

# Shake The Bottle: Contemporary Photography and Sexual Identity

## Shake the Bottle – some thoughts from Adrian Lovis and Rebekah Taylor on curating the show.

Sunil Gupta ends his essay with a question “will it be long before we see the death of LGBT shows except as an index of outmoded discrimination?” This flags up a fundamental issue, one that was in the subtext of this project from the start. In making a ‘call-out’ for “new/recent photographic work that reflect and capture contemporary LGBT experience, culture and politics”, we were struck that these distinctions are already feeling anachronistic - that setting up a show on the premise of particular categories of sexual identity seemed to be a re-statement of difference. Whilst uncomfortable, this call would address those who felt their work had something to say within this, and would presumably alienate others who would not wish to position themselves or their work in such a way.

Having gained the cultural ground where marriage is (by law and by the majority) now considered on its own institutional and cultural merits, the values of committed relationships and not by who can take part in it. Likewise, Pride is, in its many incarnations, a celebration of a society that wants to rejoice in the message of equality and fairness. This is borne out by the breadth of participation, including the widest representation of families, with no necessary connection to any specific ‘scene’, who want to enjoy the spectacle and, presumably endorse the message that we starting to leave behind huge swathes of prejudice and are looking forward to a truly modern society (considerations seemingly unregistered by Venice’s new mayor, Luigi Brugnaro).

It may be something of a fudge then, that the present artists responded to a call for LGBT work, yet in the show’s title we use the wider term ‘sexual identity’. The show may then be seen as a question – are these terms exclusive – does one cancel out the other? In using the term ‘sexual identity’, we mean how we identify and express who we are, sexually, how we consider the choices of others and, as a society, how we enable the freedom by which everyone can feel safe to express and live openly. These are challenges – prejudice and awareness of difference cannot simply be switched off and in negotiating our individual identity, we all project and anticipate our own understanding of the world we are stepping into.

So, we are delighted that the present artists did respond to our invitation for work concerned with ‘LGBT experience’, and we are proud to present what we think is a strong and diverse set of positions, under the banner of ‘sexual identity’. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, we are looking forward to picking up these discussions with several of the artists and with an audience who we hope will have found the work rewarding and may have considered how these questions bear upon it.

# Shifting Attitudes to LGBTQ Photography from Tessa Boffin to Now

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Tessa Boffin and I met at a meeting held at what used to be the London Lesbian and Gay Centre in 1988, a meeting that was called to discuss community responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis. We found a common link, along with Jean Fraser to think about creating an exhibition that would look at critical representations of the issues from an LGBT perspective with an emphasis on promoting sex. We felt that the government's visual messaging had a not so hidden agenda that was targeting promiscuity and thereby gay sexuality. The project eventually took shape and appeared as a book and travelling exhibition called "Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology" two years later in 1990 at Impressions Gallery in York.

By the time it appeared Jean Fraser had withdrawn from it, but not without making valuable contributions to the initial discussions. Jean and I had an earlier history and involvement with Camerawork in the organising of another show, "Same Difference" in 1986, one of the first LGBT photo shows to my knowledge in a London photo gallery. This was mounted as a challenge to the 'difference' theory that we had all learnt in photo school at the time. We claimed that the difference theory being staked out by the critical writing and art practices of the time were heterosexual in orientation and had not taken sexuality and specifically same-sex desire into account in their analysis of visual cultures. This show had several features that were groundbreaking at the time. It had a multitude of practices; fine art to community to media. It had a mixture of race and gender that was unseen till then. It has to be remembered that a feature of the 1970s and 1980s was a separatist culture in which women did women's work and black and asians did work about colour.

This was the gender based difference theory that arose from psychoanalysis which had in turn got it from linguistics that was being taught to undergraduates at the Polytechnic of Central London (now Westminster) by people like Victor Burgin to students like Jean Fraser and Tessa Boffin.

