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## In the Room

by [Ariel Goldberg](#)



New Photography, the title of an exhibition series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, proposes that photography's center of gravity is always changing. An annual from 1985 to 2013, New Photography now runs in an expanded thematic format roughly every other year. "Being: New Photography 2018," which opened last month, is the twenty-fifth edition of the series. The "new" of the show's title proves as contentious as the shape-shifting genre of "photography"; over the years, reviewers have repeatedly taken issue with the forced hierarchies and arbitrariness of the word "new."<sup>1</sup> Novelty is always relative.



Since the founding of its department of photography in 1940, MoMA has espoused the once unpopular notion that photography qualifies as art, and the museum has continually pushed the definition of photography as a genre. A modest example: "New Photography 2" (1986) featured three photographers working in color at a time when color photography was still associated with advertising. The series has effects

beyond those on the general shape of the canon. New Photography often helps secure the careers of its featured artists, providing a list of names to collectors wandering art fair aisles and to faculty members selecting speakers for the college lecture circuit. Inclusion in New Photography also grants a probable home in MoMA's permanent collection: since 2015, works of 105 of the 115 artists and collectives featured in the exhibition series have been acquired by the museum.

Forums on Contemporary Photography, another series at MoMA, comprises critical discussions that explore the shifting contexts for understanding contemporary and historic practices of image production. Roxana Marcoci, senior curator in the department of photography, initiated the forums with her then colleague Eva Respini in 2010, when digital photography and social media platforms had begun to reinvigorate photography's promise of being a democratic conduit for communication and art. Guest speakers include curators, artists, and theorists, who each deliver a short presentation, followed by an unscripted discussion with the audience—more curators, artists, and theorists, who attend on an invitation-only basis. Unlike most symposia, which tack a Q&A to the end of the event, the MoMA forums reserve at least an hour for spirited debate. A seating arrangement of concentric circles encourages the audience to jump in for more spontaneous and informal speech than would a lectern before an auditorium.

MoMA is in the process of making videos of the forums available online; the ones dating from fall 2015 can be streamed like a cult sitcom for photo-history enthusiasts.<sup>2</sup> While the forums occasionally address publications and exhibitions at the museum and elsewhere, the most intriguing sessions reveal new photography department research on the medium's zeitgeist. Over the last two years, a key focus has been subjectivity as it relates to traditional and innovative methods of portraiture. The press release for "Being: New Photography 2018" says the show explores "ramifications of photographic representations of personhood," especially the expectation that an image can simultaneously invoke the collective experience of social groups that struggle with oppression on one hand and private intimacies on the other.

Because the forums and New Photography are ongoing and sometimes overlapping series, they build photographic histories. The specialized discussions question the conditions of producing the work that hangs on—and evades—the museum's drywall. MoMA's forums value unpredictability and curatorial transparency. But perhaps more important, they articulate the affective connections responsible for so much cultural production—the links between mentors, lovers, friends, and collaborators whose ongoing efforts of care inspire and sustain art. Two consecutive forums on queer photography approached topics that have gone unnamed and unnoticed at major art institutions until recently, providing a behind-the-scenes look at how dominant photographic histories and practices are challenged and dismantled. Agile yet ephemeral, the structure of dialogue at the forums invites artists to speak for themselves and allows audience members to react to recent efforts by critics and curators to enlarge and reconfigure the Western canon.

The conversation at "Queer Photography from Stonewall to AIDS" in September 2016 benefited from a narrow focus on homoerotic images, especially when testimonies and speculations on the relationships between subject, photographer, and viewer came to light. The title implies historical bookends of 1969 to the mid-'90s, when the AIDS cocktail (a mix of drugs that effectively treats HIV symptoms) became available to those with access to health care. The speakers for the most part ignored the persistence of the health crisis—HIV/AIDS still affects gay and bisexual African American men at epidemic rates, especially in the South<sup>3</sup>—and instead focused on the appearance of nudes of cisgender men on gallery walls. One exception was panelist Sophie Hackett, curator of photography at the Art Gallery of Ontario, who showed explicitly activist materials highlighting the collective effort behind Peter Hujar's jubilant group photo for the Gay Liberation Front's 1970 membership recruitment poster.

