



Rosslyn

'THE OTHER WOMEN'

AINSLIE ELLIS

By training a stage designer, whose sets for ballet are in the repertoire of Covent Garden, and who has had particular acclaim for his striking decor for Nureyev's 'Don Quixote', Barry Kay has published a book called *The Other Women* which is exceptional both in its concept and subject matter.

His subject is Australian transvestism as seen in Sydney's large transsexual community, centred in the part of the city known as the Kings Cross area. Now it would not be too difficult to imagine that some photographer, knowing about this, as he might know about Boogie Street in Singapore, would set out to make a sensational record under the guise of an exposé. Any such attempt would certainly end in something shallow, lurid, cheap, nasty and wholly unpleasant. What is infinitely worse, it would be totally unrepresentative of the nature and nuances of a social problem. Whether viewed as a malaise or its own solution. Everyone will choose which of these three: problem, malaise, or solution he, or she sees it to be. A sensational approach, the entire opposite to the one we are here considering, would have constructed, by its nature and imbalance, false evidence. Barry Kay has managed, however, to show in his 78 photographs the true outline and extent of this phenomenon. That he has managed to do this with exceptional sensitivity, without any lapses in taste, and yet to document the varieties of atti-

tudes and experience at one and the same time, is a matter of great skill, and not far short of a miracle. On top of this there are photographs in this book of disturbing beauty. Just as there are others which are either high camp, grotesque, tragic, near comic, but never repellent. At least to me. We are all, quite obviously, sensitised by our own view and experience of life in different ways and degrees.

There will, alas, always be people who dismiss any such study as this in terms of their instinctive built-in attitudes towards the subject matter. In this particular instance men whose nature and needs lead them to dress as women. Transvestism, or cross-dressing as it is known in America, can be merely a mild and occasional deviation in which the individual derives a particular thrill of erotic satisfaction in dressing, sometimes elaborately, in women's clothes.

The true nature of the need to do this is infinitely varied. It may be a Jungian matter of a displaced projection of the unconscious *anima*; it may be a reaction against the exaggerated male ethos in a family, or culture; a purely endocrine imbalance; or something else entirely. What is quite certain is that there is no known and simple answer that fits the variety of cases embraced by the term. As we shall see later, the term transsexual, used first by Dr Harry Benjamin in his rare, important, and authoritative book *The Transsexual Pheno-*

*menon**, is an attempt to define a rather deeper aspect of the problem: confusion of gender.

I was fortunate in being able to go and interview Barry Kay at his London address. My questions and, more pertinently, his answers, explore the making of *The Other Women*.

A.E. *I never have faith in mechanisms, so that I never really believe in a photograph until I have seen the final result. As if something about him may escape and so I never feel that the idea behind it is wholly secure.*

