

Buffering The Lens

Text by Ariel Goldberg and Noam Parness

*Uncanny effects: effects as of the frame; as of the mask: effects of focal length.*¹

— Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

¹Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "White Glasses," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 5, no. 3 (1992) 197.

²Ibid

³Robert Giard Journal Entry on Eve Sedgwick, 1999, New York City, Notebook 7, Robert Giard Papers, 1 Box, The New York Public Library, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950–2009) prepared her essay entitled *White Glasses* as a premature obituary for her friend Michael Lynch (1944–1991). Lynch was an author, English professor, and LGBT and AIDS activist in Toronto, who would live with HIV for only two more months following Sedgwick's May 1991 presentation of this essay at the City University of New York's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference in New York City. By this time, Robert Giard (1939–2002) was six years into his project, *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers*, in which he would document over 600 LGBTQ authors throughout the course of two decades. One year before he began *Particular Voices*, Giard photographed Michael Lynch in Amagansett, New York in 1984 (Figure 1). In this image, Lynch's nude body is shadowed against a white brick wall and dappled in repeating hyphens of sunlight. While his body, with bathing suit tan lines visible, angles away from the camera, Lynch's face confronts us; his eyes gaze casually toward the viewer, toward the lens, toward the photographer.

This image suggests a warm and playful afternoon in the Hamptons. Giard, a self-taught photographer who lived in Amagansett since 1974, chose to print this close up image of Lynch. Yet the contact sheets that accompany this photo session include a series of frames where Giard zoomed his camera out. Giard paid attention to other elements such as the window on an adjacent wall, or a pool skimmer peeking out from the sunlit lawn. These details hovering at the edge of the frame betray the single photograph that Giard printed by presenting a fuller scene, and suggesting a wider context for its making. No longer a frozen memory of Lynch, the

contact sheet gives access to other options, failures, overexposures, and processes.

As curators of *Uncanny Effects*, we have been utilizing Sedgwick's "uncanny" not only as our title, but more importantly, as an organizing principle for this exhibition. Sedgwick describes how her attempt to purchase an almost identical pair of white glasses that frame Michael Lynch's face allows for an identification with him: "When I am with Michael, often suddenly it will be as if we were fused together at a distance of half an inch from the eye."² Sedgwick's description for the functions of a lens and a frame, and their attempts at identification (or perhaps at mimicry), is an apt metaphor for Giard's photographic process. Through his lens Giard tried to learn about the cultural production, experiences, and personal environments of the people he photographed. However, the ongoing sharpening of eyeglasses offers a point of contrast to the brief shutter of a camera lens.

While many of Giard's images circulate as attentive portraits of writers, what is perhaps lesser known is the research and literary aspects that surrounded Giard's image-making. Before each photoshoot with an author as part of *Particular Voices*, he would be sure to read some of their writings to get a sense of the authors' works and literary contributions. At first, correspondence would be mailed back-and-forth to inquire about a photoshoot, then book manuscripts sent (if no titles were in print), letters exchanged about using images for author headshots, and, sometimes, permission requested to reproduce or exhibit an author's image. Giard, it turns out, photographed Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 2: Robert Giard, *Portrait of the Photographer*, 1982, silver gelatin print, 10 x 8 in. © the Estate of Robert Giard.

1999, as a late addition to *Particular Voices*. “ES is an Honorary Gay; her ‘queerness’ qualifies her for my archive.”³ We still have not been able to locate the photographs that Giard took of this scholar and artist, which evidences how vast his portraiture practice was. We suspect Sedgwick’s image is not at the surface of Giard’s archive because she was photographed immediately after his book and major exhibition of *Particular Voices* took shape, and her images were not edited into the mix of his newer project, *Queer Views*. Perhaps Sedgwick characterized a grey area that troubled his identity-based categories. Her image waits to be activated.

emphasis on lesbian writing active from 1976–1990, we found that over half the contributors posed for Giard, including Samuel Ace (b. 1954) who used Giard’s author photo for him on his first collection of poems *Normal Sex* (1994), and the United States’ current Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo (b. 1951).

