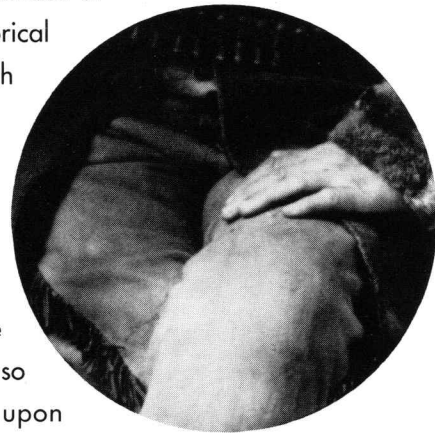




While much lies buried among the chaotic pile of memories which recall the art and theory of the 1980's, one image in particular remains pronounced. It is of representation being raided from the rummage bins of popular culture and the archives of art history; a practice of thievery not only condoned, but celebrated by the deconstructionist theory which accompanied it. Appropriating both the banal and the beatified, artists stripped representation of its conceits; revealing that there was no inherent essence, no 'truthful' origin, which lay beyond or behind the naturalized reproductions of an image or an identity.

Nina Levitt's work owes something to these photographic practices of appropriation. Purloining the imagery of pulp novels and historical record, she too enacts a series of deconstructive practices which trouble the representational limits of identity, desire and sexuality. And yet Levitt's work pushes beyond the habitual inferences and assumptions of what was then called a 'postmodern' photographic practice. In particular, her work exposes one presumption which — while pervasively embedded — largely remains impervious to questioning or critique. This is the presumption of heterosexuality: the unstated (because supposedly so obvious) inference that desire and sexuality is predicated upon (hetero)sexual difference: the difference of woman from man.

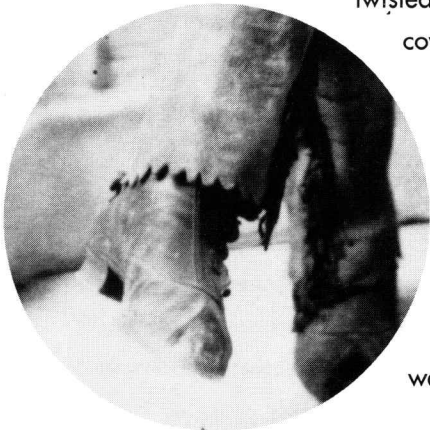


NINA LEVITT

DRAWING
UPON THE
PALIMPSEST

In its continuing progressions, Nina Levitt's work reminds us of the unnatural means by which the naturalness of a heterosexual ideology is maintained. In *Conspiracy of Silence* (1987) she throws the straight image off course by revealing and bringing to light its own hidden twistedness. Photographing images of lesbian sexuality found on the

covers of pulp novels from the 1950s and 1960s, Levitt re-presents them in the form of a negative print. This inverted use of the photograph not only comments upon a conventional view of the homosexual as 'invert', but inverts the normalized 'cover' of heterosexuality itself. In these photographic reproductions, the positive is made negative; dark hair becomes light; light skin becomes dark; things, quite literally, are turned inside out. And while the words read as they always do, their meaning must give way as well. Superimposed by the ghostly images of a woman's

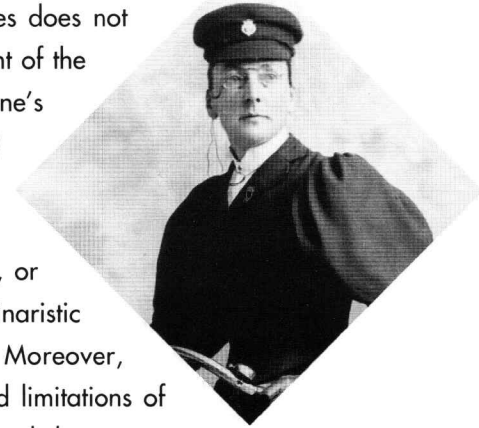


BY BETH SEATON

modest underwear, these covers become a palimpsest: the material upon which one writing has been effaced to make room for another.