Some presenters noted that interracial desire archived in gay male portraiture of the '80s existed in a social context of black and brown gay men being asked to present multiple forms of ID to enter white-run gay bars. Others discussed how alliances across race and class countered discrimination that still persists in gay communities. Aperture's director, Chris Boot, who just published a book documenting forty years of work by New Orleans-based photographer George Dureau, said his initial attraction to Dureau's images prompted reflection on his own interracial relationships. As Robert Mapplethorpe continues to receive mainstream attention, such as the 2016 HBO documentary on his life, artist Lyle Ashton Harris pointed to some lesser-known figures, at one moment distributing handouts of a *New York Times* article on filmmaker Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989). Like Mapplethorpe's work, this poetic exploration of black gay identities came under attack for its National Endowment for the Arts funding, especially when it was scheduled to air on PBS in the early '90s.<sup>4</sup>

As a panelist, Harris presented a video slideshow of selections from his *Ektachrome Archive* project (2014–), which chronicles his black and queer social and artistic worlds in thousands of 35mm slides shot between 1986 and 2000. In the open discussion, he foregrounded his series "The Watering Hole" (1996), now in MoMA's permanent collection. The nine photographed collages serve as a visual diary, mixing Harris's portraiture, which appears in snapshot-size prints, with pop-culture clippings of male figures such as a Ralph Lauren model and serial killer

Jeffrey Dahmer (his image excised from a *Newsweek* cover, leaving only a negative-space silhouette and a headline). These private and public images hang on a wood-paneled wall, spattered here and there with red paint (evoking blood) under red alarm lights. Harris also spoke about Hershey, “a hustler that I frequented in LA while at CalArts,” who posed for one of the photos:

He [told] me the same men who would patronize him during the day would laugh at him at the gym. It’s complicated. At once he may have been the source of desire and pleasure but at the same time there was a class issue.<sup>5</sup>

Harris used Hershey’s story to encourage recuperation of the voices of people who appear in queer photography. Challenging the conventional power dynamics between white photographers and subjects of color, he advocated complexity instead of whole-hearted condemnation or defense of images that reflect difficult racialized histories. Harris cited Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien’s writing on Mapplethorpe, which begins with an analysis of the photographer’s reproduction of tropes of racial fetishism and grows more ambivalent, describing how black gay men could experience both attraction and repulsion when seeing porn that plays off stereotypes of black men as either hypersexualized or docile.<sup>6</sup> What began in the forum as a question of how photographers are contextualized became an opportunity to add more historical perspectives rather than erecting a single authoritative one.

In January 2017, just days before the Women’s March on Washington, “What Makes Contemporary Photography Feminist and Queer?” followed up on the issues of the previous forum. The event split attention between feminist curating and acquisition practices inside major New York museums on one hand and smaller-scale lesbian and queer image-making over the last four decades on the other. The divide was illuminated by Catherine J. Morris, senior curator at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. Citing the 2017 exhibition “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–85,” which she co-curated with Rujeko Hockley, Morris showed four images documenting anti-racist protests, while reading from the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement, a key black feminist text. Eschewing the personalized approach of the artists themselves, Morris named neither the photographers nor the individuals shown holding handmade signs with slogans such as dykes against racism everywhere and 3rd world women we cannot live without our lives. I recognized one photo of the Black Lesbian Caucus from the 1972 Christopher Street Liberation March, taken by Bettye Lane: a group pauses amid the flow, and each member reacts differently to Lane’s camera—some smile, others do not.

Captioning an image is the task of both the photographer and those who preserve the image in perpetuity. Most out lesbian-identified photographers operated on the grassroots level in the 1970s and ’80s. By writing letters to each other about everything from image ethics to technical equipment, they built underground support systems that now take time to access, as this information lives tucked away in archives and people’s memories. The kind of protest documentation Morris showed typically appeared in feminist publications or one-night-only slideshows in community centers—and only rarely on gallery walls. Despite repeated calls (then and now) for LGBTQ community-building across professional lines, links are too often missing between the photographers who documented these events and the curators interested in drawing attention to lesbian activism and image production during this era.

JEB (Joan E. Biren), one of the most prolific lesbian photographers of the ’70s and ’80s, spoke at the forum about the responsibility she feels to connect with her subjects; she would often first develop a relationship with her “muses” without a camera present. JEB showed a selection of her photographs of lesbians doing everything from marching in public protests to performing poetry to fixing cars. White, middle-class, and able-bodied, JEB has aimed to represent lesbians in their diversity, across race, class, ability, age, and other categories excluded from the straight,

white norm. JEB switched from photography to filmmaking in the late '80s, when queer image-making was growing in scope and distribution.