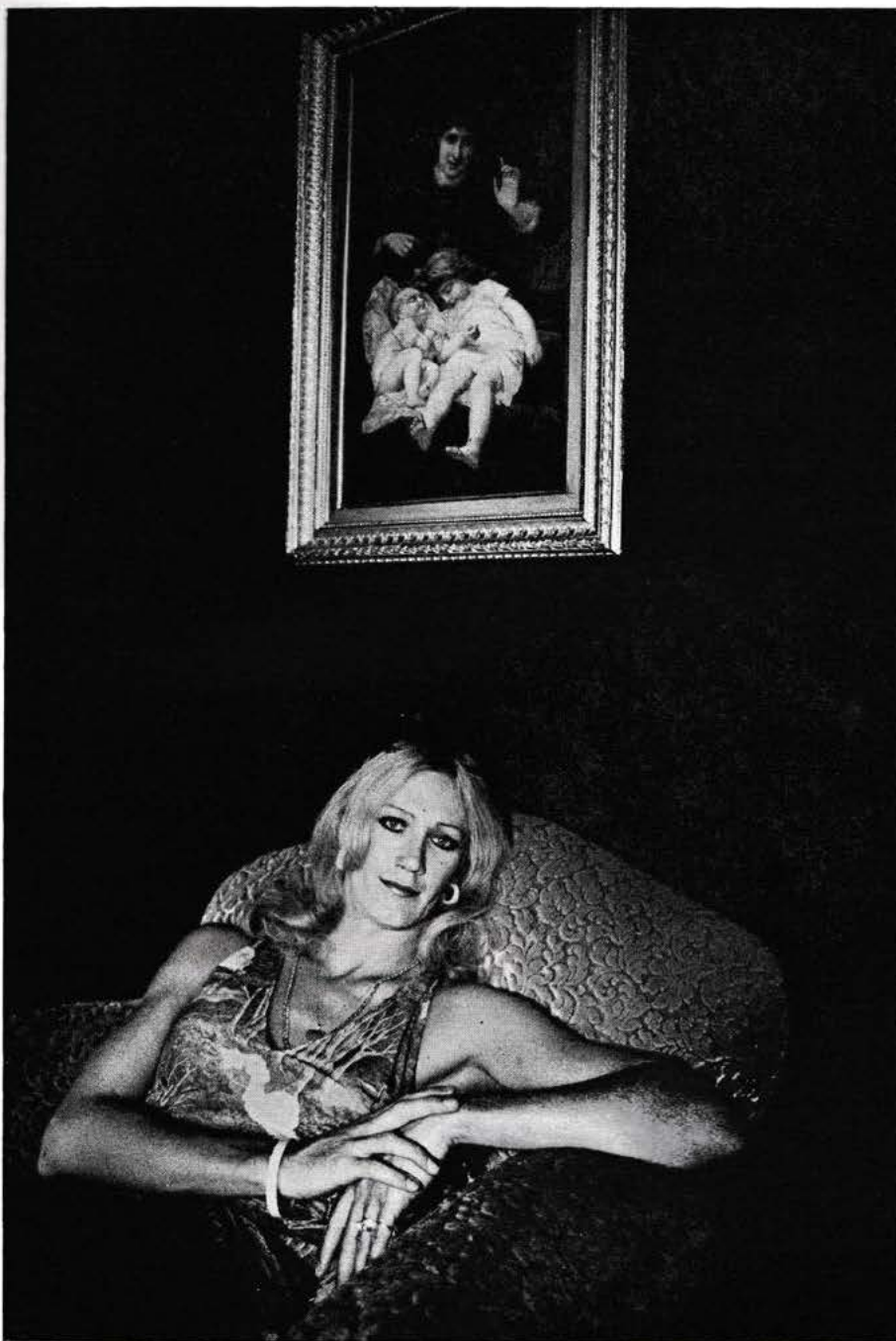
B.K. *Do you mean that in some way it changes from the moment that you take it?*

Yes. You have seen it in your head for a moment . . .

Somehow I think that the instant you take a photograph there is already a concept, even when there is apparently no time to plan it. Even in a split second there is always a concept. Yes, the idea presses in. Do you feel this to be true?

Yes, but I also think that it arises from a very complex vocabulary of visual reference which we keep in store. Of course the quality of any concept is always relative to whoever is behind the camera. Once you venture beyond the snapshot, your experience

* *The Transsexual Phenomenon* by Harry Benjamin MD originally published by Julian Press Inc, New York. Now out of print.



Robbie

and perception of life certainly becomes a more essential ingredient. The main problem seems to be, how not to obscure it. Much of that unconscious reference can be loaded with visual clichés such as art formulas or even borrowed styles. I think that either you recognise them or are trapped by them.

I agree with Paul Strand who quoted the remark of Thoreau that 'You cannot say more than you see'. But to 'see' in the perceptive sense? Yes, the moment of conception, in this instance, perception. And inevitably you do express something of your own qualities. You can never avoid that. But you must not do it directly. In some way there seems to be an interesting relative law: if you try to do it consciously you will defeat the very object. Beyond this I don't know how the law operates, but I have certainly seen it at work

in many people's photography.

In that respect there can be something extraordinarily foolproof about photography. For me it's very much like one's handwriting — something you really cannot alter. It belongs to you and is personal to your way of seeing. I suppose there is a whole area which I can express through photography which I cannot through stage design. It's a different process. In the theatre you are inventing a world — in photography you face a real one, however transient it may be. It's a challenge to recognise and record the least familiar parts — the kind of observance which I don't or cannot make in words. Perhaps I would use words if I were able but the immediacy of photography is to me compelling.