In many respects, Levitt's more recent work continues with this operation of the palimpsest: an action of recovery and recuperation. In appropriating certain historical images of cross-dressing women — whose rejections of the garments of femininity was viewed as an unseemly usurpation of masculine authority — Levitt's photographs not only expose heterosexuality as a compulsory performance, but also recover what had been lost or made impossible, under this 'dressing-up'.

Perhaps the most prevalent lesbian stereotype is that of the butch or masculine woman dressed in men's clothes. The implication which rides under this representation is that these females are not 'real' women, but rather women who want to be men. And yet Levitt's reconstituted portrait of Calamity Jane dressed in buckskin britches does not entail a celebration of the masculine at the expense of an effacement of the feminine. For Levitt literally draws out specific points of Calamity Jane's body (her crotch, her foot, her hand which holds the barrel of a gun) from the parameters of the photograph: a detailing which not only acts to forefront her particular sex, but interrupts and punctures that representational frame which attempts to define how this sex can, or should, be seen. *Calamity* (1991) reveals the way in which the binaristic gender roles of heterosexuality are themselves simply 'put on'. Moreover, 'putting on' can also be a means of taking off: from the prefigured limitations of gender, or the limited choices of 'ready-to-wear' found in a heterosexual closet.



While not pertaining to choices of clothing, *Submerged (for Alice Austen)* (1991) does refer to the choices of love. Based upon Alice Austen's photograph "The Darned Club" (1891), Levitt's reworking of this image one hundred years later again forefronts a small but disruptive detail: in this case, the highly evocative affect of touch. Certainly, *Submerged* emphasizes isolation and erasure. These female figures have been severed and the space which they originally occupied (a promontory enclosed by the domestic barriers of a picket fence) is left empty and blank. And yet, there is also a heightened sense of intimacy and attachment here, and it is this co-presence which lends *Submerged* its incisive effect. One is drawn to the ways in which the bodies of these two female couples meet: toes joining toes; arms wrapped around waists; smiling faces held to one another. Paradoxically, by segmenting this image, Levitt has emphasized its symmetry: a completeness which is largely dependent upon the union of the bodies themselves. As if to allude to this point, Levitt has left the ghostly traces of bodies under the top image of the couples' heads. While barely allowed to discern that which has been rendered nearly invisible, we are drawn to the solace of that which once was, and still exists.

Things continue to happen in Nina Levitt's photographs; as if there were some unexpected activity at work here which impels these images to take leave of their representational boundaries. In her series of portraits mined from Montreal's Notman Archives, Levitt has compiled an album of women which, while engaging with the question of 'photographic evidence', exceeds a normative

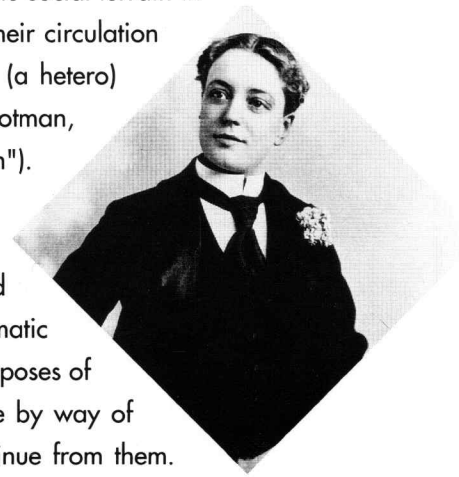
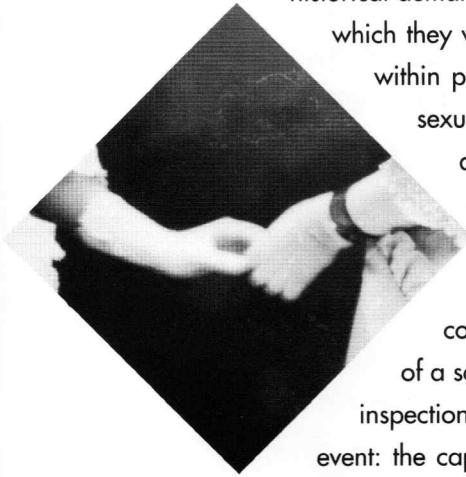
logic of resemblance, conformity, or categorical type. As details extracted from source imagery ranging from 1880 to 1935, the portraits attest to photography's dual capacity as both an "honorific and repressive" ¹ medium capable of not only extolling individuals, but inscribing social identities. Prised from their original contexts, these individuated faces (of swimmers, nuns, cyclists, cross-dressers, golfers, or Chinese girls) could act as the representative species or types which make up a composite whole: the female body, the outlaw body, the body of the archive. So too, as historical artifacts, do they conform to the comfort of nostalgic truth, that "that-which-has-been", which photography has conceitedly claimed as its own. And yet this rogues' gallery of women does not yield to those imperatives normally held within an archive's social or

