

# Introduction

ANTHONY W. LEE, NICK MAUSS,  
AND ANGELA MILLER

Almost as soon as the portable camera became widely available in the 1890s and within the financial reach of the middle and working classes, queer Americans began exploring the role photographs could play in imagining—in constructing—both their social worlds and the many ways they inhabited them.<sup>1</sup> Particularly in New York, where in the early twentieth century queer culture was open, thriving, and richly textured, the camera had no shortage of subjects or locations, of bathhouses, bars, cafeterias, drag halls, house parties, parks, street parades, and tearooms, from the Bowery to Harlem, Greenwich Village to Times Square, and places beyond.<sup>2</sup> In these photographers' hands, the camera's special power was its ability to flicker into visibility the many spaces within which queer New York, and the people who occupied it, took shape. Particularly in working-class districts, queer society had an insistent, visible life. In these spaces, queer men readily found and aided each other while navigating the city's loose surveillance and intermittent regulation.

It was arguably only in the late 1930s and extending into the following two decades when a more circumspect photographic practice began to develop as queer culture was forcibly driven underground. The social worlds of queer men did not disappear; they became more segregated and exclusive.

The effort to picture these networks and the particular social relationships, arrangements, and identities they fostered met with a host of new photographic strategies. In this new generation's way with the camera, photography tended to become more aware of police regulation and legal restraint, more sensitive to the closeting demanded of queer society, and also quite possibly, from our point of view, even more inventive.

This volume of *Defining Moments in Photography* explores this key turning point in the history of the medium through four of its key figures. Whereas previous volumes in the series have usually focused on a single photographer or body of images, *Body Language* considers two distinct artists whose seemingly divergent practices overlapped in significant and surprising ways. One "artist" consists of the trio of painters whose photographic collaborations were attributed to PaJaMa (Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and Margaret Hoening French); the other is the high-profile fashion and celebrity photographer George Platt Lynes. The four artists knew each other; shared a social world of friends and fellow artists, dancers, and writers; distributed their work among their circle; posed for one another; and exchanged thoughts about their practices. Coauthored by Angela Miller, an art historian, and Nick Mauss, an artist, *Body Language* is the first book to analyze PaJaMa and Lynes in tandem, paying close attention to their shared strategies of expanded authorship and arguing that these artists used their photographic practices as forms of queer world-making.

The term *queer world-making* brings into focus the manner in which these artists used photography to create a reality beyond social documentation and exceeding the limits of a historical moment, one constrained by cultural taboos and legal injunctions against the visibility of queer sexualities. Photography was particularly suited for building alternative communities, defined by its reproducibility and free circulation through social networks and display, from early cartes de visite to later mass-market publications,

advertisements, and public galleries and art museums. Such powers of circulation troubled the boundary between public and private worlds, a boundary strictly enforced by the primary institutions of private life in the middle-class republic from the mid-nineteenth century on. In the mid-twentieth century, when homophobia reached a fever pitch, the sanctioned preserve of private life framed, contained, and also limited sexuality in all its rich variety. Heteronormative values stemming from the family's key role in sexual and social reproduction expanded outward to define and limit the definitions of citizenship and forms of community that in turn underwrote the nation-state's regulation of private life.

During a period that saw the public sphere become ever more restrictive of nonnormative sexualities following the relative openness of the 1920s, photography offered a new mode of access to social spaces in which sexuality *could* be expressed in a range of ways off-limits in the conventional middle-class romantic scenario, in which sex was an intimate affair between men and women, defined by its *private* nature. The photographs—made by PaJaMa and Lynes—enact the undercurrents of sexual tension, mobile desires, jealousy, power plays, and performative identities that exceeded social norms and definitions of reproductive intimacy. Emboldened by the presence of the camera, these artists perform a social world shaped by uncontained desire, a disruptive force that threatened the stability of the very private sphere whose function had been to regulate desire. Instead, the artists whose work we explore here made their images in the context of *non-reproductive* social worlds they co-created and shared, confounding the given opposition between public and private, and describing alternative spaces and ways of being together.<sup>3</sup> The beach, for PaJaMa, and the studio, for Lynes, emerged as spaces of possibility.

+ + + +



Figure 1. Pajama, Margaret and Paul, Fire Island. 1944. Gelatin silver print.  $4\frac{1}{2} \times 7$  in.  
Courtesy of Keith de Lellis Gallery.

Whether circulated among the closed publics of like-minded friends and associates or through a private language in more public sites, queer artmaking in the years around World War II took shape through a new body language, consciously staged. The bodies that lean and arc toward one another, or tense in taut profile, or confront one another across space, pinioning others with their gaze, are like semaphores—silently communicating to one another in a language of signs that convey desire and deflected longing. Bodies relax into driftwood and sand, or languidly turn away from one another, separated by emotionally charged distances. Figures stand alert as sentinels, or torque and bend with powerful grace. Both essays explore the ways in which such ritualized gestures and actions with symbolic props invent a new kind of queer social enactment taking shape beyond existing genres and practices. Intersubjectivity becomes an important theme across

our readings of these artists who consistently made work “through the eyes” of each other.