The change came after the hugely influential academic exhibition at the Hayward Gallery called "Three Perspectives" in 1979, which looked at class, race and feminism. So while groups like Hackney Flashers participated as women's voices, all the race issues were covered by left leaning white photographers. And there was nothing overtly queer about any of it. I think it took the generation graduating after this to challenge this new status quo and to pull LGBT and Black/Asian practices into focus diversifying the notions of identity. This was a decade long process where ideas were debated in the independent sector usually by practitioners nurtured by town hall and other local funding if funded at all. It concluded in 1990 with several shows

around race, gender and sexuality as well as the birth of Autograph-ABP as a site of production and dissemination of critical ideas. In this the various workshops, galleries and publications (Camerawork, Ten.8, Blackfriars, Photofusion, Impressions etc) were all very instrumental in framing the practices and providing audiences.

The 1980s was also *the* post-colonial moment therefore identity politics were at the fore. Meanwhile the Tory government at the time took a dim view of LGBT lifestyle choices and we had the experience of the notorious Section 28 which had the deliberate consequence of jeopardizing funding for shows and publications from the very town halls that had supported them. They also disbanded the Inner London Education Authority, the body with which we had begun to work with to do LGBT photo projects with school children. Jean Fraser and I had run a school's workshop for them as part of "Same Difference" in which six teenagers made photo stories being LGBT in London schools. The schools' tour of these panels was withdrawn at the last minute.

Meanwhile Tessa and Jean went off to make their lesbian photography book and exhibition, "Stolen Glances", and I went got funded to organise a series of visual arts projects, as an INIVA franchise called OVA for the following decade and a half, which were necessarily racially diverse and often had a queer and photography component.

What is happening now is that the notion of 'queer' theory has entered critical debates and and the LGBT parts on their own as separate practices appear to be on the wane. There seems to less urgency for self identifying in the practice and the writing. Coupled with two major shifts; one involving the institution of anti-discrimination legislation in civil society including gay marriage, and the other is the near demise of the independent sector in photography. The practice of queer photography has had to move out of the community and either into an academic framework or towards a commercial art arena in a way that was rarely necessary before. This allows for an internal critique to become more public as there is less pressure to provide a positive image back to the community. While what's lost is the more radical pro-sex anti-heteronormative messaging of the 1980s, there is an increased scope to be more introverted and think of singular queer identities that maybe don't fit into any given narratives. In the interim we also had a number of ground-breaking fine art exhibitions that arose from academia and funded galleries such as Michael Petry's "Hidden Histories", a book and exhibition at Walsall's New Art Gallery in 2004.

*Hidden Histories did not contend there was a queer, gay or same sex aesthetic connecting the work of the surveyed artists. It did not 'out' anyone – all the information presented existed in the public domain. Hidden Histories documented how male artists' work was affected by evolving attitudes to homosexuality. (Petry 2007)*

The emphasis was clearly shifting away from outing to historicising how the work was received over time. In the last few years, Petry has intervened annually in London by curating an LGBT show at Clifford Chance, an international law firm in the City. This is a marriage of corporate LGBT rights being recognised and exposure for local queer artists in a way that was unthinkable in the twentieth century.

What I think we are seeing now is the normalising of LGB by its incorporation into the mainstream. It is no longer presenting a challenge and its concerns have turned to heteronormative family life. Same sex couples form the UK's largest demand from sperm banks for surrogate children and Stonewall is running parent and child trips to the zoo. Trans people have finally come in over the horizon and are still on the edge of acceptability. Intersex people are still fighting their long hard battle within the community and also with the gendered mainstream views of doctors and other societal gatekeepers.

However, this incredibly swift change since Tessa Boffin was practising has only occurred in the West, with increased globalisation new frontiers are opening up in Africa and Asia. Meanwhile, the notion of queerness as a questioning attitude has spread everywhere as an identity that can be adopted, regardless of sexual preference. We can observe that in some influential sub-cultures, LGBT identities have been overtaken by queer identities so we are seeing the disappearance of gay bars and LGBT community centres as people in London and Los Angeles feel they can go anywhere with their friends and feel comfortable. So I'm wondering, will it be long before we see the death of LGBT shows except as an index of outmoded discrimination?