When did you first start to use photography as a medium?

About four years ago. I was working as production designer on a film. I went

out to Australia with Rudolf Nureyev to design his production of 'Don Quixote' filmed with the Australian Ballet Company. We had already mounted several stage versions of the ballet but the film required more realistic details, so beforehand I went to Spain to gather reference material. I took a lot of film and searched for appropriate structures that had a particularly interesting play of light which we might have been able to reproduce. The sort of details that you wouldn't use in a stylised stage setting. I was surprised by the results because I hadn't set out to make photographs which were interesting images in themselves — they were merely for reference. But it did make me realise that there were a lot more possibilities to the use of a camera. Then I went off to Australia and showed our cameraman, Geoffrey [redacted], the results. It was largely this association which started a professional interest in photography.

When you went on that trip to Spain what equipment did you have to use? And is The Other Women the first photographic project you have done?

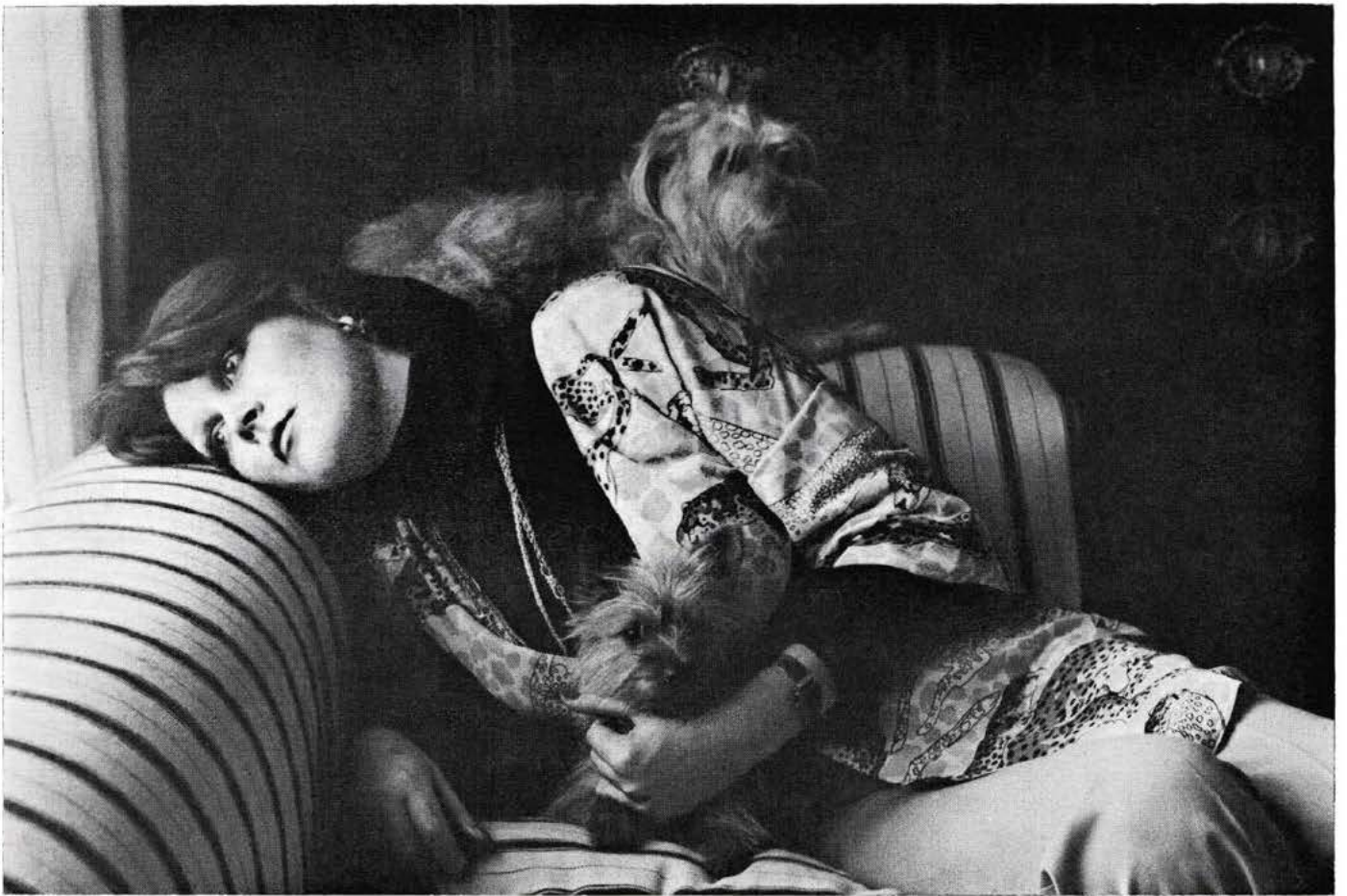
I think that I had a Praktika given to me by a friend, and a battered Polaroid. *The Other Women* was really my first major project. It began as a result of my working for the 'Don Quixote' production at the company's workshops situated in the Kings Cross district of Sydney. Kings Cross is the city's entertainment centre where all-male revues have long been an established feature and where a transsexual ghetto is also centred. After work, usually well past midnight, I used to have coffee opposite the workshops in a small cafe run by a transsexual. Through chatting together each night I soon began to learn about the complex structure of their community — transsexuals employed as strippers, female impersonators and prostitutes.

