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Seeking Permission: On the Photographic Practices of Joan E. Biren (JEB) and Robert Giard

By Ariel Goldberg

QUIET CONNECTIONS

Stormé DeLarverie sits on a bar stool, fully facing the camera, as if the axis of a compass. Mid-afternoon sun sneaks in from a nearby window and mixes with a round light fixture directly above her head. DeLarverie plants one foot on the base of the stool, the other spreads to the right, on a low windowsill. She drapes a leather trench coat, with strap, over her left leg. A bottle opener keychain the shape of a miniature hammer hangs from form-fitting cargo pants, the belt loops covered by a knit sweater. Natural light catches the veins on her resting hand. A weathered reservation book anchors the shelf before the background of the restaurant goes dark. Stormé wears tinted aviator glasses, through which you can still see her eyes.

In the mid-1980s, photographer Robert Giard began recording his portrait sessions immediately after they took place with a ballpoint pen in a modest Roaring Spring spiral-bound notebook, where pages appear fragile along the metal coil bends. I learn from his five-page entry for DeLarverie, dated “NYC, Thursday, November 18, 1999, 2:30PM,” that he was in awe of DeLarverie for participating in the Stonewall Rebellion. “I do want to do SD full justice. She deserves to be a legend . . . I hope I got a decent shot despite glasses that go dark and low-light.”¹ Yet the glamour of being a legend was mixed with the reality that at age 79, she was in a legal dispute with her landlord, the owner of the Chelsea Hotel, about the increasing unaffordability of the building that had housed many artists for decades. DeLarverie also recounts for Giard her role as the emcee and only male impersonator in the Jewel Box Revue, which traveled throughout the country performing for integrated audiences from the 1950s through the ’60s—Giard once saw her perform at the Apollo Theater—in what would now be described as the first

multiracial drag show.² From New Orleans, with a wealthy white father and working-class black mother, DeLarverie faced frequent harassment when growing up for being mixed race, so in the late 1930s, still a teenager, she took her talent on the road as a singer with jazz and swing bands.³ Giard writes of her generosity: “She’s warm and friendly immediately, just as on the phone. She calls me ‘sweetie.’” After they finish the shoot, DeLarverie wants to have a drink (“juice”) at the bar with him and her friend John, a painter. Their time is interspersed with her often recited stories: DeLarverie tells Giard she still refuses to sell the print Diane Arbus gave her from their 1961 portrait session. In *Miss Stormé DeLarverie, the Lady Who Appears to be a Gentleman*, she sits on a park bench in a tweed suit; Arbus chose a title that attempted to clarify any confusion about gender. *Harper’s Bazaar* excised the photograph from Arbus’s photo-essay *The Full Circle* (1961) because DeLarverie’s gender presentation was thought to be too subversive. Meanwhile, Giard’s journal entry from the shoot avoids nostalgia of DeLarverie’s lore, as the cruelty of New York City real estate made her preoccupied with the owner of the Chelsea Hotel and the looming threat of her eviction.⁴ She leaves the bar to go walk a friend’s dog, while Giard goes on to hang out with John.⁵

Giard concludes his journal entry with a record of how he got connected to DeLarverie in the first place: two people he had photographed already and had developed ongoing correspondences with, the historian Charles Kaiser and the independent scholar Barbara Smith, recommended her. Giard’s portraiture, which was shifting from its decade-long focus on lesbian and gay identified writers, had recently culminated in the book *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers* (1997), and he was embarking on a new project on older queer activists and landmarks; it was provisionally titled “Queer Views.”⁶ For both projects, he frequently depended on everyone he photographed to provide recommendations on whom to include next; a large part of each session was populated by this sort of social mapping, which inevitably became gossip, ending with the passing on of scraps of paper with phone numbers and mailing addresses.

In 1986, the photographer Joan E. Biren, popularly known as “JEB,” a moniker that in the early days of her career provided a more compact byline that parted from her recognizable birth name, was completing her second book, *Making a Way: Lesbians Out Front* (1987), which focused on lesbians in action, living their lives. Stormé, at the time, was a bouncer at the Cubbyhole, a West Village lesbian bar that is still in operation. In one portrait taken by JEB for the book, Stormé stands with fingers looped into the belt loops of her jeans, in front of the Cubbyhole, smiling while looking beyond the camera, with a flower pinned below her popped jacket collar, as if reflecting from this ground-level perch on her life in performance and activism. She wears chunky pinky rings on both hands, and a turtleneck beneath a flannel shirt under her jean jacket. Over her left upper thigh hangs a satchel holding the gun she carried, with a state license. On the same shoot, JEB photographed Michelle Parkerson making her short biographical film *Stormé: Lady of the Jewel Box* (1987), where Stormé describes her role as a protector against the violence queers then faced in gentrified gay neighborhoods.⁷



