

A DISTRICT DEFINED:

Streets

SEX

and Survival

MEATPACKING  
DISTRICT



## WELCOME

WE ARE THRILLED TO PRODUCE AND PRESENT ***“A District Defined: Streets, Sex, and Survival,”*** a photo exhibition about queer life in the Meatpacking District in the 80s and 90s. The neighborhood has a storied history and played a remarkable role in the lives of LGBTQ+ people.

And it happened quite naturally. Which is the same case for this show. Our partner in production, Tim Hayes, is a master maestro, connecting dots, people, and ideas to bring this show together. The artists and their photos speak for themselves, but it would not be possible without them: Lynsey Addario and Katsu Naito bring into focus the faces of those who worked the streets, and the struggles that came with sex and survival. Joseph Rodríguez brings us one-of-a-kind perspective from behind the wheel of his cab, and with stories to match. Lola Flash, t.l. litt, and Catherine McGann center the feminine and female-identified experience, while the late Jill Freedman and her ability to show the fringes of society display the kink, whimsical, and fetish behaviors of people. Efrain Gonzalez, a prolific documentarian of the district, encompasses the in-, out-, and around-Meatpacking, whose work covers a broad range of genres and years.

And with special photos on display by Spencer Tunick and Richard Young, this exhibition is a 360 experience, from 14th Street to Florent.

How did it happen? How was it allowed to be? Hidden in plain sight, trans sex workers alongside the gamut of gays and lesbians that showed face: leather laden beefcakes and prancing queens, butch dykes flanked by lady-loving femme fatales, and the who’s who of genderqueer people mingled to find release and community.

In Meatpacking, people came to express themselves freely, to achieve their release, and to work.

As the head of the business improvement district who also happens to be an out and proud gay man, bringing a meaningful pride program to the district is also personally important to me. Afterall, what is pride? Pride for pride’s sake is just another day, insert brand/person/place/thing awash in the flag of the moment to proclaim an allegiance to your fight. And then it’s over on July 1. However, ***Streets, Sex, and Survival*** is a reflection on some dark periods that wreaked havoc on a community, but still they prevailed, and partied, and lived life despite - and perhaps because of - the circumstances and odds. And for that we can have tremendous pride.

It is a privilege that we can hang these photos of a community that has gone from fringe to more mainstream, but the fight for liberty and justice for all is far from over.

Let’s be proud that while there is a lot still happening inside clubs and behind closed doors – as it should – we can live life more fully out than ever before, in a way that was not always possible, even in New York City. That the Meatpacking District provided that outlet, and can continue to play a role for people’s freedom today is quite cool, and I am here for it.

Enjoy the show,



Jeffrey C. LeFrancois, Executive Director  
Meatpacking District Management Association

A DISTRICT DEFINED:

**Streets, Sex, and Survival**  
examines the Meatpacking  
District's rich history  
of queer nightlife in  
the late 80s and 90s.

**The exhibition focuses on  
eight photographers.**

## THE MEATPACKING DISTRICT: AN ABRIDGED HISTORY

NESTLED ON THE LOWER WEST SIDE OF MANHATTAN, the Meatpacking District is a distinct corner of New York City. By day and for decades, carcasses of beef were dressed and hogs processed in the neighborhood to be shipped around the city. Blood ran down the streets and the sidewalks were slicked with fat. In the afternoon, once the butchers returned home, a different type of character began to appear.

Sex work was a major trade in the District, given its proximity to the working waterfront and the short-stay hotels along the Hudson. The neighborhood's geography lent itself to activities best kept to the city's fringes at the time. With the elevated highway and the decaying piers on its western edge, long a playground for queer people, the freewheeling and indeed dangerous sense of the Meatpacking District lent itself to clubs for kink, fetish, and sex. Meat lockers and warehouses took on a new use when the sun set.

New York City came roaring out of the disco era. A decade after trans women threw the first bricks at the Stonewall Riots and thrust the rights of LGBTQ+ people into the media, new lines in the culture wars were quickly drawn. As the meatpacking industry continued its decline since the advent of refrigerated trucking, gay bars, nightclubs, and sex clubs filled former factory spaces, including the Anvil, Hell Fire, Zodiac, Cycle, OK Corral, Mother, and the Mineshaft.

Struggles of identity, sex, and survival played out in the streets and, for those who were comfortable with their identity, in clubs where they found sanctuary.

In 1985, the restaurateur Florent Morellet opened a 24-hour diner, called Florent, in the old R & L Restaurant building at 69 Gansevoort Street. It quickly became a destination for the LGBTQ+ community and hip downtown nightlife-goers, who reveled in the vibrant atmosphere and free-flowing cocktails (among other substances). Morellet, who often dressed in drag and was an ever-present presence at the restaurant, was also an AIDS activist. He famously posted his T-cell count next to the daily specials.

Also in 1985, Mayor Ed Koch ordered the New York State Public Health Council to close bars and clubs that permitted "high-risk sexual activity" linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS. This resulted in the closing of several clubs in the Meatpacking District. While nightlife didn't fully disappear, it changed for a while in the neighborhood. After years of fighting for recognition, understanding of the virus, medical advancements, safe sex, and treatment for HIV/AIDS, a new scene emerged. And more LGBTQ+ establishments opened elsewhere around the city.

The Meatpacking scene was hit with another blow in the late 1990s when Mayor Giuliani launched his own war on nightclubs, sex shops, and strip clubs. But that was also met with the premier of *Sex and the City*, which set the stage for a remarkable next act for the district. In 1999, Keith McNally's *Pastis* opened on Little West 12th Street and Ninth Avenue. That same year, Jeffrey, the notable boutique on 14th Street and Washington, opened and founder Jeffrey Kalinsky proclaimed, "This is going to be the center of New York City."

# Elisa Crespo

CONTRIBUTOR

THE MEATPACKING DISTRICT IS KNOWN FOR ITS RADICAL ACCEPTANCE. A place filled with outcasts of their own community. United in their struggles. Often ostracized from other circles, countless queer New Yorkers found themselves on the outskirts of the city, near the piers of the lower West Side of Manhattan.

As a descendent of the legendary trans women of color who frequented the Meatpacking District to engage in sex work - I feel the power and unwavering sense of survival in this collection. I can hear the clicks of my ancestors' heels on the cobble-stoned streets. It's surprisingly comforting. It feels dangerous, but familiar. I know these streets. I've been here before in a different time. I now know that I came back as my ancestors reincarnated. To take everything that wasn't afforded to them.

From street walkers to socialites, Queer and Trans people are etched into the fabric of the Meatpacking District. We are cultural pioneers and contributors of the great history of the District. A District Defined: Streets, Sex and Survival, not only captures the emotions of those in the photos, but of all people who spent their lives on these streets. All of the club kids who got lost in the music. All of the Drag artists who performed their hearts out. All of the trans women who worked the streets to care for their own community. Suddenly, I am reminded of our power. I'm reminded that we've been here before. That we've overcome. Not through assimilating, but through demanding justice. By making America fulfill all of her promises to us.