A most interesting point about your book is that you have nowhere made a distinction, in fact you mention this in the text, of any kind between the types of transsexuals you photographed. I deliberately avoided dividing the book into sections.

Yes, I think that was entirely right and very successful. Otherwise, had you done that, one would then be looking consciously and directly at a sociological or clinical study and not at a set of photographs of people.

Although, of course, it is a documentation. One of the difficulties in presentation arose from the fact that many of the subjects are in a state of transition: as, for example, those who go through a transvestite stage before becoming more fully committed to transsexualism. Had a system of classification been adopted, it may well have caused embarrassment to some. *It couldn't have been easy.*

No it wasn't. It was essential to gain everyone's trust and confidence in what I was doing and I spent a considerable part of the time just in meeting, talking and coming to understand their way of life. Often the camera appeared much later.



Carol



Rita and Colleen



Jaye Jaye and Jan

Now, to me, the most striking thing about your book is that it is, above all else, an encounter with individuals. Every picture is an encounter, a relationship via the camera for a brief instant, with an individual. That you have managed to do this seems almost incredible, and a most difficult thing to achieve.

I felt there was a risk in emphasising the communal aspect at the expense of more individual qualities — which is why I sought to make each photograph a personal study. In fact, at first it was surprised by the degree of individuality which I found even among those living in a ghetto situation. What I did avoid most was sensationalising or satirising the subject. In spite of this there are still some people who are worried by the photographs. I think this is because I have tended to 'normalise' the condition. Many of the subjects embrace such an average domestic way of life — perhaps it's the thought that they could live next door. *Had this book been conceived differently, done, say, in the manner of Diane Arbus, it would have contained the sense of shock that all her pictures, in spite of her sincerity, managed to give. Why do your pictures not do this to us?*

I could never have done it without empathy, that's why there was no shock. Besides, I can only see transvestism as a fragment in the greater complexity of sexual patterns. I am not disturbed by it and there was never any reason to present it that way.

You go directly to the subject, there is an encounter. And yet you have also managed to give every picture a personal and individual signature, a quality of your own. But there is no mannerism, no preciousness, no hint of an imposed composition or of a self-conscious style.

I suppose that this is something which concerned me from the beginning of the project. I felt that, as a stage designer, I might easily become too using the viewfinder like a proscenium. self-conscious about composition. After all when you're looking through it horizontally the shape is much the same. It is something which I had to think about the quite consciously. Within the area in which I work: I am not convinced that good composition is necessary to the strength of every image. I know it is an ally but I also know that it can act as a dampener when over contrived. Besides there is a distinction between wilful composition and recognising what is already there. *Although all these pictures have, as it were, your personal signature about them they are in reality, photographs of very different people. Some are young, some are middle-aged, or, in one instance at least, elderly. Some are transvestites, some are transsexuals. Some are prostitutes, while others are nothing of the kind but are, in their own fashion, a kind of suburban housewife. There are many variables and variations. Would you say that transvestite is merely a transitional state to something more positive, more overtly feminine? It can happen. Many transsexuals go*

through a short transvestite stage, but then there are different kinds of transvestites. The majority are, in actual fact, heterosexual. But there is another area, which is not necessarily classified scientifically as belonging within the transvestite area, and this is 'drag' or homosexual transvestism.

