woman; her hand rests on her partner's hip, covered in what appears to be blood. Possibly West is making a comment on the way in which the female body has been sanitized by patriarchal culture, a process which would not occur between women as each experiences similar changes within her body, thus having a greater understanding of what the other feels, including the sexual pleasure of that body.

In the adjoining panel is the image of two women making love, an image not often seen in abundance; it appears to be the same women that can be seen in the other photographs throughout the panel. In the last photograph we see the woman with the eye tattoo looking directly at the viewer, challenging that gaze, and the opinions that the viewer has of her identity as a lesbian.

Nicky West's work articulates the right of lesbians and other women to represent their own bodies and the sexual desires of those bodies. Again, as I have pointed out before, it would be impossible for West, or any artist,

to represent every lesbian; there is no universal essence one can use to give a clear portrayal of lesbianism, there are many different identities within the lesbian subculture, including race and class, as well as sexual expression.

Through her work West also explores the construction of gender in society and the ideas behind 'femaleness'. In a 1994 group exhibition, 'Occupying Territories', West exhibited 'Performing Daily' (Plate 10) which portrays the life, and the contradictions in the life of the American jazz musician Billy Tipton. He, or rather she, was married with three adopted sons. On Billy's death in 1989 it was discovered that Billy was a woman. Billy's wife claims that she did not know that her husband was a woman, explaining that their marital arrangements did not include sexual intercourse and that Billy had an internal injury that required surgical body bandages. Nicky West puts across the image of Billy through a photograph of a woman wrapping bandages around her breasts and genitals.

Billy Tipton was a present day cross-dresser, but as with those of the past we will never know the various dimensions that this identity had. Was she or was she not a lesbian? What we do know is that Billy Tipton challenged society's construction of gender by her impersonation of a man, and we know the difficulties she had to take on in daily life such as the physical attributes of the bandages which she had to employ to hold her identity as a woman. In 'Performing Daily' Nicky West is portraying this situation, as

'Performing Daily' (detail - original in colour) 1994



Plate 10
'Performing Daily' (detail), by Nicky West, 1994

well as questioning the 'naturalness' of the positions of sexuality and gender within society, and the way that this society trivialises women.

The personal always informs artforms and this is the case with Nicky West. Her work is erotic, powerful as well as being a positive portrayal of what it is to be a lesbian. These images are aimed largely at a lesbian audience, but West also wants her work to be seen by mainstream audiences; by exhibiting to mainstream audiences lesbian artists can help to erase some of the myths and assumptions society has about lesbians.

Tessa Boffin

Tessa Boffin, the English born photographic artist, part-time teacher, writer and lesbian has had her work exhibited widely. Her quest being, in each area, to promote cultural activism and sexual diversity. She has addressed many different issues concerning lesbians in her work, such as AIDS and the ways in which it has an effect on lesbians, and the importance of, as well as the problems surrounding lesbian history, including the stereotypes from the past and the stereotypes that exist today.

In the late 1980s a group a group of gay and lesbian artists met in London to discuss ways that they could address the problems of HIV/AIDS, and

attempt to do away with some of the prejudices that existed around the disease. The media had put across negative images concerning AIDS, which helped to create the fears and myths connected with the disease. As a result of this meeting two exhibitions took place. The first, 'Bodies of Experience: Stories about living with HIV', consisted of photographs and stories looking at the profound effect that the virus has on the individual and society. The second group exhibition was called 'Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology', Tessa Boffin's work formed part of this exhibition. She also co-wrote the book of the same title as the exhibition with another lesbian photographer, Sunil Gupta.

In this body of work Boffin addresses the issue of women and AIDS. She focuses on the problem of educating women, particularly lesbians, of the real need to be aware of safer sex practices. She uses images that put across the message and convince her audience from the standpoint of pleasure rather than fear. The 'safer sex as fun' approach has been used successfully amongst gay men in the fight against AIDS, through the use of posters and educational material produced by organisations like the Terence Higgins Trust. However, the issue of safer sex practices remains an awkward issue amongst lesbians as many lesbians do not see AIDS as something that can affect them. It is this kind of attitude that Boffin is trying to challenge through her images. AIDS has created a context in which lesbians can talk about sex. It is no longer just permissible for lesbians to tell each other what they do sexually, but has become a social

requirement, a necessary and important part of lesbian health concerns.

