

Phyllis Christopher: *Contacts*

23 October 2021 – 20 March 2022



Contacts is an intimate glimpse at lesbian community in San Francisco in the 1990s through the archive of photographer Phyllis Christopher. Belonging to a politicised tradition of documentary photography, Christopher's handprinted and tinted images reflect how the camera participated in the performance of queer identities and feminist politics in the club and in the streets.

This marks the first major institutional survey of Christopher's work, which she produced while living in San Francisco between 1988 and 2003. Her archive offers insight into expressions of lesbian sexuality and queer politics during a period of heightened homophobic violence and state censorship amid the AIDS crisis in the US. Pairing images depicting moments of sexual intimacy alongside documents of LGBTQ+ protest in the street, *Contacts* explores the ways that visual representation and political activism are rendered inseparable through Christopher's lens.

Amid the connected crises of HIV/AIDS and gentrification, Christopher and her collaborators answered the historic absence of representations of lesbian life with an abundance of images showing acts of sexual intimacy and public protest – a community defiantly taking up space and taking care of their own. An ethic of consent frames Christopher's images as photographer and subject negotiate what it means to be shown and seen as lesbian, both then and now.

Christopher produced her first body of work as a photographer in the early 1980s while enrolled in college in her hometown of Buffalo, NY. She is one of a number of photographers to begin documenting lesbian community in this period, after the gains of the women's and gay liberation movements in the previous decade, at a time when debates about the place of sex in feminist politics intensified. Moving to San Francisco in 1988 so that she might be closer to this emerging culture, Christopher began to document the world that she occupied, from pro-choice protests and demonstrations against pharmaceutical profiteering to the queer punk scene and lesbian-run sex clubs.

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Christopher's work documents a period in which expressions of lesbian sexuality intersected with queerness as a political declaration. Her early work was made at the height of the AIDS crisis in the US, at a time when hard-won combination therapies and grassroots safe sex initiatives were transforming ideas about sexual practices and politics. In Christopher's photographs, women put their bodies on the line, facing an increasingly militarised police force on the street. Alongside documentation of public protest, the exhibition includes photographs that stage vivid performances of sexuality and gender in the context of clubs and photo shoots. Together they reflect how the camera participated in the construction of queer identities and feminist politics in the nineties.

The images in *Contacts* are part of a tradition of politicised documentary in which communities take the means of representation into their own hands. They circulated in the context of lesbian-run media, in magazines such as *On Our Backs* where Christopher worked as photo editor between 1991 - 1994. Many of the photographs in *Contacts* are handprinted and tinted by the artist, mirroring the care with which Christopher documents her community. As well as the acts of intimacy shown in the photographs, the title of the exhibition gestures to the on-going conversations that allow this work to be made public and to the new connections made as the photographs continue to be shared.

Contacts is curated by Laura Guy, editor of a new book dedicated to Christopher's work. *Dark Room: San Francisco Sex and Protest, 1988-2003* is Christopher's first monograph and has been published by Bookworks in Spring 2021. The exhibition at BALTIC coincides with Christopher's solo exhibition at Grand Union in Birmingham and together they represent the artist's first major retrospective.

Notes to Editors:

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About BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

BALTIC is a major international centre for contemporary art situated on the south bank of the River Tyne in Gateshead, England and has welcomed over eight million visitors since opening to the public in July 2002. BALTIC presents a distinctive and ambitious programme of exhibitions and events, and is a world leader in the presentation and commissioning of contemporary visual art.

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About Phyllis Christopher

Phyllis Christopher (born 1963) is a photographer whose work documenting LGBTQ+ sexuality and protest in San Francisco has been published widely including in anthologies such as *Nothing But The Girl: The Blatant Lesbian Image* (Susie Bright and Jill Posener, 1996), *Photo Sex: Fine Art Sexual Photography Comes of Age* (David Steinberg, 2003), *Art & Queer Culture* (Catherine Lord and Richard

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Meyer, 2013) as well as magazines including *DIVA*, *Aperture* and *Art Monthly*. Between 1991 and 1994, Christopher was the photo editor of the groundbreaking lesbian erotica magazine *On Our Backs*. She has featured on HBO's 'Sexbites', Canadian television's 'Sex TV' and in the documentary film 'Erotica – A Journey into Female Sexuality'. Recently, her photographs have been included in various exhibitions including 'On Our Backs: An Archive' (The Newbridge Project Gallery, Newcastle, 2016) and 'Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance' (Nottingham Contemporary, Del La Warr Pavilion and Arnolfini, Bristol, 2019). She is a 2020 finalist for the Queer|Art Robert Giard Grant.

About Laura Guy

Laura Guy is a writer, editor and curator based in Glasgow. Her research on feminist and queer visual culture has been published widely, including in *Aperture*, *Frieze*, *Photoworks* and *Source Photographic Review*. Over the past decade she has collaborated with individuals, community groups and cultural institutions to preserve the legacy of many photographers who documented queer lesbian feminist community between the 1970s and 1990s. She is the editor of Phyllis Christopher's *Dark Room: San Francisco Sex and Protest, 1988-2003* (Bookworks, 2021).