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Lesbian Photography—Seeing through Our Own Eyes

Lesbian Photography—Seeing through Our Own Eyes¹

JEB (Joan E. Biren)

We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. . . . The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation and that always seems fraught with danger. . . . We fear the very visibility without which we also cannot truly live. . . . And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which is also the source of our greatest strength.

—Audre Lorde²

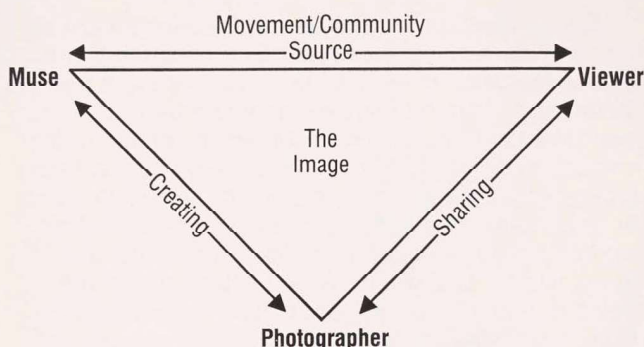
In what follows, I write as a Lesbian photographer about Lesbian photography. I believe that Lesbian photographers are helping to create a new culture. We are transforming ourselves and the world in which we live by seeing and sharing the realities of our lives and visualizing the future. Lesbian photographers are making visible that which has been invisible.

Existing male-defined images of Lesbians are completely false when measured against the realities of Lesbian lives. The viewer is assumed to be male and the portrayal is designed to reinforce his sense of power over us. Male images of pseudo-Lesbians create two stereotypes: Lesbians are either sick, perverted vampires and murderers (the bloodletters) or superromanticized plastic playmates (the bloodless). One stereotype makes us afraid to identify as Lesbians because we don't want to be "unnatural" and ugly. The other ultimately makes us feel inferior because we aren't (or do not forever remain) teen-aged, slim, blond, and blurry à la David Hamilton. Many Lesbians have identified with these images simply because they are accessible.

JEB (Joan E. Biren) has been photographing within the Lesbian feminist movement for more than ten years and supports herself as a free-lance photographer. She taught herself photography after dropping out of a doctoral program at Oxford University. Her photographs have appeared in many Lesbian, feminist, and gay publications including The Furies, Off Our Backs, Gay Community News, Sinister Wisdom, and Our Right to Love. In 1979, JEB published a book of her photographs, Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians, the first book of its kind. Since then she has traveled extensively in this country with a slide/talk presentation, "Lesbian Images in Photography: 1850-1982" and has been conducting workshops for photographers.

Making Lesbian images visible and accessible is one way of defining ourselves. Often women feel excluded because they insist on experiencing a positive statement, "I am a Lesbian," as if one had said, "You are not a Lesbian." Women sometimes object to the very idea of "labeling" as "just creating new stereotypes or boxes." But for Lesbians to define (to name or to picture) is not limiting or exclusionary of other women, is not creating some kind of "correct line" about what a Lesbian is. What Lesbian artists are doing is expanding the possibilities, enlarging our vision, suggesting new ways of looking that have not existed before—ways that affirm our loving and our lives. Adrienne Rich (1980:648) has offered the concept of "Lesbian existence," suggesting a presence throughout time and "our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence." I visualize this as a spiral of existence in which Lesbians continually shed male-identification as we move into a woman-centered world. Part of what propels us on this journey is what *Sinister Wisdom* has called "the Lesbian imagination in all women."³ Lesbian definitions (as our seeing and our visions) will continue to evolve as we journey further into this new woman-identified existence.

Part of defining ourselves is the creation of a common language—oral, written, and visual. Lesbian photographers are most concerned with the visual vocabulary. This may be affected by race, class, age, and regional or other differences. Differences need to be acknowledged and appreciated. But something about those of us who have survived as women-loving women in a woman-hating world is the same, and something we are creating is the same. If we do not identify that "something," we will remain invisible. Lesbians cannot survive as a formless, faceless people who fear discovery so much that we are not visible—even to each other. Without a visual identity we have no community, no support network, no movement. Making ourselves visible is a political act. Making ourselves visible is a continual process.



Lesbians make visible some way in which they have freed themselves from patriarchal domination; then Lesbian photographers make these women visible in their images; then the images are made visible. All these things are in continual interaction, mutually validating each other and encouraging further movement into Lesbian existence. I have diagrammed these interactions as a triangle. In what follows I explore, first, the interaction between the viewer and the muse; then the photographer and the viewer; and, finally, the muse and the photographer.⁴

The Viewer and the Muse

People ask me, "Why are there no feminine women in your book?" or "How about pictures of some straight, professional-looking women?" or "Where are the Lesbians at the office or playing bridge?" We all want to be validated by seeing ourselves reflected in images. At the same time, Lesbians have internalized our oppression, expressing it in our desire to "pass." Passing means giving no visual sign of being different from the dominant, straight culture. It is the visual signs which are so threatening to heterosexuals—the more blatant the sign, the more threatening it seems and the more forcefully it will be resisted. Anything that signals a moving away from the male-prescribed behavior for females is a sign. The most basic, of course, is existing in the world without a visible male "protector." Other signs can range from standing with your hands in your pockets or sitting with your legs apart to looking directly out from your eyes, growing your body hair, or wearing "dykey" clothes (usually durable, comfortable clothing whose use is supposed to be restricted to men). When Lesbians ask for images in which we look "undykey" because otherwise "someone might get the 'wrong' idea; might be discouraged from becoming a Lesbian; or might use the images 'against' us," we are censoring ourselves because of our own fear of recognition.