Sarah Schulman, *Women's Liberation Zap Action Brigade* (1981) by JEB (Joan E. Biren); © 2018 JEB

JEB carried generic photo release forms with her on her shoots, whereas Giard would send a release form later on, with proofs, in the mail. Even though JEB's two books were self-published, her printer, who feared libel lawsuits, required a secondary release form, which included a Xerox of the photograph that would appear in *Making a Way*, clearly reiterating the book's subtitle, *Lesbians Out Front*, to prove the subject was aware of the book framing them as a lesbian. In Stormé's release, she does as JEB instructs, to "cross out any parts that do not apply." Stormé ran a thick black marker over the line that read: "I also give permission for use of this photograph with name in any related promotional printed matter and/or related advertising material and/or published reviews."²⁸

Consent is often procured through dialogue, the terms for which have morphed along with the developments in communication and photographic technologies. In the 1980s, JEB and Giard used letters and paper release forms to record this consent, which leaves traces of relationships developed in the photographic exchange. In the more protracted time of analog, such ephemera acknowledges the stakes in documentation of a vulnerable yet varied population.

JEB (b. 1944) and Giard (1939–2002) were eager to put into practice an analysis of both white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy that they had learned from the civil rights, second-wave feminist, and gay liberation movements. While photographic historicists have overlooked their portraiture for a perceived sentimentality (as opposed to the de rigueur of sensationalism of the 1980s and '90s), JEB and Giard's "positive images"²⁹ live on, imbued with the pulse of history's connection to present struggles. Their respective practices offer glimpses into a quiet connection between photographer and those photographed that demonstrates care in seeking out visual representation and maintaining contact, and therefore consent, in the photographic process.

JEB and Giard both began photographing in the early 1970s and were self-taught. JEB's earliest publication was for the influential newspaper *The Furies* (1972–73), where she documented a tight-knit group of lesbian feminists in Washington, DC, some of whom, like JEB, were a part of the Furies Collective for various lengths of time. Giard's practice began with off-season landscape scenes of the Hamptons before turning to modest male



B. Michael Hunter and John Albert Manzon-Santos (1994) by Robert Giard; © 2018 Jonathan G. Silin

nudes, which appeared in 1980 at the Robert Samuel Gallery in Manhattan with unannounced yet overt homoerotic male themes.¹⁰ Both JEB and Giard mostly used black-and-white film as well as less expensive consumer-oriented camera equipment with off-brand names. Giard preferred a twin-lens reflex Rolleicord, while JEB used a 35-mm Nikkormat.

Both photographers had a vision to fill a void in the visual culture. They were compelled to document those openly identified as lesbian and gay; while people have always lived as bisexual and transgender, those words were not adopted by these photographers in the 1970s and '80s to describe their respective projects. JEB and Giard's focus on identity calls for a reflection on their own material conditions as they shaped their photographic practices. Giard moved full time to Amagansett, New York, in 1974 with his then partner and now estate executor, Jonathan Silin. In the mid-1970s, Silin was a co-founder of the East End Gay Organization, where, with a mixed group of lesbians and gay men, the couple participated in a consciousness-raising group.¹¹ Giard taught photography as an adjunct at Southampton College of Long Island University for over

two decades, laboriously commuting to work from the east end of the island before a regular and direct train was available on the Long Island Rail Road. Giard never learned to drive, which meant his trips to photograph people took the form of long journeys on public transit.¹² Giard came from a white working-class background in Hartford, Connecticut. His mother cleaned buildings associated with a Catholic school, while his father held a series of jobs: working in the Underwood Typewriter factory, playing music, and doing custodial work.¹³ Giard studied English Literature at Yale on a full scholarship, before receiving a Masters in Comparative Literature from Boston University in 1965.

JEB's parents, children of poor Jewish immigrants, aspired to a white middle-class suburban life in Maryland. Both her parents worked at white-collar civil service jobs. JEB did not exactly see herself in this assimilative life; her first demonstration was protesting racial segregation in a local amusement park as a teenager.¹⁴ JEB graduated from Mount Holyoke College in 1966, where she had studied political science before going on to pursue her PhD in the same field at Oxford University, but she dropped out as soon as she realized the incompatibility of a straight life in politics with the revolutionary fervor that called her.

JEB and Giard were both able to live close to the ground and devote themselves to their photography. Feminist music scene producers across the United States provided JEB with venues and built-in audiences for her slideshows and photography workshops, where, through word-of-mouth networking, she continued to meet lesbians to photograph. JEB went on tour in 1979 for her first book, *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* (1979), which turned into nearly a decade of making a living by giving slideshow presentations at bookstores, community centers, and eventually universities. Her most widely seen slideshow featured historical and contemporary lesbian photographers, aptly titled *Lesbian Images in Photography: 1850–the present*, also known as *The Dyke Show*, which she performed—mixing the educational format with an ever-evolving comedic script and cache of images—across the US from 1979 to 1984.