The Meatpacking District exhibition reminds me of a forgotten people, in a forgotten community. I think about how many were ravaged by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, how we were neglected, how our community managed to come together and act up, rejoice, heal, and in the midst of that, how we managed to develop survival techniques and American culture that transcends us.

**Elisa Crespo is a trans Latina advocate and former public servant who has fought to promote civic engagement and elevate the LGBTQ+ community's voice in halls of power.**

# Efrain Gonzalez

Efrain John Gonzalez is a Bronx-born photographic artist whose talents with camera and darkroom have allowed him to document the unusual, the erotic, the unique, the wild and slightly crazy, from the world of body modifications to the underground universe of radical S&M, from sensual beauty of the flesh to raw sexual desires. An internationally published photographer who for the past 35 years has been traveling down dark and mysterious paths, trying to capture on film, real life images that illustrate a story of people finding the path to their souls, gathering together to celebrate their uncommon lives. His patience has created a rare historical archive of original work, candid photographs of underground clubs, transgender people, tattoo and body modification events, cities at night, and leather cultures.

**MEATPACKING DISTRICT: What drew you to the neighborhood?**

**EFRAIN GONZALEZ:** The Meatpacking District was a very necessary element. I mean, you have this thing inside you that drives you to these cultures, whether it be trans, bondage, submission... You know, imagine what it was like in the 70s and 80s. In order to find this place, you had to read about it in some book or magazine or newspaper. You had to find a little article that said this club is... And then you had to go there. You had to drive all the way down there into this dark, dingy neighborhood. Then you had to find the building and then go down this dark staircase, pay the money and go into a room where you knew nobody. Imagine that. Imagine doing that in 1979, which is exactly what I did. And there had to be something inside you to drive you to go through all those lengths to get to that room full of people doing fetish things ... back then it was something inside you that drove you to be the dom or to be the submissive. To set yourself up as someone who is completely under the control of someone else, or to have total control and domination over someone else. There is that social drive. It exists. And this is where it flourished. This is where it came out.

**MTPK: Where would we have been able to see your photos in the 80s and 90s?**

**EFRAIN:** These are not photographs you'd normally see in the New York Times ... not until later. I would photograph basically for myself. I saw something, it looked great. The shadows are fantastic. Look at that person standing there. I'd shoot it. I'd photograph it. I'd make a few prints. The only people who would be interested would be other fetish people. And the only place I would get published would be in certain magazines. Eulenspiegel [Society] had a magazine called Prometheus. And Prometheus was their monthly magazine, and they would always come to me for photographs. Another magazine that would use my photographs was Piercing Fans International Quarterly. It was PFIQ. It was a magazine about body modification... So I had my photographs in that magazine, other

tattoo magazines, fetish magazines, kink magazines. So those were the only places my photographs would be in. Now I'm finding that the New York Times, the Whitney, and all these book publishers want my photographs... "Oh, you photographed this? Oh, you did that? Oh, my goodness." So I have all these antique photographs of the neighborhood, and the people in it, and the cultures that were flying in it.

**MTPK: How did the neighborhood scene change over the years you were documenting it?**

**EFRAIN:** Back in the early 80s, you know, we were just coming out of the time when you could be arrested for being gay. When a whole bar full of people could be arrested simply because they were all gay. One of the stories that was told to me by an older gay man was if you went to a gay bar or a gay club, you had to carry a \$10 bill in your pocket at all times because when you were arrested by the police, you were taken to the police station. And as you got up to the police sergeant to be arraigned, to be filled in, if you gave the sergeant a \$10 bill, he let you go home.

I have seen a change in the culture because the older generation of gay men who founded gay culture, built the gay culture, all the leather daddies and things like that... you know, the older men have died. Now you have a younger generation coming up and saying, "Why don't we try this? Why don't we do this?" So you've seen a shift away from the older leather daddies, these men who would wear these leather uniforms, these Tom of Finland-type outfits, into a more subdued culture where you can just be gay and, you know, you don't need to be a leather daddy. It was like a uniform back in the early 80s. You know, you'd see these kids walking around in leather chaps and leather vests and leather hats. There was a style but you don't see that anymore.

**MTPK: Why do you think it's important to share these photos and tell the history of this neighborhood today?**

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**These were places where you could go and become that life. And then when you leave, you would leave everything behind and go back to being normal.**

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rules, you were welcome. You had The LURE that was a gay leather man's bar ... You had Mother on the corner of 14th and Washington which was a musical venue. Bands would play on stage, performance artists would get up and speak poetry or spank themselves on stage or whatever. And then downstairs, you'd have a basement with sofas where people could sit, drink a beer and socialize quietly. You had the

Anvil with ... they had crazy sex acts on stage, and singing by Ruby Rims. So these places existed, a lot of the older places existed until 1985. Then the city decided to shut down the sex places because of AIDS. But what took their place were fetish clubs that had no sex. So you could walk around naked. You could spank somebody. You could do a scene as long as there was no sex involved.

**EFRAIN:** Because it tells us that we were always there, you know. We were always there. This isn't a new fad. Today they're always complaining, "Why are all these trans people coming up? Oh, they're coaching our children into being trans." No. [Many people] were trans back then. You just couldn't be it. You just couldn't say it. You just couldn't do it. You couldn't put on a dress and walk around like ordinary.

**MTPK:** Was the neighborhood a safe space for gay culture?

**EFRAIN:** It was a safe space for us. It basically was an abandoned industrial neighborhood where no one worked after 6 o'clock and everyone left and the streets were deserted. And then the clubs would open up and people would go down there, and you would do your thing in the privacy of your club. And, some clubs were grittier than others. I mean, the Mineshaft had a dress code, you know you had to be grungy. No perfume, no Italian shoes, no disco garb. People tend to nostalgize these

neighborhoods. These were places where you could go and become that life. And then when you leave, you would leave everything behind and go back to being normal.

Nowadays with the internet and access to everything, you can Google everything you wanted to know about being a dominatrix in 3 easy lessons. You can go on ebay and buy a whole slew of toys and you're an instant dominatrix. You're an instant leather daddy because you can buy a really great leather harness for \$49.99. But there was more to the culture than just wearing an outfit. It was a lifestyle. It was a point of view. It was an expression of beliefs. And that's what made it what it was.

You would go to these places and you would celebrate your fetish life, no matter what it was. So you would have a club like Hellfire, which basically dealt with every fetish you could possibly imagine. They were wide open. They didn't care who or what you are, just as long as you played safe and you played by the



# Lynsey Addario



In 2015, American Photo Magazine named Lynsey as one of five most influential photographers of the past 25 years, saying she changed the way we saw the world's conflicts.