This intersubjective nature of PaJaMa’s and Lynes’s queer artistic production blurred the boundary between self and other, public and private worlds, transforming the very subject of photography by implicating the photographer as much as the photographed subjects as co-conspirators in the making of images. But more than capturing the collaborative nature of their games of staging, the photographs reveal their interfiliated social worlds, involving mentorship, reciprocal influence, and the protective “bracketing” of those who in different circumstances suffered psychological and social isolation resulting from their sexual orientation. PaJaMa’s games countered this sense of isolation by playfully affirming group identities. Photography for them was a tool not of self-expression but of *enactment*: a process shaped by the interactions between and among other selves and responsive to the shifting circumstances coming to light beyond the agency of the individual actor. As Miller writes, “Their performed actions, rather than *expressing* anterior emotions, actively scripted the raw material of their shared lives. The photographs they made were the trace, or record, of this collective process.”

Just how entwined PaJaMa’s and Lynes’s worlds were can be gauged by the many shared models that recur between their photographs and paintings—including dancers José Martinez and John Butler, playwright Tennessee Williams, novelists E.M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, artist Fidelma Cadmus (Paul’s sister) and her impresario husband, Lincoln Kirstein, actor Sandy Campbell, curator Monroe Wheeler and author Glenway Wescott (with whom Lynes was engaged in a three-way domestic partnership), and painter George Tooker (lover of Cadmus). Paul Cadmus, Margaret French, and Jared French are usually recognized not as photographers but as painters. The hybrid identity that unified them as PaJaMa is as much a new artistic identity as it is a representation of their *ménage à trois*. Yet it is clear that the camera was not an

incidental or occasional tool in their hands but something to which they turned repeatedly, beginning in 1937, extending with regularity to 1947, and continuing on, though with less frequency, as late as 1957—in all, a twenty-year odyssey driven by Margaret’s state-of-the-art, handheld Leica range finder. Their total number of pictures is as yet unknown, perhaps numbering in the hundreds. Today these can be found in the Archives of American Art, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and especially at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where Margaret French deposited a trove of contact prints.<sup>4</sup> Private collectors and those to whom the trio gave their photographs may still yield up other examples. A number of these served as source material for paintings, but many were staged solely for the camera. The Leica was passed from one to the other in joint sessions—indeed, one can often infer by absence which of the three had taken a certain photograph. The pictures, almost entirely concerned with their society of three and a small circle of family and friends, were the results of collective experimentation and decision-making. Even their very name, PaJaMa, Miller writes, was “meta-authorial,” identifying the trio’s entangled identities both behind and in front of the lens.

Lynes was self-taught, attaining international acclaim as one of the most inventive studio photographers of the 1940s. His particular vision of glamour drew from a vast reservoir of visual culture: the interlocking gaze, the fashion pose, the embodied language of dance, references to classical painting, beefcake, Surrealism, and Hollywood star photography, as well as homages to his own cohort of artistic peers. He moved between genres and invented new ones: psychologically piercing portraits of writers, artists, and other cultural celebrities; insouciant fashion editorials; allegorical nudes; tableaux of alienated eroticism; glamorous photomontages; crystalline images of modern ballet; and hybrids of all the above.

Lynes’s images circulated through nearly every possible channel of distribution: from advertising and editorials in mass-market publications to

the more exclusive gallery and museum exhibitions that featured his work, specialty publications of nudes, and photographs commissioned by the US Air Force during World War II, as well as to the very circumscribed audience of friends and lovers who delighted in the wealth of experimental images Lynes was unable to exhibit publicly but that he gave away as gifts. While recent scholarship has emphasized the compartmentalization of Lynes's studio practice to allow for his secret exploration of the aesthetic power of the male nude, Mauss looks to the instances in which Lynes refused such compartmentalization through the provocative cross-pollination of his varied genres. Lynes's images reveal an alertness to the fact that the differences between art lovers, balletomanes, readers of fashion magazines, cinephiles, homosexuals, or literati are tenuous compared with their points of contact. It is precisely the spaces *between* audiences that Lynes exploited. Viewed in this light, his artistic project is no longer confined to polarities of public and private but can be seen as a larger exploration of how publics are constituted and addressed. The wide spectrum of his creative output and the precision with which he calibrated its various degrees of visibility reflect the work of a tactician attuned to the latest trends in art and fashion, whose ingenuity allowed him to circumvent increasingly homophobic social mores and legal restrictions. A new reading of Lynes's work allows us to better understand the synergy between the avant-garde and commercial photography worlds in which he was a central player, and to appreciate the subversively queer implications of his variegated practice.

Lynes and several members of his inner circle posed in PaJaMa pictures, and all three PaJaMa protagonists posed for portraits in Lynes's studio. PaJaMa and Lynes shared significant procedures: working collaboratively; playing the simultaneous roles of artist, model, and muse; staging their images; and circulating them as a form of social media—a way to confirm the multiple *networks* that constituted their lived and desired worlds. One recorded instance shows more directly how their artistic projects merged. A