Elle Pérez, who is two generations younger than JEB, presented nightlife photographs reflecting the last decade of the Latinx diaspora, from underground queer punk shows to amateur wrestling competitions. Pérez avoids “queer” tropes (such as certain haircuts) that are common in image culture, focusing instead on personal connections between people gathered in temporary celebrations or events. Both JEB and Pérez have recorded their own communities, eliminating the cold distance often associated with black-and-white documentary photography. When describing how they build trust and gain permission from their subjects before taking a photograph, JEB and Pérez echoed Harris’s concerns about the camera’s ability to silence its subjects.

The “Feminist and Queer” forum also addressed the dangerous paradox of visibility faced by those living precarious lives. As Miss Major Griffin-Gracy—a participant in the 1969 Stonewall uprising—and a chorus of trans activists and scholars have argued, mainstream media attention to a handful of trans people produces a “backlash” of violence against trans individuals, especially women of color.<sup>7</sup> One audience member pointedly asked JEB and Pérez how they “deploy positive images to protect queer bodies from the threat of violence.” JEB spoke about the early days of lesbian organizing, and how lesbian self-representation was the first step in undoing invisibility. Yet this effort was inextricably linked to the risk of homophobic attacks: JEB said Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority wanted to buy her work and make it into anti-lesbian propaganda. Images are forever vulnerable to being used in ways contrary to the image-maker’s intent. JEB encouraged lesbians not only to risk appearing in photographs but also to preserve a visual record of their lives, something trans and queer people do incessantly now, thanks to the availability of digital photography.

Pérez (who uses “they/them” pronouns) wondered how relevant or redundant queer portraiture has become in the early twenty-first century, an era when the stigma JEB encountered has shifted to interest, though who is interested and to what end remains an important question. Will the current attention on queer artists last beyond a momentary glance and yield long-term support? Pérez’s work has been featured by various institutions that do not explicitly focus on trans and queer artists. They reflected on images of a now shuttered queer Latinx club in Baltimore, which they withheld for many years, then published online in the aftermath of the Pulse nightclub shooting as a reprieve from the traumatic news.<sup>8</sup> These images, such as one of drag queens peeking through a curtain to watch others perform, elevate offhand moments of pleasure in queer life. When these artists theorize about the histories they are building, audiences learn about the patience and care that go into the images we all consume.

Urgent questions from audience members to the mostly white-appearing panelists at both forums concerned how individuals and institutions in the room could work “to decenter whiteness” as an integral part of the feminist and queer project of representation.<sup>9</sup> Suggestions erupted for curators: someone asserted that Nigerian-British photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, who died of AIDS in 1989, is due for a retrospective. Artist and writer Deborah Bright implored participants to think outside MoMA’s walls, offering a public service announcement for the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art downtown. JEB chimed in to say that the Leslie-Lohman has initiated a fund specifically for acquiring works of artists who belong to identity groups other than the one (white cisgender gay men) that currently dominates its collection.

From my laptop viewing of the forums, I was struck by the impossible broadness of the word “queer,” and the danger of making queerness exceptional or beyond critique: when one identity category (such as queer) qualifies a genre, especially in the context of mainstream image culture that celebrates those who appear white and cisgender, we must trouble the terms and

focus on people whose lives and work have been historically erased. At these contentious queer-themed forums, the sexism of the canon was evident in the focus on gay male desire in “From Stonewall to AIDS” and the disjointed agendas of straight- and queer-identified feminists that created a town-hall atmosphere at the second forum.