Addario is the recipient of numerous awards, including a MacArthur fellowship, she was part of the New York Times team to win a Pulitzer prize for overseas reporting out of Afghanistan and Pakistan, an Overseas Press Club's Olivier Rebbot Award, and two Emmy nominations. She holds three Honorary Doctorate Degrees for her professional accomplishments from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Bates College in Maine, and University of York in England.

In 2015, Addario wrote a New York Times Best selling memoir, "It's What I Do," which chronicles her personal and professional life as a photojournalist coming of age in the post-9/11 world. In 2018, she released her first solo collection of photography, "Of Love and War," published by Penguin Press.

At the time of the interviews for this zine, Addario was on the front lines of Ukraine on assignment. From the war in Ukraine she was then deep in the Amazon, also on assignment. Her photos of trans sex workers in Meatpacking were taken in 1999.

**Lynsey Addario is an American photojournalist, who has been covering conflict, humanitarian crises, and women's issues around the Middle East and Africa on assignment for the New York Times and National Geographic for more than two decades. Since September 11, 2001, Addario has covered conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, Darfur, South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Syria, and ongoing war in Ukraine.**

# Michael Alago

CONTRIBUTOR

How did a 21-year-old gay Puerto Rican from Borough Park in Brooklyn wind up moving to 763 Washington St. in the heart of the Meatpacking District in Manhattan? Guess I was always curious and up for an adventure.

1981 and I soon found out that the Mineshaft was right next door to my apt. Their address was 835 Washington St. I went there only once with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. About 10 minutes after we got there Robert ditched me and I was wondering “What the Fuck?” Suddenly a very tall man with leather pants, cowboy boots, no shirt and a leather mask with a zipper across the mouth, spun me around, unzipped the mouthpiece and started making out heavily with me. I thought, “I love my neighborhood.” Later I frequented The Anvil, The Spike, The Eagle, The Manhole and the hetero-friendly Hellfire Club. Always looking for a good time and always finding it.

On nights that I went home alone all of us knew about the public phones and you hoped that they rang. If you answered the call you were inevitably invited to the caller’s apt for nameless sex. Sometimes amazingly hot and other times just a jerk-off session, then staggered home.

I remembered late one night around 3 AM, I was walking along Christopher Street back toward the Meatpacking District where I saw

this gorgeous blonde man. I edged up close to him. “I have crack in my pocket” I whispered “Would you like to come home with me?” No thanks, he said. “I’m a police officer and you’re under arrest.” I was furious! “What the hell” I screamed as I pulled my dick out and pissed all over his leg. I was so angry. He grabbed me by the collar, whipped me around, threw me up against an unlocked van, handcuffed me, and brought me to the holding pen on 10th St. They fingerprinted me and everything.

Dammit!

On late nights, early mornings on W 14th St, Gansevoort St and Washington St while staggering home I ran into numerous trans hookers showing off their stuff, while men with out-of-state license plates kept circling the block in hot pursuit of the 20-dollar blowjob.

Those were the days.

I called that neighborhood the wild frontier.

Many of the bars/clubs were shut down by 1985 due to the AIDS epidemic.

I tested positive in the 1980s and by the early 90’s had full-blown AIDS.

I am grateful to be alive in 2023.

**As a music executive at Elektra Records Michael Alago was best known for signing Metallica in the summer of 1984, changing the entire landscape of rock ‘n’ roll and heavy metal. He continued to work in A&R for both Palm Pictures and Geffen Records. He was thrilled to executive-produce albums by Cyndi Lauper, Public Image Ltd, White Zombie, and Nina Simone.**

**In 2005, he left music to pursue his other love: photography. Alago went on to publish three bestselling books: “Rough Gods”, “Brutal Truth”, and “Beautiful Imperfections” with German-based publisher Bruno Gmünder.**

**In 2017, a documentary directed by Drew Stone and produced by Michael Alex on Alago’s wildly successful career in music was released in theaters and on Netflix, entitled “the Fuck Is That Guy? The Fabulous Journey of Michael Alago”. In 2023 you can find the documentary on Prime Video, Tubi, Google Play, X-Box and YouTube. His memoir “I AM MICHAEL ALAGO” can be found on Amazon.**

# Jill Freedman



In the 1970s, Freedman brought her camera to the Meatpacking District, shooting some of the earliest images of the area's emerging LGBTQ+ nightlife, including sex clubs and fetish nights. Just a few years after the Stonewall uprising, these images signal a new and revolutionary degree of queer visibility, and Freedman was just the person to capture it. Her pictures have a louche, unrehearsed quality that only a trusted insider could have achieved. She embraced the freedom found in the margins of neighborhoods like the Meatpacking District. "The weirder the better," she told the Times.

Freedman collected her work in seven books, and she exhibited frequently during her career, however, she never achieved the level of recognition of many of her male peers. Her fearless approach and her empathy for the people she photographed add a feminist dimension of her work. Through this exhibition, Freedman's work is recognized for its artistic, social, and historical value.



Jill Freedman (1939-2019) was a pioneering American photographer who is known for her immersive approach to the individuals and groups she documented, which included firefighters, cops, civil rights activists, circus performers, and other groups who were considered marginalized or on the fringes of society. She often placed herself within these groups, sometimes even living with them. She became embedded in these communities, which also allowed her to recede into the background and let the people she was photographing be themselves. This helped Freedman capture unguarded, natural, and spontaneous moments, rather than composed or staged events. "I put a lot of time into being invisible," she told the New York Times. "When I was a kid, I always wished I had one of those rings or cloaks that made you invisible. Then I realized years later, I am invisible behind a camera. I am a camera."



# Katsu Naito



Japanese photographer Katsu Naito began taking photos in his early 20s, shortly after his arrival to New York City in 1983. He bought himself a 35mm camera and found that photography was his way to communicate with his new surroundings. He began shooting his fellow New Yorkers on the streets, and quickly became involved with black-and-white photography. His practice of photography is to capture an intangible to simplify the process and add emotional quality to it. In 2010 Katsu presented his first international exhibition, “West Side Rendezvous”, which features his photographs of the street-walkers of the Meatpacking District in the 1990s. A collection of Katsu’s photographs of Harlem were published in the 2017 book “Once in Harlem.”

**MEATPACKING DISTRICT:** How did you start photographing people in the Meatpacking District?

**KATSU:** I was about 27 years old and I was constantly seeking for something to photograph in the city and I normally carried the camera walking around and taking a picture snapping here and there.

And one day it was 1991 in the late summer, I was walking on 16th Street towards the West Side near Chelsea Market towards that area and that’s the first time I see them [trans sex workers] and I seen a few of them on the street and then I start talking to them, they’re on the edge of society that marginalizes people.

For myself, living here in the States, I never felt I completely belonged. I always felt minor, and I always had a special feeling toward people on the margins.