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## **Artist Statements**

**Robert Roach, QuotingLove.com, Positive comments for LGBTQ, 2015**

Quoting Love is a photography project run by Robert Roach, a mixed media photographer, and graphic designer. Quoting Love is the final piece for the photography degree at UCA Rochester (Kent). As an openly gay man in a long-term relationship, the project investigates the depiction of LGBTQ, both through quotes and photographs.

QuotingLove in a literal sense, is a project that presents positive quotes for LGBTQ, combining photographic portraits with their 'words of wisdom'. QuotingLove is a community photographic project, which takes the form of portraits alongside embossed text. The portraits are taken by Robert Roach as well as being submitted through the QuotingLove website to extend the reach of the project to a wider audience. The intention for this project is that a range of images will be received from around the world, showing acceptance in different forms, from a wide diversity of people. All images will be shown on the QuotingLove website as well as through social media outlets. In addition a large selection of images will be shown at the Free Range exhibition at London in June. Some examples of the work are shown below; submissions are invited at [QuotingLove.com](http://QuotingLove.com), where also the full range of submissions are shown.

This exploration into gender has developed from the research already carried out in a previous project entitled Jeal-Roach. This investigated the deconstruction of the body which was then abstracted and constructed in a photographic media. As the deconstruction became more abstracted this seemed to interject with the concept that small elements of a person's psyche is important; as Judith Butler stated in the book title - Bodies that Matter. The subjectivity, freedom and agency start to become more apparent after being in a long term relationship where the interaction of personalities overlap. This project led to the consideration of possible wider community outlets, and how 'others' perceive their identity, in a positive context, creating [quotinglove.com](http://quotinglove.com)

### **Ajamu, *Fierce: Portraits of Young Black Queers*, 2013**

Both my artistic practice and my politics emanate from a culture of Otherness. My objective within fine art photography has been through experimentation and risk taking to extend, transgress and push contemporary theoretical debates to explore critical issues of representations, identities, race, genders, desire, pleasure, cultural heritage and community within contemporary Britain.

I predominately work with Black and White large format 10 x 8 camera's, shoot straight, crop within the frame and with virtually no re-touching afterwards. Over the last few years, I have been re-visiting the work of mid 19th and early 20th century photographers, specifically those working with non-silver techniques and alternative processes such as Platinum/Palladium prints.

What the viewer sees is what I saw when I looked through the viewfinder. The ideas, people, communities, their personal testimonies, experiences, a range of dialogues that can't be captured on film, however will influence how that will be portrayed along with issues that I choose to engage with are just as important as the printing, framing and aesthetic quality to the work.

I like to prepare for a studio portrait session much as I would prepare for any other art or community engagement project. A portrait, like community work, is as much about process as it is about the end product.

My work involves ongoing engagement with socially engaged photographic practice, inclusion, cultural heritage and diversity. I see this as a unique approach within the arts and cultural sector.

### **Lucie Rachel, *MotherFather*, 2015**

Selected photographs, letters and diary excerpts documenting my parents' relationship, from 1976 until present day.

The four-part narrative shows a quite ordinary couple falling in love, up until 1981, when my Father reveals to my Mother he is transgender (although this term wasn't used at the time). The story then follows my Father's personal development and my Mother's growing isolation as they struggle to keep the secret from their two children. Finally my Father told my sister and I in 2008, and in 2011 my parents separated. I began photographing my Father in 2012, around the same time I came out to her as bisexual and regularly started going out with her and her friends in the Manchester village, Leeds and Glasgow

### **Ryan Riddington, *Foil, Mantle, Chesterfield and Chariots*, 2010**

In *Foil* and *Mantle* the subject gazes directly at us. The impassive expression on his face and nonchalant pose suggest, however, that he is no more than the form upon which the true subject of these images is draped - the 'clothes' that form displays. These uniforms of unspecified occupation were assembled from a found anorak and an apron like fragment of a dissected Chesterfield chair which were 'modeled' by myself and then photographed