Boffin has seen the AIDS epidemic as an ironic opportunity to discuss sexual identities, practices and fantasies, as well as fears around sex and ways to adopt safer sex practices.

In the 1989 'Ecstatic Antibodies' exhibition Boffin produced a photo-tableau series, 'Angelic Rebels', which consisted of a five part fantasy narrative. Using staged scenes, with the ~~with the~~ consent of others and thus not objectifying them in her images. In the first photograph of the series (Plate 11) we see a woman dressed as an angel, she seems to be deep in thought and looking depressed. The depression appears to have been brought on by the surrounding mainstream tabloid press's negative reports on the AIDS epidemic, and there seems to be no escape from the fear that is everywhere. Then in the final photograph (Plate 12) we see two women dressed as angels, one sitting on a box and the other, who also appeared in the first photograph, standing behind her on the box. The sitting angel's mouth is gripped inside the other angel's thigh. They are surrounded by sex toys, reading material (probably lesbian sex manuals and safer sex pamphlets) and a crocodile. The mood has changes in this photograph, the woman who was in a state of depression in the first photograph is no longer depressed. She realises now that safer sex will not limit her sexual options, but rather will give her greater freedom to pursue her fantasies.



Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex, 1989, first in a series of five, by Tessa Boffin.

Plate 11

First in a series: 'Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex', by Tessa Boffin, 1987



Plate 12
Last in a series: 'Angelic Rebels' by Tessa Boffin, 1987

These photographs, along with other artists' work in the exhibition, were labelled by some people as pornographic and subsequently faced censorship when the exhibition toured in Britain. It was to appear at the View Point Gallery, Salford, however, this was cancelled because it was considered not to be suitable for a public gallery where young children would go. It was alleged at the time that Salford Council Arts Officer said "the show was pornographic". This closure is indicative of the argument around pornography censorship preventing the right of alternative images to exist and inhibiting the right to free speech. The other side of the argument is that pornography and erotic material of any kind are oppressive to women. Censorship will, I think, cause more damage than good to women, lesbians more specifically, problems also occur in determining who will decide what is pornographic and where the line is to be drawn as to what will be censored. Work like Boffin's is badly needed, the images provide a legitimate focus for lesbians to talk about sex, which can be life-saving as well as identity-affirming. The images of 'Angelic Rebels' and others dealing with similar topics are vital to the lesbian community and too important to be lost under censorship. "The most important work for saving lives must take place in the minefield of representation" (Boffin, 1990, in Boffin & Fraser, 1991)

In another body of work, a series of portraits: 'The Knight's Move', 1990, Tessa Boffin looks at the issue of lesbian history and the stereotypes from history. This series of photographs also forms part of the material in Stolen