I find beauty in them also at the same time the human quality and something that we all have as humans, a conscious mind and the truth of who you are. And I really wanted to capture who they are and what they have inside their minds, inside their heart. And at the same time, I lost two of my friends because of the AIDS crisis.

**MTPK:** What was it about the Meatpacking District that became both a refuge and a place of danger for trans/non-binary people, including sex workers?

**KATSU:** I wanted to photograph them to show the relationship with their environment [and] also with who they are. In 1991 in the late summer I encountered three of them on the street. I ask if I can photograph them and they say yes. So I started to go there and to just walk around the area, the Meatpacking District on 16th Street, 15th Street.

**MTPK:** So it’s important to build trust with the people you photograph, because you want to show them truly, honestly, and with dignity?

**KATSU:** That’s how we start to, little by little, getting to know each other and I start talking about my daily things and they start talking about the daily life things they do, and the things they’ve been going through.

**MTPK:** How do you capture that photographically?

**KATSU:** When I want to take a picture, I want to stand right in front of you, I don’t want to go from the side way. I want to be right in front of you and I want to look into your eye and you also look right into my eye. You make a personal connection with them, sort of having a rapport. I’m a strong believer in that. You have to build some trust with the subject. The subject must trust me before I click the first frame, and so I take some time to take a picture. I don’t just show up and take a picture. I wait for the moment to come in, and there’s always a moment. Even if you’re standing behind the camera and carrying a conversation with them, spend some quiet moments too. The subconscious mind steps in.

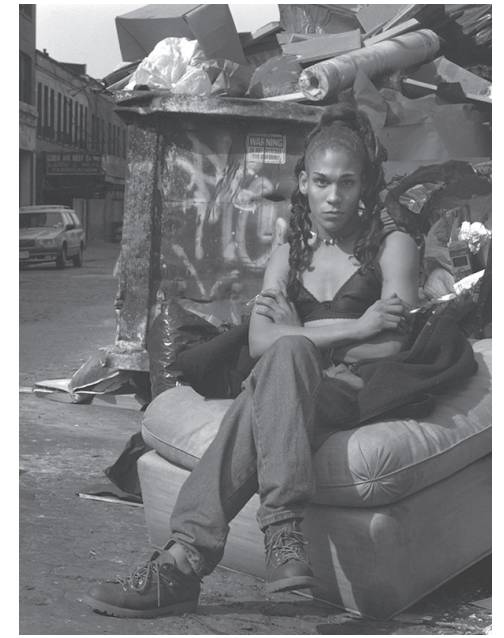
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**MTPK:** It's interesting that you talk about being drawn to marginalized communities and wanting to understand their lives. At that time, the Meatpacking District was a fairly marginalized neighborhood.

**KATSU:** It [was] a very marginalized community. You can't just say it's just that nothing was there. Its only function was as a meatpacking distributor. People who went there in the morning to work, they usually wrap their job around one, two in the afternoon. And then once they wrap their business in the area, the area starts to get very quiet and you don't really see anyone around. I also liked that feeling, too. It's just that you're there but you don't see anyone around you and it's a very isolated feeling, and then you start seeing the people, the street walkers showing up and the buyer, Mr. Jones or whoever, starts showing, a lot of them are driving, some are walking. I like to just watch what's happening in this area at this time.

**MTPK:** Why do you think it's important to show this work today?



**KATSU:** The neighborhood is very different now than it was in the 90s. Simply, it was a reality, it was real life, it was not fiction. There were the people who are living, working, surviving in that area 30 years ago and now that area has changed so much. It's important that those people are not forgotten and that slice of life in New York is remembered.

Being on the street, that's where they can feel their freedom and be themselves, where they can act any way they want, in spite of what they have experienced in their life, every human, every one of us has the beautiful side inside.

They're beautiful people, they just didn't have a chance to show themselves as who they are.

Recently, just prior to the pandemic, one of the subjects that I photographed 30 years ago reached out to me. We've been chatting over the email for the past years and I finally met her last month after 30 years, and I showed her the picture that I took 30 years ago. She loves it, she loves it. And it was a beautiful experience to meet her and share that moment.

# Joseph Rodríguez

From 1977 to 1987 Joseph Rodríguez documented the Meatpacking District through the windshield of his taxi cab. Born and raised in Brooklyn, he studied photography at the School of Visual Arts and in the Photojournalism and Documentary Photography Program at the International Center of Photography in New York City. Recent exhibitions of his work have appeared at The African American Museum, Philadelphia, PA; The Fototeca, Havana, Cuba; Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, Alabama; and Open Society Institute's Moving Walls, New York. In 2001 the Juvenile Justice website, featuring Joseph's photographs, launched in partnership with the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival High School Pilot Program. He teaches classes at New York University, the International Center of Photography, New York and universities in Mexico and Europe

**MEATPACKING DISTRICT:** When did you first begin documenting the Meatpacking District?

**JOSEPH RODRÍGUEZ:** I'll give you a journey because as a taxi driver my garage was on the southwest corner of 15th and Ninth Avenue. I was a taxi driver from 1977 to 1987. During the era that I was photographing, which was mostly in 1978, I would start my driving at about 3:30 in the morning on a Friday night.

The first thing I do, I'm getting in my cab, and there are the trans sex workers: "Hi daddy, what's going on? Do you have time for us?" I'm talking about 2 or 3, sitting on the hood of the car. Looking all pretty. I said, "Look, we love you ladies but your man's gotta go to work. Could you please get off my cab so I can get to work." And so that was the greeting I would receive the minute I would start my work. Because they owned those corners. They own 15th Street and Ninth, they own 15th Street and Tenth, they own 16th Street and Eleventh. You know, this would go all the way down to Christopher Street.

**MTPK:** Could you describe the streets of the Meatpacking District in the 1970s?

**JOSEPH:** In the late 70s, who do I see at about five in the morning? I see Al Pacino. And what is Al Pacino doing down there? Well, he did an amazing movie with Brian DePalma called Cruising which was about the scene. At that time all the empty trucks used to be on the West Side Highway from 14th Street past Little West 12th. They'd be open in the back because legally you had to keep your truck open because god forbid somebody got locked in there. The boys would go in there and do their hanky panky and then come out. And then if you had money you'd go to the Anvil which is just two blocks away on the corner of 14th Street and the West Side Highway. And what was upstairs? The Hideaway Chateau. And the Hideaway Chateau, I think you can put two and two together, was more of a happy ending hotel.

**MTPK:** Did you ever get out of your cab to photograph?

**JOSEPH:** But, I would get out of the cab, you know, to help people get in or to stretch my legs, grab a cup of coffee. But, most of the time we were just queuing up, and time was money back then. I mean there was no time to hang out. But I was very friendly with everyone and people were friendly with me. I think it was... I knew you had to honor them, you know. It's tough being out there on the streets trying to make a living. And then, you know, the stories would come, "My boyfriend this, and my boyfriend that, and what do you think I should do?" And then, you know, you had that quiet moment. All kinds of things would happen.