Just as the majority of Giard’s portraiture was specific to the daily environments of his sitters’, the space of Giard’s image production occurred in his home. He printed all of his negatives in a closet-like darkroom with a layover across the hall to the kitchen’s water flow, which would be out of commission for cooking when it was rigged to wash his prints. In one of the early self-portraits of *Uncanny Effects*, Giard is wearing a rubber apron, indicating the toxicity to the chemical baths used for gelatin silver printing, yet he is still exposed, without a shirt on and barefoot. He both protects and makes his body vulnerable to his materials (Figure 2).

Giard shot almost exclusively on black and white film, usually with a twin-lens reflex Rolleicord camera on a tripod with no artificial lights. While committing himself to making photographs, Giard worked modestly and persistently in Amagansett. In the late 1970s, he began teaching photography courses at Southampton Community College, and by the early 1980s, was participating in local activities such as the East End Gay Organization’s mixed gender consciousness raising group. *Uncanny Effects* is as much a show with notable figures’ portraits as it is a portrait of a photographer who was working against the grain of photographers who were swept into the art market starting in the 1980s who have now become household names.

Inspired by two plays in 1985—William Hoffman’s (1939–2017) *As Is* and Larry Kramer’s (b. 1935) *The Normal Heart*—Giard felt it imperative to document gay and lesbian authors in a time when his peers were dying in the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Giard produced portraits for a growing tide of queer cultural production in the United States during a period of acute homophobia and ongoing state violence toward lives that fell outside the white hegemony. Giard continued, all the while, his seemingly more meandering but continuous practice of nudes, still lives, and landscapes, which began prior to the organizing principle of a state of emergency that marks *Particular Voices*, which has often been plucked as his most distinguished body of work.

In curating a retrospective of Giard’s work, we are concerned with the precise question of how Giard can speak to the now. Do we have enough reflective space from the late 20th century to understand its image production? As white male toxicity reaches its unholy apex, Giard shared an embodiment of limitations that, we believe, he tried to face as necessary modes of departure in the task of

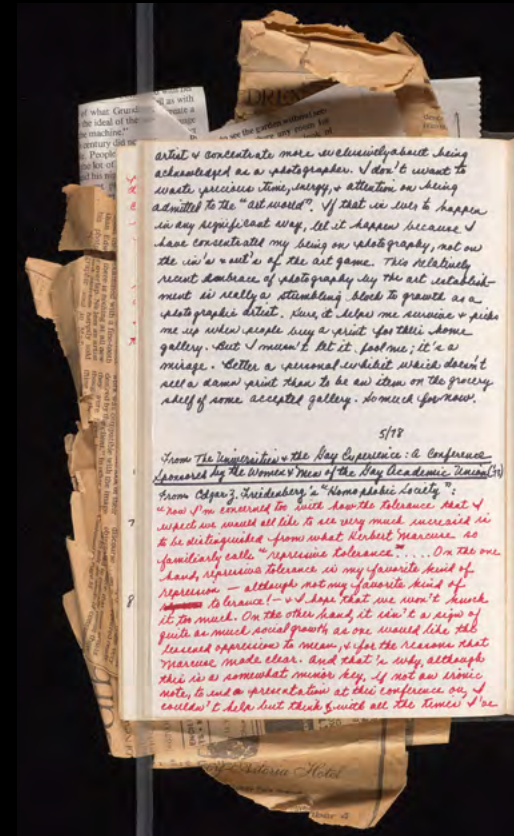


Fig. 3

Giard often left one portrait session with more names, phone numbers, and addresses for future portraits. His process is marked not only by the pace of analogue film, but an analogue network. We value the comparative slowness of Giard’s practice to modes of photographing today. Suggestions of who to follow were not presented by an algorithm, but by in person conversations and correspondences that relied on the durational movements of the postal systems, landlines, and answering machines. We are met with these networks when looking at the rich histories of small press LGBTQ publishing of the late 20th century. In a Table of Contents for issue 16 of *Conditions* (1989), a feminist literary journal with an

Fig. 3: Robert Giard Journal Entry, May 1978, Robert Giard Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, © the Estate of Robert Giard.

photographic representation. His portraiture alternates between tense and expansive negotiations of communicating with another's image through the lens. He attempted to build relationships that were necessary to buffer the lens. He knew he wanted to represent those who lived life from perspectives and experiences different than his own, but shared being "lesbian" and "gay."