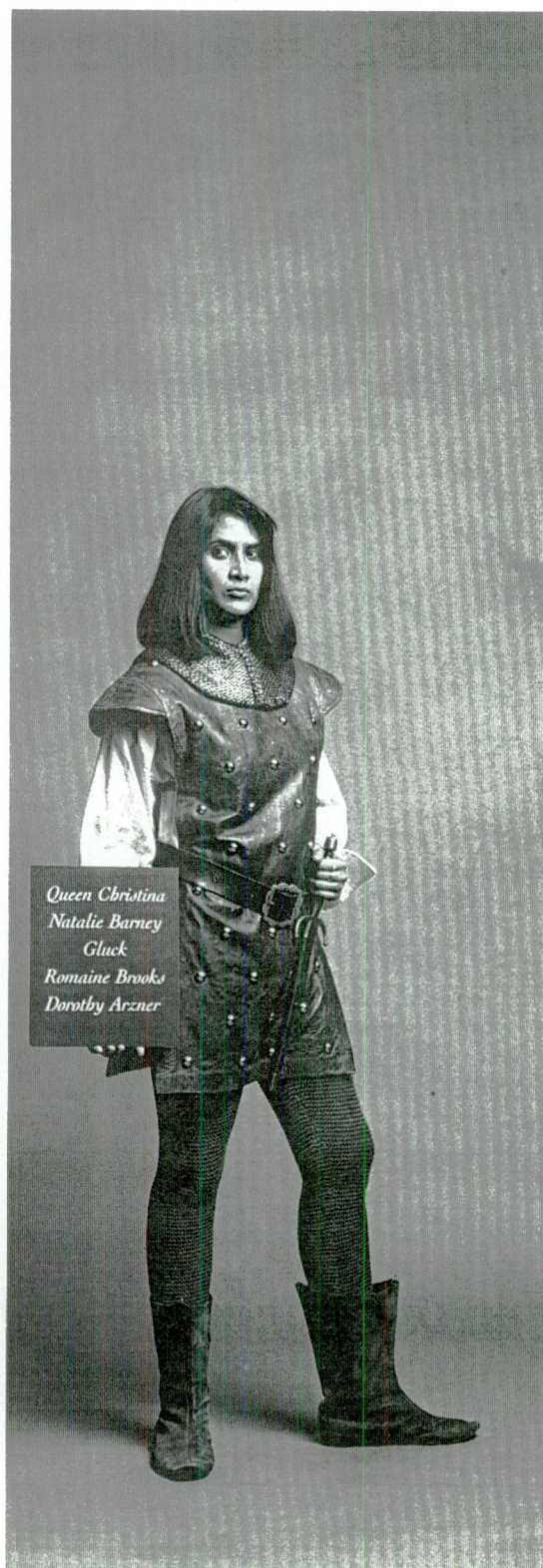
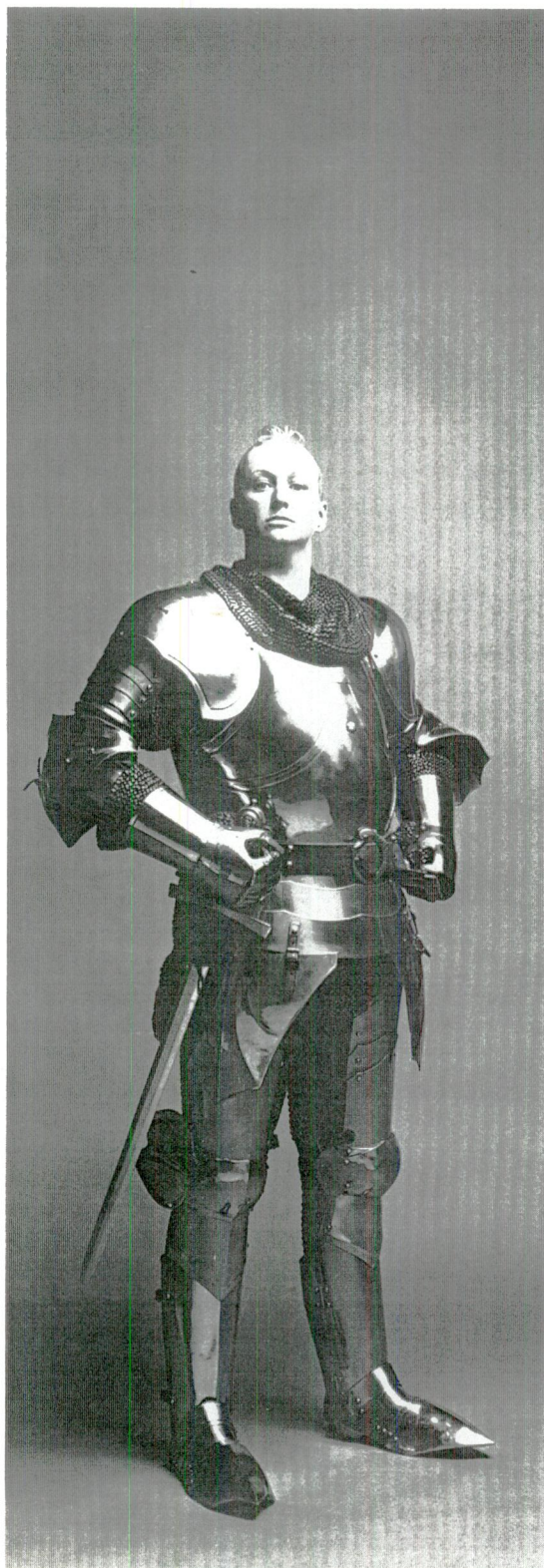
Glances, a book of lesbian photography which Boffin co-edited with the freelance photographer Jean Fraser in 1991. The first photograph in the series (Plate 13) is of a cemetery scene, with scattered photographs lying about of famous and not-so-famous lesbians from the past: Sylvia Beach and Janet Flanner by Berenice Abbott; two of Alice Austen's self-portraits; and Gertrude Stein by Cecil Beaton. Then following on from the photograph we see portraits of posed figures of women dressed as a Knight; a Knave, displaying the names of famous lesbians; an angel; Casanova; and finally a lady-in-waiting who also displays the names of famous lesbians (Plates 14 & 15). In the final photograph we see them all together in the cemetery scene (Plate 16).