The forums asked audiences to consider what has fallen through the cracks in the histories of queer photography. Darrel Ellis was the star of “New Photography 8” in 1992 with mixed-media works distorting family photographs his father, Thomas, took in the 1950s in Harlem and the South Bronx.<sup>10</sup> Ellis was a prolific artist who briefly worked as a security guard at MoMA in the late '80s. He was also a black gay man who died of AIDS at the age of 34, just months before “New Photography 8” opened.<sup>11</sup> While two Ellis works from the exhibition are in MoMA’s permanent collection, the portfolio provided on the website of the nonprofit Visual AIDS offers the most substantial body of his work online.<sup>12</sup> A hand-drawn self-portrait of Ellis was frequently reproduced in the press to represent the controversial 1989 Artists Space exhibition “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing.” A model for other photographers, Ellis wrote a haunting caption to his self-portrait for the Artists Space catalogue: “I struggle to resist the frozen images of myself taken by Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar.”<sup>13</sup>

Ellis, who worked primarily in painting and drawing, used photography to document his practice. He eventually adopted a laborious process—employed in his final body of work for “New Photography 8”—that abstracted figurative representation by projecting his father’s negatives onto three-dimensional molds. Ellis then re-photographed the bent figures and scenes, sometimes adding geometric shapes to block and layer parts of the snapshots, and even further layered the new photograph with watercolor, gouache, pencil, and ink.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Ellis’s pictures captured a family history that ruptured: he died at the hands of plainclothes police over a traffic dispute a month before Darrel was born. In the early years of appropriation, Ellis translated his father’s black-and-white snapshots into figurative drawings and paintings of a matching grayscale palette, as if to memorialize the parties and family milestones. Then came experiments with more turbulent renderings, such as an untitled image of a busy birthday party. Kids float around an adult who extends an arm outside the frame, perhaps serving food, his head reaching the streamers on the ceiling. A picture on the wall ripples like a flag in the wind. Ellis’s reworking of the birthday party scene collages embellishments and obfuscations that evoke the vicissitudes of memory and lost family bonds. Art historian Deborah Willis has described the work as conveying “the notion of absence . . . through excision or obstruction.”<sup>15</sup> I rarely hear Ellis’s name uttered in discussion of queer photography, which should prompt us to question what is recognizable as “queer” in our rich histories.

While the word “queer” is absent from the press release for “Being: New Photography 2018,” the salient question about visibility and vulnerability posed at “What Makes Contemporary Photography Feminist and Queer?” is relevant to those artists in the exhibition who depict people resisting repressive governments and their vigilante enforcers. For the latest iteration of New Photography, curator Lucy Gallun has selected work that challenges histories and frameworks of imaging, revealing how portraiture reinvents itself to protect individuals from state surveillance. For example, the homepage of Yazan Khalili’s personal website shows a short text instead of an image. Boldface letters highlighted neon green like a warning label plainly tell a first-person narrative of crossing the Allenby Bridge out of the West Bank in Palestine and being interrogated for appearing to film at one of the multiple checkpoints. There were no recent images on his phone, so the narrator could prove that he was just checking the time. A subject of the state’s penetrating gaze tried to watch his own surveillance, but this experience lives through language, or the imaginations of myriad readers. A heavy caption floats to the surface in the absence of a literal image. Viewers are offered not a picture, but a story that illustrates the persistent violence of the Israeli occupation.

The discussion at “From Stonewall to AIDS” speaks directly to themes in the work of Paul Mpagi Sepuya, another “Being” artist. Sepuya’s studio portraiture includes snippets of camera equipment, printed photographs, and bodies. In *Mirror Study (4R2A0857)*, 2016, tripod legs poke out below a collage of photographs of human limbs, which Sepuya holds at the center of the image with both arms. Through collage and re-photography, various skin tones, paisley fabric, and a black sock on one foot combine in hybrid forms that seem to occupy both two- and three-dimensional spaces. Proposing representation as an idiom of excerpts, Sepuya moves along the threshold of being inside and outside the scenes he constructs, often appearing inside the frame by using camera timers and mirrors that are sometimes smudged to make the reflective surface noticeable. It’s as if Sepuya has invited into the frame the ghost of Fani-Kayode, who often appeared in his own photos, as well as beckoning those of photographers such as Dureau, who usually stayed behind the camera. Sepuya’s photos vibrate with the dissonance of bodies desiring connection across time, even as the conditions of these connections loom outside the frame.

As major museums show more artists who are queer and not white, we need to develop a fresher discourse about what falls outside the frame of images installed in galleries. Artists who have worked outside, alongside, and within various photographic traditions have sustained their practice through personal relationships. Such affinities are not easily preserved in a permanent collection, but they can be articulated at events such as the Forums on Contemporary Photography, which offer space for questioning and listening. As we watch the slow, awkward change in certain museums’ exhibition and acquisition practices, precarious pasts live on as oral histories, and therefore depend on discussion for their longevity.