Once adept at the slideshow form, she focused her slideshows on activist events, such as the anti-nuclear Seneca Women's Encampment in Upstate New York, with *Look to the Women for Courage: Stories From the Seneca Encampment for Peace and Justice* (1984). JEB also sold her photos for small sums to various feminist and left-leaning publications, such as *Off Our Backs* and the *Washington Blade*.¹⁵

In her own photographs, and the way in which she encouraged other lesbians to take and preserve their own pictures, JEB applied her background in politics to promote various forms of lesbian visual propaganda. She photographed the mundane to the momentous: from lesbians sitting in their living rooms, to fixing cars, to getting arrested at demonstrations. The camera provided a new language for her; as she developed a lesbian feminist consciousness in the early 1970s, she hoped taking pictures offered a way of listening, as opposed to the inherited gestures of patriarchy that she noticed were entrenched in her use of speaking and writing. JEB has identified the camera as being as intimate as a limb: “[it] was part of me, it was like my arm.”¹⁶ She has also described her camera as a “barometer” of

the movement: at first people were afraid to be photographed, and she had to build trust, without the camera even present. As lesbians became more comfortable being seen publicly, her camera became less suspicious, and people in her local community and those she met when traveling expected her to have it at all social and political gatherings. When she didn't, they were disappointed.¹⁷

Giard never relied on an income from his photography. However, his persistent work achieved the attention of Roger Conover, an editor at MIT Press, who turned Giard's massive project of over five hundred portraits of writers—developed over twelve years of photographing any lesbian or gay identified writer, at any stage of their career, in any genre—into the art book *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers* (1997). A total of 182 portraits were selected from an ongoing project of over 600 portraits, each with a facing page of excerpted writing from the author. A year later, the founding curator of New York Public Library's photography collections, Julia Van Haaften, mounted an exhibition of 110 of the prints from its collection of two hundred *Particular Voices* photographs.¹⁸ Van Haaften was Giard's greatest champion outside of the usually segregated gay art and literary worlds. As a white gay man, Giard had relatively more access to mainstream presses and platforms than JEB, who lived and worked in the lesbian feminist subculture. Nevertheless, Giard's platforms were far from commercial artworld venues. JEB's only solo show to date was also at a library: at the George Washington University library.¹⁹ Meanwhile, JEB and Giard's work continues to accrue cultural capital, despite the miniscule financial support it has provided the artists. They are now receiving more attention and recognition in part because their multimedia collections have been archived: JEB's by the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, and Giard's by the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University. While JEB's photography intended to document the lesbian feminist movement, Giard was motivated to begin *Particular Voices* when people were rapidly dying of HIV/AIDS in the early days of the epidemic.²⁰

"RESPONSIBILITY TO OUR MUSES"

Barbara and Beverly Smith, who are twin sisters, sit in a home office in Roxbury, a neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1978. The background of the picture is a desk covered with stacks of papers. Anchoring one edge of the frame is a filing cabinet; at the other edge, a bookshelf. Blinds are drawn on the window, but sun still streams in, mixing with the lighting equipment JEB brought. On the left, Barbara's desk chair is covered in a crocheted blanket. She turns to directly face Beverly, who is turned more toward the camera, on a diagonal. The image appears to capture a break from their work at the desk. Barbara was at the time co-editing, with Lorraine Bethel, *Conditions: Five; The Black Women's Issue*.²¹ She smiles while listening to Beverly, who appears to pause, mid-thought, looking upward. Barbara's left hand rests on the receding metal arms of a typewriter's spread of letters that hurl up to mark the page. Their 1970s shirt collars droop over sweaters. Beverly holds a two-sided pencil, and rests a pad of paper on the heel of her right foot which is crossed over her left thigh. At thirty-two years old, they bore witness



JEB at the Ovular Photography Workshop, Oregon (1980); photograph by Clytia Fuller

to the desegregation of Boston's public schools while developing black feminist theory *and* practice as co-founders of the Combahee River Collective (1974–80), which originated ideas of intersectional politics, coalition building, and identity politics.²²

Barbara wrote back to JEB in May 1979, after receiving proof prints, that she and Beverly also liked the one JEB liked best. Most of the letter tells JEB about the “state of emergency”²³ in the Boston area, which was experiencing an epidemic of murders of black women. Barbara and Beverly were organizing in response to the violence with pamphlets, demonstrations, and consciousness-raising groups. A few months later, both Barbara and Beverly wrote JEB as she was finalizing her book *Eye to Eye*, with a request to modify the terms of their release form. Like two other black-identified lesbian writers and activists JEB photographed, DeLarverie and Parkerson, Barbara and Beverly Smith asked JEB *not* to use their photographs