While looking at images of Chesterfields online I found those on the website of a London gay sauna chain. There seemed to be something subversively incongruous in such a venue using these props from the 'Gentleman's Club', but on visiting I was disappointed to find how completely they fit the environment of the 'chill out lounge'. Much more interesting were the flawed, skip like forms of the communal/'private' spaces that were being cleaned. Rather than scenes of sexual pleasure, here we are witness to the almost unrecognisable aftermath. This led to the works *Chariots I-III*

### **Natasha Schastneva, *SNAPSHOTS. PHOTOGRAPHER-AS-A-VICTIM*, 2012**

Our story, a whirl of adoration, lust and tenderness, started spontaneously. Next day she had to leave. She travelled a lot. Being already in love with me she spent much time on talking to me on Skype. And then I enjoyed watching her gentle lips mismatching her voice, stared at her

slightly unfocused eyes and touched the screen as if I was touching her skin... Noise and connection errors were the frame our love pictured itself in.

I'd want to pretend a photographer here and make her my model. But it would hardly work. It is a total inversion of the "photographer -model", "voyeur -exhibitionist", "hunter -hunted" patterns. None of them would work. Our communication made us exchange these roles like mirrors reflecting each other. Skype empowered my 'model': she seduced me via webcam, she entered and left the frame on her own, she took snapshots herself; composition, brightness, and focusing submitted to her behaviour. Skype deprived me of photographer's basic instruments of control. Lens, viewfinder, and shutter release acted independently. Sitting at home I travelled to the cities she had residencies in. I watched the places she lived in, the places she called home. My snapshots were the impossible intervention of mine to her space.

And now, two years later, I started assembling our mosaic. Now I see the multiplicity of our subjectivities and appreciate its performativity.

St.Petersburg, Russia, 2012

### **Nicole Davenport, Michael's Story and Michael to Kayla Hill, 2014**

Nicole's collaborative series documents the final transition of the two-year journey following her transgender friend Kayla. Nicole has undertaken this ongoing project to raise awareness and explore the sensitive handling of her and Kayla's relationship, challenging the cultural perceptions and complex social issues around transsexualism.

In response to Nicole's careful consideration and direction, Kayla's life changing events have been recorded and culminated in this documentary series, helping Kayla gain the confidence to officially change her name, dress as a female more than ever, and take part in activities where she increasingly confronts her feminine identity.

This raw and intimate body of work expands on Kayla's everyday encounters and achievements, accompanied by handwritten diary entries, snapshot styled images and powerful-open hearted portraits, together charting new territory on a diaristic manner, showcasing key moments that have been instrumental in changing Kayla's life.

### **Diogo Duarte '*Unconscious Commands and Judgements of our Century*', 2013 -**

*Unconscious Commands and Judgements of Our Century* is an ongoing long-term self-portrait series I started in 2013, at a moment in my life when my internal sense of self was clinically coming apart at the seams.

Since then, I have been reflectively photographing myself with the objective of telling the story of growing up as a gay child in Portugal during the mid-nineties and contemplating its effects on how I perceive myself today.

I am interested in documenting what happened when the normative became undesirable, the permissible mundane and the obligatory contradicting, vague and problematic. I attempt to look back and determine whether it is at all possible to healthily construct an identity whilst running through a checklist of the normative, the permissible and the obligatory.

In a society full of contradictions as far as gender identity and sexuality is concerned; where the camp is ok but only in certain arenas, and femininity acceptable only as long as the bathroom door is closed; it was also my intention to create an inner dialogue of acceptance to deal with what was left from years of being (a) bull(y)-ied and distorted sexual 'gratification', ultimately resulting in a portfolio of mental health problems.

Looking back at my childhood, I often have the impulse to portray things as I wish they had been, not as they were, a portrayal that is still nevertheless a reflection of the many 'layers' that crept in at different stages of development to cope in such an environment.

Now, as the series reaches Part II, I aim to reach out to other people going through the experience of not fitting, not belonging and tell them it is ok to never fit and never belong, or so my therapist said.