Well how would you define the term 'transsexual'? I am most interested to know if definition is really possible.

Transsexuals are more deeply committed than transvestites. Transsexuals are motivated by the feeling of belonging to the opposite sex, believing that they are rightly female. They are considered to have a greater gender confusion than transvestites, although conventional attitudes towards gender role are now changing with much less rigid definition of what is masculine and what is feminine. Unlike transsexuals, transvestites believe in their maleness and are motivated only by a compulsion to dress as women. Sometimes this attraction to cross-dress is a fetish. We are mostly speaking about men, since the majority are men.

In asking you about individual pictures, individual people, within this book: it seems better to talk, and far more fair — since, as you say, people are going through transitions, people change sexual direction within this mode, or indeed, out of it — to talk in general rather than in specific terms. To avoid saying, in short, that this particular person is, or was, one thing or another. Take, for instance, this picture (which we will not identify or necessarily include among the illustrations to the

article): in my view if you showed it to say, 2000 people they would say, without hesitation, that it was a picture of a girl. Everything about the physical appearance, the dress, even the gesture, is wholly feminine.

Yes, remarkably so. This person was then only seventeen and had already begun hormone treatment . . . These hormones are, like drugs, fairly freely available over the counter, and without prescription, in Sydney? In certain pharmacies, that's correct. Well this individual had a steady relationship which began on a homosexual basis. However, at the time of taking this photograph, the transsexual involvement had obviously progressed quite far. Some begin gradually, they have a term for it in Australia — 'weekend drag'. This means that they find the opportunity to go to particular pubs in female dress at the weekends only. Sometimes the opportunities increase and quite often the commitment becomes deeper. What about this girl? It is rather difficult to know whether to use the known gender or the apparent one. In this instance, an engineer who cross-dresses as a transvestite. Whereas here is someone on the next page, who, when I went back on the last trip, had grown a beard. There was not a trace of the feminine persona. The transvestite phase seemed to have been abandoned and he appeared as a good-looking man.

It is obvious that in some of these photographs we are looking at individuals who have put themselves on hormones. Breasts are, therefore, the result of ingested oestrogens, or something similar, or, perhaps, of silicone implants. This playing about with hormones is surely extremely dangerous? I believe it is and requires the guidance of an endocrinologist. In fact this aspect I did find disturbing. On one of the more recent trips, I found quite a few teenagers experimenting with the taking of hormones as others might with drugs. But I know little about the medical side — my interest is more of an anthropological nature, although I am mostly drawn towards exploring our own sub cultures rather than digging into primitive societies. I like the approach to be the same — only the subjects are different. For me it's having the desire to stand outside of preconceptions — to see the subject: not only as it relates to the surrounding environment, but also as it exists in its own right.

I am convinced that this is why your photographs are so successful. Some time prior to tackling *The Other Women* as a self-imposed assignment, I had been immersed in the writings of Benedict, Malinowski, Mead and others. It greatly influenced the approach and sharpened my objectivity.

Had there been a sense of involvement, rather than of objectivity, I don't think it would have worked.

I can't imagine it otherwise . . . And that must have been the most difficult part of it?

It was. Throughout the work I lived amongst these people, spending all

available time in their company. Under these circumstances it can sometimes be difficult not to start identifying with the world of your subject. In some respects the view becomes myopic and you can easily lose sight of the true perspective. It was fortunate, I suppose, that I didn't live in Australia. When I returned to London, the very fact that there was a physical distance, this immediately had an objectifying effect. When I saw the proofs, it brought back the contact but minus the familiarity.

How many shots would you take around one subject — twenty?