**MTPK:** Can you talk about some of the stories from your cab? You must have seen a lot of things and heard a lot of conversations.

**JOSEPH:** You know, I've heard all kinds of stories.

I picked up this one passenger from one of the clubs there. So he comes out, he has all this BDSM on. You know, this whole leather with the chaps, with your cupcakes out, you know that kind of thing and the hat and the whip, and he gets in my cab and I said, "Where do you wanna go, sir?" And he says, "Eighty and Park Avenue". So that's a good ride. And so I'm taking him up there. Now my little plastic shield is all scratched up with graffiti. I can't really even see this guy, but by the time I get to the Park Avenue destination, he had changed his clothes. He was like Clark Kent, he was like Superman. He had a pair of khakis on, penny loafers, an Izod t-shirt and the doorman opens up and says, "Good morning, sir." And who would ever know, who would ever know who this man was before? I don't even know if he was married or, you know, what his secret life was. And then, you know, right after that it was a Sunday morning. I'm coming down Park Avenue and I pick up this African American family. They're all going to church. And so this is the city.

**MTPK:** Can you talk about what the neighborhood was like in the mid to late 80s, when you were at the tail end of your time driving your taxi cab?

**JOSEPH:** I was at the end of an era, meaning I was there to document. I wish I documented more. When I say “end of an era” that’s when the big disease with the little name came up. And then that just completely devastated everything and then I shifted my photography more to the activism part. GMHC was just being thought of. There was a lot going on.

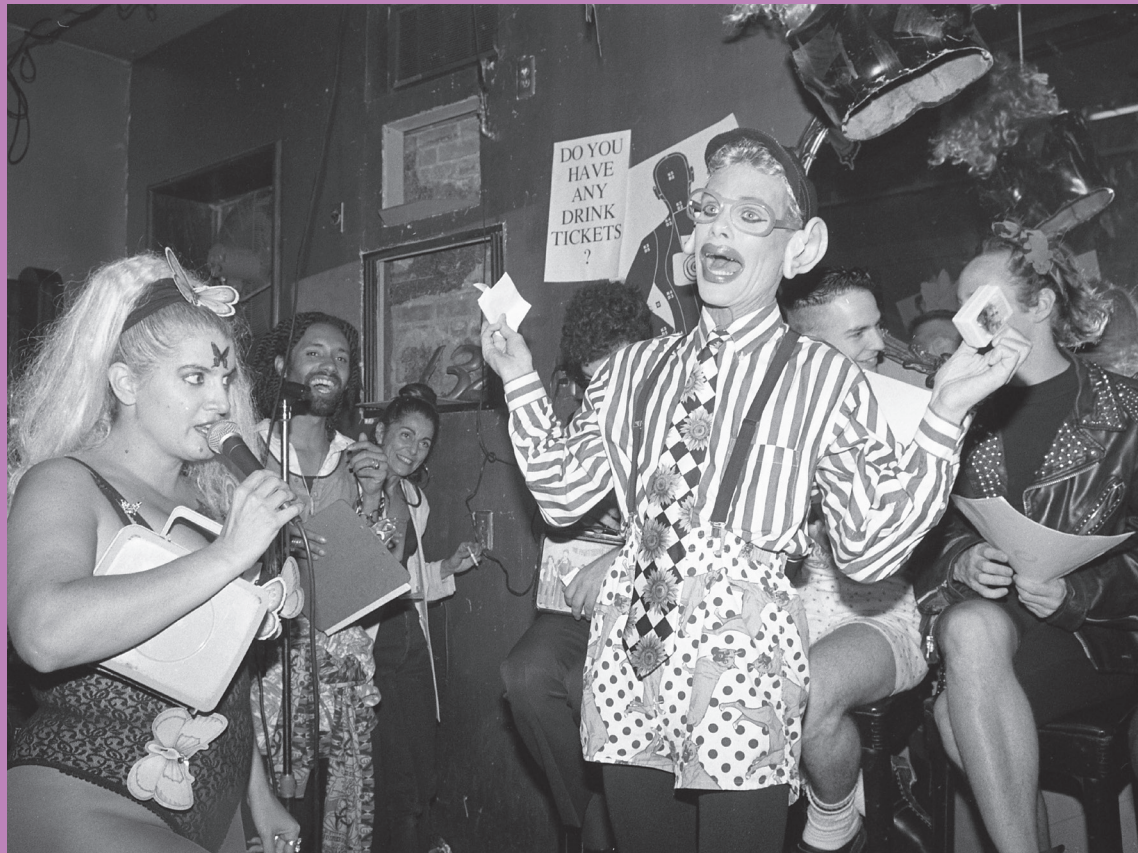
It was a devastating shock to the city in a way that it happened so fast. And I mean fast. It was just like one night everything was cool and everybody’s at the Anvil and they’re all partying and then, you know, you start hearing about this pneumonia that people would catch and then the carcinoma would come as well...I think for the gay community it really was a gut punch, you know, and it happened so fast. And then one beautiful thing that happened was that the community comes together and now they’re on the streets. And they’re creating something, they’re creating a movement where they’re saying there’s no drugs for us, there’s nothing, nothing.

**MTPK:** Why do you think it’s important to show this work today?

**JOSEPH:** So what I try to do with the photography that I make, because I’ve been doing documentary work for almost 40 years, is that I’m just trying to leave some history behind because the young folks they’re not big history buffs, right. They don’t read the books as much ... Photography has now opened up the eyes of these young people as to what folks have lived through where you’re standing now [in the Meatpacking District].

“  
I knew you  
had to honor  
them, you  
know. It’s  
tough being  
out there on  
the streets  
trying to  
make a living.  
”

# Catherine McGann



New York born photographer Catherine McGann began her career in 1986, shortly after graduating from art school, as a Contributing Photographer at the Village Voice newspaper. Soon she was shooting a weekly nightlife column, a gig which continued for the next sixteen years. Throughout the late eighties and nineties Catherine documented the tumultuous, downtown New York scene; a decadent, raunchy and chaotic underground populated by artists, writers, actors, drag queens, and musicians. Clients include the New York Times, Spin, Entertainment Weekly, People, Guitar World, Mute and Rykodisc. Her work has been published extensively internationally and has been exhibited in galleries in the US and UK.

**MEATPACKING DISTRICT:** What was the origin of the body of work and what drew you to photographing nightlife?

**CATHERINE MCGANN:** My goal was always to go and work for the Village Voice and to photograph underground nightlife in New York. I got exactly what I wanted. I was in the right place at the right time and I was partnered with Michael Musto, the writer who at the time in 1986 ... He was really the king of New York nightlife next to Andy Warhol. I just tagged along. I had my own pretensions to being an artist and I wanted to photograph things that were exciting and underground and artists and musicians and whatever else I might find in New York at that time.