Giard processed this tension between himself and the people he photographed through writing in small, metal coil bound notebooks, immediately after his shoots as if exposing another type of film through words. He wrote about arriving at the sitter's house, if he was late or early—always traveling by public transit—what mood he was in, what mood they seemed to be in, contextualized by the tenor of their previous letters or phone calls. If not already friends, he questioned how they would relate both during the task of the portrait and outside of it. In his journals, Giard personalized memories of gossip, insecurities, and rough observations about the intimate space of people's homes and their neighborhoods. On his ferry ride from Audre Lorde's (1934–1992) Staten Island home, he meditated on what it meant to see the Statue of Liberty. He narrated if he arrived at someone's home while they were going through a painful break up. He sometimes recorded an attraction to his sitters while photographing them, or noted someone's ambivalence and resistance to the camera's and Giard's own gaze. He used the space of his journal to meditate on how he imagined, or sometimes even discussed, the specific experience of being imaged. He was drawn to take portraits of writers because he too, was a writer; just before he passed away, he began his *Queer Views* project, about very early LGBTQ activists and geographic sites of relevance, which was intended to include his own writings alongside his photographs.

Giard's *Particular Voices* journals, located at the New York Public Library (NYPL), were restricted for 20 years, according to the stipulations of Giard's donation. This April they fortuitously became available to researchers at NYPL, the same site of his first major exhibition of *Particular Voices* in 1998, a year after the book version of the project was published by The MIT Press. A selection of Giard's journals featured in *Uncanny Effects* are at the heart of understanding the nuances of his practice. How does Giard's writing gesture towards kinship in his images? The shutter flirted with potential. Camera equipment rubbed against questions.

Uncanny Effects does not promise a representative sample of Giard's practice as a whole; instead it is a snapshot of what we, as curators, find relevant and interesting to share in this moment, which is his process, and the traces of contact forged through the photograph. We selected images of artists,

writers, and activists, as well as the occasionally anonymous sitters of his nude portraits. We feature portraits of individuals whose work we wanted to learn more about, searching through the lens of how Giard connected to this person, and engaging with their cultural production in conversation with Giard's correspondences and journal entries.

Giard took a dual category as his starting point for *Particular Voices*: that of "lesbian" and "gay," which we update three decades later to LGBTQ (and which, by the late 1990s, he would change to "queer"). Some of those Giard photographed, such as Patrick Califia (b. 1954) and Samuel Ace, transitioned their genders after their portraits were taken. In one journal entry from 1999, Giard notes how Sylvia Rivera (1951–2002) corrected the pronoun he used for her friend Chelsea during their portrait session (Figure 4). In his journal entry for a shoot with Minnie Bruce Pratt (b. 1946) and Leslie Feinberg (1949–2014) in 1993, he records their recommendations to read the work of Kate Bornstein (b. 1948), and how he learned more about gender. Giard was afoot to constant change because he wanted to preserve life being lived; he saw the precariousness of queer lives and their histories.

The categories that structured Giard's projects now pose challenges for us as curators. We are one of many stewards of his work since he died suddenly of a heart attack in 2002. We too struggle with similar grey areas that alleged identity categories prompt and duplicate. With each image, contact sheet, correspondence, we invoke our attempt to regenerate his network, to notify those who are still living about our intent to include their image in *Uncanny Effects*. We want to pick up on conversations between Giard and those he photographed. We want to get in touch, to see how those people remember him and their experience of being photographed by him. We want to know how they relate to their image now.

UNCANNY EFFECTS: Robert Giard's Currents of Connection
On View: January 22 – April 19, 2020
Curated by Ariel Goldberg and Noam Parness

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Ariel Goldberg's publications include *The Estrangement Principle* (Nightboat Books, 2016) and *The Photographer* (Roof Books, 2015). Goldberg's writing has most recently appeared in *Afterimage*, *e-flux*, *Artforum*, and *Art in America*.



Fig. 4

Fig. 4: Robert Giard, *Sylvia Rivera*, Brooklyn, 1999, silver gelatin print, 14 x 14 in. © the Estate of Robert Giard.