Where Is My Knight
My Knave
My Angel
My Casanova
My Lady-In-Waiting?
I Could Hardly Find You
In My History Books
But Now In This Scene
You Will Come Together

Tessa Boffin, 1991 (in Boffin & Fraser, 1991)

Boffin is aware of the importance placed on lesbian role models, the status they hold, owing especially to the scarcity of lesbian role models from the past. She knows that they are essential, but is also aware that they can be restrictive as well. Fantasy has a large part to play in Boffin's work; she approaches her subject matter through a form of photo-theatre, finding this approach more suited to her work than documentary realism, which is often used by photographic artists. Her art is "a non-naturalistic form of





Queen Christina
Natalie Barney
Gluck
Romaine Brooks
Dorothy Arzner





representation which insists first and foremost that 'reality' is mediated, staged and framed" (Boffin & Fraser, 1991). In this statement Boffin is pointing out that the camera can be manipulated to show something that is not there in reality; the camera can lie, so fantasy staged scenes are just as valid an approach as any other. Through the use of fantasy, Boffin reappropriates heterosexual figures, reinvesting them with a lesbian meaning by recreating them with a new image as lesbian role models from the past. By reinventing role models from the past the missing links in history can be joined together to form a complete picture, also forming an important part of the representation of lesbians in the present. This approach gives great scope for the representation of lesbian identity, visual representation being essential in order to shape the future (Boffin & Fraser, 1991, p. 49).

Lesbian experience is extremely diverse, it is always set in the historical and political context and there is no one unitary lesbian subject. It is this point that Tessa Boffin crystallises through her work. Her photographic images can be described in many ways: erotic, political, informative, as well as educational. Her work is produced for a lesbian audience but is also displayed in galleries where the mainstream audience can view the images. I think Boffin's work is successful in its aims and provides important images that the lesbian community can relate to and admire.

CONCLUSION

My research has shown that photography is a medium that has been of concern to lesbians almost since its invention, and that it is still very important for lesbian artists today. My attempts to research the work of lesbian artists in various other media ran into many problems, caused mainly by a simple lack of exhibitions or published information. As a result of these difficulties I began to realise the primacy of photography in the work of lesbian artists, as well as the historical background to this primacy. I decided to concentrate my research on photography.