I was very into the music scene and anything alternative. My icons were people like Diane Arbus and other photographers in that vein and I saw it as a great opportunity. So Michael and I really hit it off. He wrote this column called La Dolce Vita. We ran around a couple of nights a week together.

**MTPK:** What brought you to the Meatpacking District?

**CATHERINE:** Michael is the one who told me about the Meatpacking District. We went everywhere and that area was like the wild West back then... I had friends who lived over there. It was extremely empty and it always felt a little dangerous. A little bit seedy for sure.

It was an active Meatpacking District. I actually remembered this shoot that I had done in the Meatpacking District inside one of the meatpacking plants with these two guys who made a magazine briefly. They were club kids and I think their office was like above the meat place for something and that's how we ended up doing it and we just sort of jumped in and I have all these pictures of them with hanging carcasses of meat and stuff.

It was the real deal. So the main reason that I would go there was certainly when visiting friends would be to go to the main club, Jackie 60, that was on the corner of 14th Street. It was a very hip place. It was filled with artists and musicians and drag queens and trans people.

**MTPK:** Why was it important to document nightlife and the Downtown scene?

**CATHERINE:** I was always much more interested in actually trying to photograph what I saw in the world without editing it, editing things out...I saw myself as recording a scene....

There's always a scene, right? So I ended up being there in the scene of club kids, whether I liked it or not... I think people are always interested in New York history. I think that's a really big thing. New York has some of the most interesting history in the world.

“

There's  
always a  
scene, right?  
So I ended  
up being  
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club kids.

”



# David Kennerley

CONTRIBUTOR

## Meatpacking District in the 1990s: A vital haven for queer nightlife

THE 1990s SAW AN EXPLOSION OF LGBTQ+ NIGHTLIFE OPTIONS IN NYC. Club king Peter Gatien called the decade a “perfect storm” of just the right place, time, buildings, and momentum. The owner of legendary megaclubs like Limelight and Tunnel proclaimed that the decade marked the end of an era of epic nightlife. He was right.

Despite its relatively compact size, the Meatpacking District was a nexus for alternative nightlife that culminated in the '90s. If you ventured into the area at that time, you'd discover a tantalizing, gritty underworld of bars, lounges, dance clubs, sex dens, and other spots catering to the LGBTQ+ community, especially gay men.

A key factor in this perfect storm was economics. At the start of the decade, New York's financial footing was still shaky from the stock market crash of 1987, and there were many pockets of undeveloped real estate. The Meatpacking District was a fringy, dicey area rife with decrepit warehouses, cheap rents, and crime. Today's gleaming High Line park was an abandoned, rusting railway to nowhere. The current Hudson River Park greenway was a jumble of crumbling piers of concrete and wood. The area was dominated by scores of meatpacking plants, with carcasses hanging from metal awnings, and rivulets of blood trickling down cobblestoned streets. In summer, the stench could be gag-inducing.

In other words, it was ideal for nightlife entrepreneurs to set up shop. Not only were rents cheap, but the Wild-West ethos meant lax city oversight and no pesky community boards carping about the noise or crowds. Plus, the dangerous, forbidden vibe added to the allure.

Another element of this perfect storm was the burgeoning HIV/AIDS crisis, which by 1990 had claimed the lives of nearly 90,000 Americans, mostly young gay men in their prime. Nightspots played an urgent role in galvanizing and supporting a traumatized community. LGBTQ+ folks needed to come

“Out of the closets and into the streets” to enact change, since the government was in deep denial of the epidemic. More than just places to socialize, these spaces provided a refuge and held benefits for vital causes like ACT UP and GMHC. This calamity would not ease until the latter part of the decade, once the lifesaving protease-inhibitor based treatments became widely available.

Arguably the most innovative space in the Meatpacking District during that time was Bar Room 432 (later rebranded Mother), comprised of various clubs and weekly parties, that launched in 1990 and closed in 2000. The medium-sized venue, carved out of a derelict nineteenth-century market building at 432 West 14th Street, was a petri dish for alt-club culture, catering to a wildly diverse crowd that included artists, activists, feminists, drag queens, and genderqueer people. On Tuesdays was Jackie 60, a mixed LGBTQ+ party created by DJ Johnny Dynell and Chi Chi Valenti that featured exuberant, offbeat performances. On Fridays was the lesbian-centric Clit Club, hosted by Julie Tolentino and Jocelyn Taylor. On Saturdays DJ Aldo Hernandez presided over Meat, a gritty, eroticized gay party whose flyers promised “Sexy Go-go Hardon Videos.”

The only megaclub within the boundaries of the district was the mixed club Mars, which opened on New Year's Eve 1988/89 and shuttered in 1991. Located on Tenth Avenue at West 13th Street, the dance mecca was led by nightlife impresario Rudolf Piper and featured five floors, each with a different DJ and ambiance. The gay party, Mars Needs Men, was hosted on Sunday nights by Chip Duckett. Another massive dance club, The Roxy (1978-2006), located a couple of blocks north of the district on West 18th Street, helped channel energy into the Meatpacking clubs.

Besides Meat, a number of sex-positive clubs and parties popped up in the district, many of them BDSM-focused. There was The Vault/Cell Block and Trouble in the former Mars space; Hellfire and Manhole at 28 Ninth Avenue, and

J's Hangout around the corner at 675 Hudson Street. On West 14th Street just west of Ninth Avenue were The Attic and Blow Buddies.

On the southern fringe of the district was the raucous Pubic Hair Club for Men party at The Comeback (507 West Street at the Jane Hotel), hosted by gender-bending performer Dean Johnson, which was known for its steamy back room.

porn videos, and live BDSM sex shows that were not for the squeamish.

These spots harked back to the notorious, hardcore sex venues like the Anvil (1974-86) and the Mineshaft (1976-85), padlocked by the city to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS. But the new generation of sex dens was much tamer, and some hired monitors with flashlights to

Tea dance on Sundays. Mike's Bar/Mike's Club Cafe (400 W. 14th St. at Ninth Avenue), a large, high-ceilinged "men's bar" that evoked a London Pub, helped usher in the nearby Chelsea gay bar scene. In 1997, a spot called Hell opened at 59 Gansevoort Street. It was a stylish, chill lounge for LGBTQ+ people and their friends.

Not that bars and nightclubs were the only option. Florent, the 24-hour comfort-food restaurant opened by Florent Morellet in 1985, was a magnet for gays, lesbians, drag queens, trans people, activists, artists, tourists, and other revelers needing a pre- or post-romp meal, until it closed in 2008. A few doors down from Hell lounge at 69 Gansevoort Street, the eatery had a casual diner/French bistro vibe, with a long counter with swivel stools and framed maps covering the walls above the banquettes. The menu board above the counter displayed a graph of T-Cell counts for Morellet, which went a long way to diffuse the stigma of being HIV-positive.