It varied. Working with 35mm cameras — Nikkormats mostly with 50 and 28mm lenses — I would sometimes use an entire film. At other times I wouldn't have the opportunity to take more than a few frames. But there was one person for instance who I did photograph on many occasions. This was one of the first I met who at the time was living as a man but also cross-dressing. Now this person lives permanently as a woman and contemplates having the conversion operation.

And this one?

Very unusual. Someone in quite a unique situation, equally successful both as a man and a woman and accepted by friends and business acquaintances in both roles. We met at a party where the guests were mostly professionals — architects, lawyers, doctors and their wives. This is someone particularly intelligent and with considerable insight into their own condition, which is not the case with many.

Very beautiful too. When you met her at this reception was she dressed as a woman?

Yes, and very elegantly.

Did they know or did they not know?

Yes they did. The women were perfectly comfortable about it and this included different generations.

Australian attitudes on the whole are very middle-class which makes such ease of acceptance rather surprising.

One of the things I particularly wanted to ask you was how women react on the whole to this situation?

I have found most women far less perturbed by it than men. I noticed this also through the press both here and in Germany, besides America and Australia.

The women journalists have expressed no sense of threat whereas a number of male editors and writers have shown a positive need to distance themselves. The identification appears to be greater with men so they are less impartial.

They stand either for or against it.

But did you find in Australia any male attitude that was thoroughly hostile?

Hostile? No, not at all — which is interesting because it also seems to fulfil a certain need. I don't think there would be a ghetto employed on this scale in a city of Sydney's population if it were not really a requirement.

Even if you only take into account the number of artists who are employed by so many of the revues and cabarets. Nearly all the strip clubs had a high percentage of transsexuals working

for them. One of the largest establishments employed 90% who were transsexual, although this was unknown to the audience. The management tend to encourage their services because some behave more provocatively than their female counterpart.

And prostitution, what of that?

It is quite extensive in the Kings Cross area and, as I have suggested in the book, their very existence, like all of the transsexual community, seems to express a need to counterbalance the male myth.

Yes, it's opposite: the image of the surf-rider, the Bondi beach guard, you mean. Or the prototype image, in short, of the tough Aussie?

Yes. And it's from such a male stereotype that many turn, only to adopt an equally exaggerated female stereotype. It becomes the exchange of one extreme for another. By contrast, it struck me as exceptional to see the degree of integration into society that many have achieved in spite of such rigid role definition.

Almost to be accepted as a suburban housewife?

Yes, often, that is the ultimate goal.

Three years ago I reviewed Diane Arbus's exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. On that occasion I wrote the following paragraph which relates to a specific transvestite pictured by her. But its relevance to Barry Kay's work is striking.

'She, possibly, over-identified with her, mostly, unbeautiful people. But she thoroughly understood that we are all, at heart, freaks and drop-outs. We just don't have the courage, that's all, either to be or to do. You don't believe me? You deny this? Well, in that case, you will neither enjoy, or fully experience, the sense of identity, the unity of our humanity — fearful though this is — that she experienced and set down. Not to know, not to own (however deep down) that I am, that you are, the man photographed in a bra and stockings: this somehow sells our humanity short. OK it's a cheap laugh. Not at the unfortunate man, but that I can write it in all seriousness. But not to understand this, not to really know this, is, in the end, not to know the depths as well as the summits of life. Then the easy laugh seems somehow different.'

If Arbus's photograph of the man in the bra and black stockings has a quality of disbelief about it, of deliberate shock, Barry Kay's photographs are without this element. This is their great virtue. Although they will be disturbing to some natures, to particular individuals, they help us to come much closer to a reorientation of our point of view, to real understanding. His five pages of text which introduce the book help significantly towards this. Above all the photography in *The Other Women* is marked by restraint, by insight, by sensitivity and excellence. This book is a remarkable achievement.

The Other Woman by Barry Kay is published by Mathews Miller Dunbar at £3.95 and distributed by Wildwood House. Not all bookshops will handle it. It is, however, available from The Photographers' Gallery, all branches of Words and Music, Compendium, Claude Gill Books and Academy Bookshop.