Before making this decision I had already established the issues and theories I wanted to discuss. History is vital to lesbians, just as it is to any other group of people living in a community. History was the starting point from which I wanted to talk about lesbianism, as it forms a basis from which an identity or subject can be discussed. It is from history that we learn and form our opinions for the future. I discovered that from its invention photography has been connected with lesbianism, forming some of the records and memorabilia of its past, thus enabling lesbians now to find role models of women like themselves. I also found that, equally, photography has helped to label and portray lesbians negatively, as mentally or physically defective, as well as enabling images of lesbians to be created for male sexual pleasure. More recently, lesbians have seen the

potential photography has to help record their own history, using it to produce lesbian imagery and self definitions for a primarily lesbian audience.

Each artist I have discussed uses the strategy of appropriation in her work to portray lesbian experiences, fantasies and sexuality, as well as using it as a weapon against the invisibility of lesbianism in society. Each of these artists also has her own priorities about which issues she wants to address through her work.

Della Grace concentrates on lesbian S.M. and the appropriation of heterosexual pornography codes. Her work clashes with feminist ideologies surrounding the portrayal of women, lesbians in particular. Grace's images have faced internal censorship by the lesbian community, as well as external censorship by mainstream society; this has, in a way, aided her prominence within the lesbian community. Grace's aim in her work is to portray the desires and lifestyles of S.M. lesbians, which she sees as celebrating female strength and also as a way of offending homophobes.

Like Grace's, Nicky West's work is erotic, but this does not come from an allusion to S.M. practices. The viewer is challenged by the tactics West uses and made aware of what they are doing in looking, so making them think about the opinions that they hold. Ideas of gender are addressed

through West's work, she questions the cultural connection of gender with anatomy by focusing on a present day cross-dresser, this being an identity that has close ties with lesbian identity throughout history.

Finally, Tessa Boffin's work focuses on the subject of gender; using the appropriation of heterosexual role models from the past, sometimes by using gender reversals, she is pointing out the negative and positive positions of role models in lesbian imagery. Another issue Boffin deals with in her work is that of AIDS, attempting to break down some of the myths and fears that society has of the epidemic, whilst also trying to educate lesbians to see that AIDS does concern them personally and that they too have to practice safer sex. Boffin is also aware of what censorship can do, not just as a woman, not just as a lesbian, but as an artist as well, by feeling the effects of censorship as a result of her work being banned. The diversity of ways in which censorship has affected lesbian and gay culture is one of most important things I discovered from my research, this censorship coming particularly as a result of the introduction of Section 28 of the Local Government Act in Britain.

From looking at these artist's work I can see some problems surrounding the images. It could be claimed that the production of sexualized lesbian imagery, even if it is circulated only within the lesbian community, could contribute to the objectification and exploitation of women. Della Grace's work could be interpreted as reinforcing the stereotype of the lesbian as

being masculine. Work like Grace's throws up fundamental questions about what kind of lesbian sex is being represented. Close examination of lesbian porn reveals that the dominant forms of sex being represented are penetrative and S.M. activities. Dildos appear with great regularity, as do chains, leather straps, etc., portraying lesbian desire as requiring penetration with objects; this is a theme which could be seen as being borrowed from heterosexual and gay men's porn, with their emphasis on penetrative sex. The dildo also appears in Tessa Boffin's images of 'Angelic Rebels', which is strangely ironic considering that this body of work is about AIDS, and the fact that, because of AIDS, penetrative sex has been challenged. The question must be whether this resexualisation of lesbians may in some way reproduce rather than challenge traditional sexual values, through emphasis on penetration and the eroticisation of power difference. What about lesbians who do not want to play with sex toys, who do not turn onto power; does this work imply that they are not real lesbians?

Censorship is not an easy answer to these problems. I know personally what labelling and censorship can do to an individual, and the secrecy, silence and sometimes isolation that surround an individual when trying to hold onto their identity, as well as their position in society. Censorship does have an impact on lesbian lives, but it will not destroy their culture, because lesbians are not asking, they are demanding the right to define themselves, and have established networks and organisations to make this

voice heard. Lesbians are a diverse, multicultural community, but I found from my research that, despite the divisions, there are strong links and common aims within the lesbian community.

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