Another destination was Lee's Mardi Gras (400 W. 14th St., 3rd floor), a 5,000-square-foot "cross-dressing" boutique specializing in plus-sized shoes and women's clothing, frequented by drag performers and trans people.

The Meatpacking party, however, was not meant to last. Starting in the mid-'90s, Mayor Rudy Giuliani waged a campaign against NYC nightlife, ordering raids and levying hefty fines for minor violations, which made it impossible for some owners to keep their doors open.

At the dawn of the new century, venues got squeezed out by skyrocketing rents,

gentrification, zoning changes, and hostile community boards. What's more, the rise of the digital era offered online options like AOL chatrooms and Manhunt.com, which competed with bars and clubs as a way to find sex partners. In search of reasonable rents, LGBTQ+ nightspots migrated to Hell's Kitchen, Brooklyn, and beyond.

These days, the reanimated Meatpacking District is still a destination for LGBTQ+ people.

Adjacent to the former Club Mars site, atop The Standard, is Le Bain, which carries on the dance club tradition with parties like On Top (hosted by the legendary Susanne Bartsch) and Paradisco, that have a distinct queer accent. Racket NYC, on West 16th Street, occasionally hosts LGBTQ+-centric events, like Masterbeat gay circuit parties.

The Whitney Museum, which migrated from the Upper East Side in 2015, showcases works of numerous American LGBTQ+ artists like Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Julie Mehretu, and regularly holds Queer Teen Nights. Remarkably, it recently featured an installation replicating the now-iconic entrance to the fabled Mineshaft sex club during its 2022 Biennial exhibition.

Next to the Whitney is the southern entrance to The High Line, among the most successful urban renewal park projects in the world. The brainchild of two gay men, Joshua David and Robert Hammond, the breathtakingly gorgeous elevated park attracts a mindboggling, mixed crowd of tourists and New Yorkers of every stripe, and often holds special events catering to the LGBTQ+ community.

**David Kennerley is a journalist and historian specializing in LGBTQ+ culture. For nearly two decades, he has been an Arts & Entertainment reporter for Gay City News, the NYC-based LGBTQ+ newspaper and website. Originally from the farmlands of Eastern Pennsylvania, David moved to NYC and became addicted to nightlife in the 1990s, where he became a club flyer hoarder and unexpected expert on queer nightlife of the period. His book, GETTING IN: NYC Club Flyers from the Gay 1990s, will be published by Daken Press in August 2023.**

“These were places where you could go and become that life. And then when you leave, you would leave everything behind and go back to being normal.”

In 1994, a new breed of leather/jeans bar opened at 409 West 13th Street, called The LURE (Leather, Uniforms, Rubber, Etc.). For years, the macho retreat had a strict code of no sneakers, boots only. On Wednesdays was the Pork party, where admission was only \$3 and draft beers \$1. A flyer from the era invited patrons to "Pig out and rock out." The LURE featured a sleazy backroom corridor, extreme

make sure exploits didn't get out of control. The venues offered free condoms, lube packets, and safe-sex pamphlets, targeting a vulnerable demographic.

Briefly in the '90s was a venue called Fat Boy (409 W. 14th Street), which attracted Latino gay men and hosted a weekly Scandalo! party; and Plush (431 W. 14th St.), which held a Tropical

# Lola Flash



Working at the forefront of genderqueer visual politics for more than four decades, photographer Lola Flash's work challenges stereotypes and gender, sexual, and racial preconceptions. An active member of ACT UP during the time of the AIDS epidemic in New York City, Flash was notably featured in the 1989 "Kissing Doesn't Kill" poster. Their art and activism are profoundly connected, fueling a life-long commitment to visibility and preserving the legacy of LGBTQIA+ and communities of color worldwide. Flash has work included in important collections such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, MoMA, the Whitney, The Museum of the African American of History and Culture and the Brooklyn Museum. They are currently a proud member of the Kamoinge Collective, and on the Board of Queer Art.

Flash received their bachelor's degree from Maryland Institute and Masters' from London College of Printing, in the UK. Flash works primarily in portraiture, engaging those who are often deemed invisible. Flash's practice is firmly rooted in social justice advocacy around sexual, racial, and cultural differences.

**MEATPACKING DISTRICT:** How did you get started photographing people in the Meatpacking District?

**LOLA FLASH:** I worked at the Clit Club, right there at Washington and 14th Street. I was the bartender at the very beginning. I also made the slide shows, so I would ask people if they wanted to model for me. I used to always say, no one's going to know who it is because you'll be like red, green, or blue. Because obviously at that time and even now, it's sometimes challenging, especially for people of color, to be out. These pictures would have been taken in 1989 or 1990.

**MTPK:** Tell us about your use of bright colors in the pictures.

**LOLA:** Cross color is a process that I started by mistake when I was in college in the seventies. When you print a slide onto negative paper, which is what I did, you get negative color. So I call it cross color. Basically back then you would print a slide onto steam chrome paper. So I started printing because the negative paper was always hanging about at the college, which was the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore. And I loved the color so much that I just kept doing that for 20 years basically.

I started thinking about growing up as a Black person. When you think about being Black

and growing up knowing that like a black cat is bad luck in my photographs, I'm changing that around. Black people are now white and white people are now Black.

As a Black person, as a queer person, the challenge is to work towards getting rid of erasure and actually placing ourselves into these narratives of happiness, joy, home ownership. All the things that aren't often granted to us. We don't have generational wealth to count on due to redlining and all the ways that America has shaped this world to basically be against people, Black and Brown people.

**MTPK:** Can you talk about that a little bit more about that duality between visibility and concealment?

**LOLA:** I didn't really think about it when I was in the process, because this was during the AIDS crisis and I was also an ACT UP. I know my brain was just kind of working 24 hours a day. We were either at demonstrations or we were planning demonstrations or we were in the hospitals, visiting our friends who were dying or we were at funerals.

I think in that sense, Clit Club was a real escape for a lot of people to just be in a safe space.

I encouraged people to be in the photograph by

“

The thing  
I've always  
wanted to be  
able to show  
is kindness.  
This is my  
weapon.

”

saying like, ‘no one’s going to recognize who you are.’ I didn’t really think about it until later on about how that was really kind of a way to let people be present. But not so present that they lose their jobs.

There’s really a kind of fine line between making myself be seen and when you look at me like you can see that I don’t really sort of blend into the crowd.

There’s a real tension between being seen and, and not being seen.

A lot of times you’d see people come to clubs and dress at the club just because of not wanting to be seen as they truly are.

