

RADIANT SPACES

An Introduction to Emily Roysdon's Photograph

Series *Untitled*

Jean Carlomusto

Emily Roysdon's photograph series *Untitled*, an homage to David Wojnarowicz's series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, evokes for me, at first glance, the eerie experience I sometimes have on the streets of New York City. I'll see a friend I haven't seen in years. As I approach to say hi, I realize that that person died of AIDS years ago and that the person passing by merely bears a resemblance to him or her. A momentary lapse; a suspension of disbelief; a desire to recall a friend's presence into the everyday tableau of the city streets—Roysdon's work reminds me of these radiant spaces: places of suture and reclamation.

Inspired by Ernesto Laclau's argument that myths offer possible collaborations and "a new space of representation," Roysdon assumes Wojnarowicz's subjectivity in a playful cultivation of everyday life.¹ She has him hanging with the gang, even stitches him into bed—not with her but *as* her.

Roysdon's *Untitled* is a courageous endeavor both to acknowledge Wojnarowicz's mythic stature as a queer icon and to keep him engaged in a queer feminist backdrop. Her photos embrace what I appreciate in Wojnarowicz's original *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, a desire to reembody our eccentric and slutty icons, to transport the spirit of our heroes to the present drama of our lives, a drama they somehow inspire anyway.

Jean Carlomusto: In your artist's statement you mention that these photos reflect a "personal realization of a complex identification with Wojnarowicz." Besides

David's "politics, urgency and method," what are the other identifications you have with him?

Emily Roysdon: David was one of the first people who allowed me to identify as an artist, and it was his everyday life, method, and commitments that spoke to me here. Living life.

JC: Wojnarowicz had a strong identification with Rimbaud. Their lives shared many similarities—broken home, abandonment, homosexuality, early death. Are you going to the "spiritual soul mates" level of identification with David?

ER: I do heavily identify with David on a personal level. Many of my best friends have died—my first when I was eight—so I identified with the sense of loss and growing up young that I think I saw in David. Having to make different kinds of decisions in a youthful mind but also deciding different reasons to live and deliberate ways to do that.

JC: Since David's original Rimbaud series was done in the seventies, before HIV/AIDS, what made it dramatically possible for you to "go home again"? Did you find the specter of HIV/AIDS intrusive in creating these photos?

ER: I wouldn't say intrusive, perhaps melancholic. I feel emotionally as well as politically attached to the AIDS community because of the loss I mentioned earlier. Growing up, even in college, the age when I was discovering David, many people do not have a relationship to death and loss and grieving, and I had to do most of this on my own and very young, which is of course a giant specter in the communities affected by HIV. I was absolutely fascinated that communities were being wholly affected by, as well as growing up and organizing around, something that had been so critical for me. But besides death, moving into a critical and queer identity in those years, I felt responsible to the history, the struggle and commitment, that we all still face. As far as "before" the "infamous disease" . . . it's almost hard to imagine, really, having grown up "inside AIDS" as a queer, and ideologically in the United States, the space "before."

JC: Were you conscious of looking for the "space before" when creating these photos?

ER: I wasn't looking for a space either before or after.

JC: Interesting. I find David's place in these photos as one of hope.

ER: Yes, it is a hopeful space, a productive space.

JC: Rimbaud and Wojnarowicz both acknowledged and drew energy from their roles as outsiders. In fact, this has remained part of their mystique. What, if any, subtle differences do you see between the artist as gay outsider and the artist as lesbian outsider? Do historical struggles around issues of lesbian invisibility threaten to erode the type of identification/alliance you are building in this series? Does lesbian invisibility make it more difficult for you than it did for either David or Rimbaud to romanticize the position of outsider? Or is this one of those empty spaces you venture boldly toward?

ER: Great. It is important to me for this not to be lesbian work, which is difficult to say, because I love lesbians. I'm fine with being called a lesbian, with standing in this position, but it is explicitly a queer project, a queer gender and sexuality project. So I am attracted to David. I am supposed to be a woman, supposed to be a lesbian, but this project hopes, among other things, to bring gender and performance into the frame of gay and lesbian politics. So beyond the historical gay/lesbian divide in community and also in the history of HIV/AIDS, this project takes for granted, or jumps from the hope, that we have collapsed many of these boundaries and distinctions already and have strengthened our communities, but it's also a call to queer trans politics.

JC: Why can't it be lesbian, too? Having lived this incredible moment in the late eighties/early nineties when lesbians and gays got on the dance floors and into the streets together and called it queer, I am not ready for any "Queer Eye" makeover that tosses out lesbian identity like dowdy undies.

ER: It really is only that the word [*lesbian*] can foreclose an act. And I definitely want those spaces to remain open in the project. Away from sensationalizing his [Wojnarowicz's] gayness, or our difference. I feel like him sometimes . . . and my desire is powerful.

JC: In your artist's statement you refer to Laclau's "empty spaces": "It is in this empty space that our feminist queer identities become analogous and our performances collaborative." Is the radiant sexuality exhibited in the dildo photo a manifestation of your "guest spot" as David, or a coinhabitation of that space of desire? Maybe it is none of the above options. Tell me differently.

ER: I know what field we are in, but I don't know exactly how to answer this. It's [meant] both to say definitely a guest spot, in having the phallus, in making the sex and sexy images, and also [to express] a desire to work with David, stitch myself into bed with him, turn myself into a fag. Yes, turn myself into a fag, allow my

desire to move my body, change my body, make something that gets me closer. . . . Maybe we should get more into this . . .

JC: In “democracy, invisibility, and the dramatic arts,” you state that “making boundaries is politics, crossing them is drama.”² For queers, is there a mystical aspect to this crossing? Queer in that it occupies position of outsider; mystical in that it refuses boundaries of identities, space, and time. What is it that makes us don masks, makeup, and costumes in search of the dramatic impulse of our present life?

ER: Performance and play are official tactics as well as vernacular expressions of life. . . . I agree that there is a mystical relationship between queers and boundaries, as you define it. Especially capital-Q-identifying queers, a subjectivity that resists being defined by a specific action or gesture. Also a queer relationship to history in the movement between time and space. I know that even in my community now, we live in a mythical space. Spinning histories wide, looking far and queering all that we can. Mythical as well in the expansive web of our relations and commitments. . . . I think especially from the ravaging of our communities through AIDS and the straight world we live in, queers are less willing to forgo our icons and the lessons from the past. We have had the opportunity to cull our history, and in that action we perform our future. What we remember, the spaces we inhabit, the jeans of a lover, the face of a lost friend. We can’t release them, so we play with them.

Notes

1. Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 61.
2. Emily Roysdon, “democracy, invisibility, and the dramatic arts,” *LTTR*, no. 1 (2002): **000–000**.



Select images from *Untitled*, by Emily Roysdon. Printed by permission of the photographer