historical demarcations. By evacuating these women from the social terrain in which they were originally posed, Levitt has disrupted their circulation within particular currencies of (a feminine) gender, (a hetero) sexuality, (a white) race, and (an upper) class (Notman, after all, being "Photographer to the Queen").

In so doing, she has reconstructed another archive, one in which the past is re-coloured, confirmed, and contested within the present. Neither emblematic of a social aggregate, nor individuated for the purposes of inspection, these photographs effect their significance by way of event: the capricious incidents which condition and continue from them.

Their connection, or affinity, is supported not by an imposition of type, but by touch: the repeated image of female hands joined together. Naming these hands "neutral moments", Levitt has left them literally 'colourless' in order to dispel the cultural taints of normality by which female affections are discoloured and disapproved. It is through these hands that these past lives touch, and it is in this touch that the past is made to intersect with present situations, stirring up a complicated mix of re-invention and erasure.

Levitt's photographs invite one into the heart of a conundrum: a place where the truth and the lie turn upon one another and dualities twist into Gordian knots. *Le Monde Interdit* (1992) folds the binarisms of social discourse inside out to reveal the messy entrails of societal panic. The covers of a 1960's yellow press — whose headlines scream alarmingly of lesbians invading the sanctity of domestic and rural spaces — have been blown to monstrous proportions, thus bringing to light the strategies by which monsters are invented. The tactic of the palimpsest is again in evidence. For stealing in from the margins of these populist posters to gradually inhabit a position of centrality are the small and delicately framed source images of the Notman Archives. These women from the past, now wholly shown in their studio and social settings, have not been placed for the purposes of contrast: a historical truth posed against the hysterical. It's not simply a matter of having to decide between the two, for such choices may only fall to one side or the other. Rather, this co-presence of the historical and the histrionic begins to incite a reciprocal process of animation which moves not just among the photographs themselves, but reaches out from the



Untitled (from
the Notman Archives),
1992 (detail)

confines of their frames to involve the viewer. What was once ossified begins to stir, and in this movement the contrivances of truth are revealed as a complex fabric of small fibs and fanciful elaborations. An unexpected combination of closure and dispersal is at work, wherein the photographs are culturally enforced, bound within their ideological agendas, and yet are also dispersed into the viewer's desires, constructs, and framings: given over to ulterior imaginary endeavours. The certainties to which these photographs attest, their 'original truths', are intermingled with other truths and half-lies which we, in the present, add, each time producing a different version of what is accurate or genuine.

Within the motile spaces of these images, we may begin to acknowledge our disappointments and dependencies, but also to recognize our dreams and aspirations; those desires which move beyond that which already is, to that which now may be brought into being. Without resolution, Levitt's photographs are always protean beings. Moving within the dreamed and the decreed, they await numerous possibilities, for things continue to happen.

1. Sekula, Allan, "The Body and the Archive", *October* #39, Winter 1986, p. 3-64.



Submerged
(for Alice Austen),
1991 (detail)

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