When you think about photography it is a colonial act. I’m very clear and understand that the tool that I use has been used in a really inappropriate way for many years and still is. For me, whenever I’m working with my models, it’s always a collaboration. They bring as much to the table as I do. When I choose those folks, I can already see it in their walk and the way that they present themselves, just the stride and the confidence.

I’m amazed at some photographers who still only photograph their white friends or then sometimes they sort of sprinkle in a Black person or two.

I’m like, ok, y’all can do that I can do that too. So I have mostly Black and Brown folks and I sprinkle in a few white people here and there. Maybe it’s payback.

There’s just been so much of my life where I never saw myself. I remember in the seventies when I was in high school, I used to go to Christopher Street all the time and I would walk up and down Christopher Street and I’ve always loved looking at guys and the guys back then they used to look like Marlboro men. They had mustaches, cowboy hats and a lot of them had chaps on, and I used to just think, wow, that’s so cool.

There weren’t any posters like you see now of queer couples.

That’s another part of why I continue to photograph my community so that the younger folks can see that we are a beautiful bunch of folks and that we’re proud, we’re smart. The thing I’ve always wanted to be able to show is kindness.

This is my weapon. Like, Gordon Parks talks about how he decided to use his camera as a weapon as opposed to some of the other guys who were getting into like gangs and all this violence and he decided to use his weapon.

I feel like that’s where I’m at right now and, standing on the shoulders of a lot of people like Audre Lorde or Angela Davis, people who sometimes when I get tired of fighting, I can sit and look at what they’ve done and remember that I’m not alone. We have a whole army.

**MTPK: What was the neighborhood like for you at the time? What was the scene?**

**LOLA:** OK, so the first thing about the Meatpacking District, which every time I go there now, I kind of laugh because I’m like, where’s the meat?

I would say the first thing is the smell of blood and whatever else that’s kind of trickling along the curb.

I remember setting up at the Clit Club. The trans folks would come in before they started their night of work. They would come in with their little pocketbooks on their arm and we would give them a drink and we would dance around with them for a little while. When they would leave, I would say a silent prayer just hoping that no one was harmed.

And after the club, we would all go to Florent and eat there.

Now that I am history, I can see how history gets lost so easily.

A lot of people have told me that they met the love of their life or they were with different people that they met at the Clit Club for years.

The music was just great. It was a place where all of us felt comfortable. There were always like pretty much more Black and Brown folks in there than anyone else. The Queer Spaces even nowadays, that’s just not the case. We’ve got patriarchy against us, we’ve got racism against us. You know what I mean?

**MTPK: You’re such an interesting figure in that, like you were creating community through the club, you’re documenting folks creating visibility, your activism obviously with ACT UP and, and the other groups that you participated in—it was kind of all aspects of your life kind of synthesized around creating this space and this power for people like you and other folks. Talk about how all those pieces fit together for you.**

**LOLA:** I graduated from college in 1981. That was officially the first year that someone was diagnosed with AIDS. That’s when the New York Times decided to spread the word. Being Black, it’s hard to do anything that’s not a political act, same thing with being gay, right? I feel like my identity makes it really hard for me to do anything without thinking about being an activist.

I said to myself, um I’m never gonna take a um I’m never gonna take a beautiful picture until there’s a cure for AIDS.

My parents were teachers. I think that sort of community thing was always like part of my upbringing, helping others, educating others.

I knew that I could use my photography to change the world in some way, and if not the world, maybe certain people’s opinions. It creates a conversation. It gives me a purpose. It gives me a chance to say my peace and to uplift my community.

I feel like there was no choice. There wasn’t a choice to do anything other than what I’m doing and how I’m doing it.

When I got to about 40 I was like, I’m tired, and so I kind of just started doing what I call watercolors. They’re photographs—I started

photographing Fire Island and Jacob Riis beach in the fall light and just kind of going back to what I remember when I was young. I finally said to myself ok, it’s ok to take a beautiful picture.

**MTPK: What is it like for you having started out at the Clit Club, being in that world, being in that scene, and now, your work is in the Whitney in the same area?**

**LOLA:** It’s really exciting. I have a book out called “Believable, Traveling with My Ancestors,” and it’s called “Believable” because when museums started acquiring my work, I kept saying to my fiancé, it’s so unbelievable. I think about the third time I said that she said, “Lola stop, you are believable.”

That was not ever my goal. I didn’t wanna be in a gallery. We used to do so much wheat pasting. I used to do a lot of shows in pubs and restaurants.

I felt like the people who I wanted to see my work were not at those institutions, and also like the white walls, there’d be white people, white people as visitors and white people on the walls.

Museums are changing. They’re including many more artists that look like me. The Brooklyn Museum has that whole sort of first Saturday, which is just a mob of Black folks and families.

I don’t know if I’m going to live to be old enough to see when things are truly equitable. But I think by the time I’m ready to get going, I think that I’ll be able to sit back and think, well, some things have changed. I feel like I need to toot my own horn and say that I think that I’m someone who has helped that change.



PHOTO BY LOLA FLASH

“

This exhibition tells incredible stories of a period when many people first ventured into public in search of a safe community for true self-exploration or survival.

-Tim Hayes

”

## THE AMERICAN LGBTQ+ MUSEUM EXHIBITION PARTNER

The American LGBTQ+ Museum preserves, investigates, and celebrates the dynamic histories and cultures of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, as well as those of the emergent and adjacent identities among our communities. Using exhibitions and programs, the organization seeks to advance LGBTQ+ equality through the lens of social justice movements, including, but not limited to, race, gender, class, immigration, and disability.

The museum is a relative newcomer to the arts and culture space. With a planning task force that met in 2017, a year later the museum received funding support from the New York City Council. In 2019, a partnership with the New-York Historical Society was formed and the New York State Board of Regents granted an educational charter. Two years later, the museum hired its first Executive Director, Ben Garcia, to lead and grow the organization. In 2023, the museum received state funding to build a permanent home in the New-York Historical Society.



401

THE SHOW TAKES PLACE AT 401 ON 401 WEST 14TH STREET, a re-envisioned POP-UP CONCEPT. 401 will offer a variety of experiences during its three-week run. Visitors can enjoy a daily coffee bar powered by local coffee shop, Terremoto. In the evenings, there will be happy hour programming. The space, generously donated by Taconic Investment Partners, will also act as a studio and feature artist talks and panels. It is available for audience participation, live music, and DJ sets. Merchandise will also be available for purchase.



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THE MEATPACKING DISTRICT MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION IS A BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT (BID) THAT SERVES THE BUSINESSES, RESIDENTS, AND VISITORS OF THE AREA WITH A COMMON GOAL: TO PROGRAM, PROMOTE, AND TAKE CARE OF THE MEATPACKING DISTRICT. WE LOVE THIS COBBLESTONE CORNER OF MANHATTAN, AND IT'S AT ITS BEST WHEN PEOPLE HERE ARE ABLE TO THRIVE.

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