The visual appearance of Lesbians (what I sometimes call *The Look, The Stance, The Clothes*) is a combination of what already exists and has existed in our herstory and how Lesbians will be when we become even more liberated from male definitions. For example, if you are a woman in the city it is dangerous to take off your clothes when you are outside because men will probably attack you. In woman-controlled country spaces, it is safe for women to be nude. If I portray "too many nudes," it is because my image of Lesbians is a synthesis of how we are now and my vision of the future. To the extent that the viewer and the photographer share a common vision, the image communicates what the photographer wants it to communicate. If the viewer does not share the artist's vision, it is possible, as Arlene Raven (1977:51) has pointed out, that the image itself can force the viewer "to take a leap of consciousness out from the patriarchal mindset." In other words, how we see is affected by the differing perspectives along the road from victim to survivor (can you imagine little wooden signs of cameras posted at the scenic viewpoints along this road?), by how far we have traveled on our journey into woman-identified existence. Our perceptions change along with our appearance and the substance of our lives. We have a different way of seeing because we have a different way of being; and we have a different way of being because we have a different way of seeing. Lesbian images can help speed the transformation of our individual lives and the world by stirring our imaginations, by focusing on the aspects of Lesbian lives and looks that are different from male-dominated culture, and by celebrating these differences as the beginnings of a better world.

The Photographer and the Viewer

We live in a world filled with images and, because of the camera, probably more images than ever before. Unfortunately, few people know how to "read" or experience visual images. The photograph is often regarded as proof that something exists. But all photographs reflect the subjective vision of their makers. There is no objective "way things look"; there are only different ways of seeing. How we see and how we represent our vision are both determined by, and are determiners of, our consciousness. Most people too often fall into the trap of accepting the point of view of the photographer as a "true" representation of the visible world only when the photographic image reflects the prevailing ideology. When the photograph reflects a different consciousness, one that challenges established values, then people call it "political" or label it "propaganda." But art and politics are not separable; nor art and propaganda. All art is

propaganda for some ideology. The photograph has already transformed our way of experiencing the world. All of us need to understand better how pictures can introduce another mode of vision into the world. My own process of seeing and photographing has been very affected by the existence or nonexistence of certain kinds of pictures.

When I first started photographing in 1970, I was a Lesbian who had never seen an affirming Lesbian image, so I began by making photographs of smiling Lesbians. I trained myself not to make pictures when women looked unhappy, because my idea of what was appropriate to photograph was influenced by the "happy heterosexual" images all around me. As our movement grew, joyful images of Lesbians were increasingly visible. Then I learned that we also needed and wanted to see the pain and struggle that are a part of Lesbian lives. My own way of seeing was transformed by being able to look at more images of our reality. This is why it is so important for Lesbian photographers to work on new and more effective ways of making our photographs accessible (including ways of financing our photography and distributing our images).

No photograph completely communicates any one thing exclusively; photographs give us the appearance of a moment in time, but they cannot narrate, cannot tell us about change. We, the viewers, fill in much of the meaning. We will take part of the meaning from the context in which we view the picture—reading a caption, looking at the surrounding images, noticing whether we see it in a museum, an ad for whiskey, or a Lesbian publication. The reliance of the photograph on the viewer or context for its meaning makes existing visual imagery even more important. What now exists is mostly male-defined. As Harmony Hammond (1977; 1978:261)⁵ has observed, the work of Lesbian visual artists is not visible to one another, and this denies us "the possibility of developing work that acknowledges Lesbian experience as a creative source for art making and as a context in which to explore it." We need to enlarge the context for viewing Lesbian art by making our art and ourselves more visible to one another.

Currently most photography we look at is removed from the context in which it was made. Part of the definition of Lesbian photography that I am offering depends upon the photograph being viewed in a context "continuous with that from which the camera removed it" (Berger 1980:51), for example, in our homes, women's centers, and Lesbian bars and restaurants. In this way the photographer can be more certain of the meaning which will be assigned to the photographs and the use to which they will be put. The photograph will be comprehensible, as Joanne Kerr has explained, "because of the reference to

shared experience, rather than shared knowledge of artistic convention."⁶

Making images for non-Lesbian audiences forces Lesbian artists to make different images because we must rely so heavily on the common experience of art to communicate. But making images for Lesbian viewers allows Lesbian artists to share our life experiences through our art. As women share their new experiences with us, our images change. For example, in the last year or so I have had a chance to talk with and photograph fat Lesbians who were feeling good about their own bodies. This was a change which made me see fat women in a more affirming way. (I should also say that I subsequently gained weight and feel okay about it most of the time.) Knowing there is a community of women to view our work gives Lesbian photographers permission to create photographs which will never be encouraged by establishment art schools, critics, museums, photography magazines, or the general public.

Kerr suggests that feminist, as opposed to Lesbian, art tries to bring about social change by communicating women's experience, especially women's oppression (like violence against women), directly to the male-dominated culture. She continues: "When art specifically refers to and is inspired by women and their relationships with one another, the art can be defined as most especially 'Lesbian' and often speaks to a smaller and more specific audience."⁷ I do not entirely agree with the implication that feminist art is more organizational (mobilizing action) and Lesbian art more educational (raising consciousness). I agree that Lesbian art is not made for large public audiences; it emerges as an affirmation of those who are struggling against the patriarchy more than as a direct reaction against the patriarchy itself. Lesbian photographers are not reporters to the rest of the world as much as we are recorders for those whom we photograph. They are the ones who use our images and are moved to action by them.

The Muse and the Photographer

In Lesbian photography, where the muse is a woman, we strive for collaboration, not domination. This collaboration extends into something reciprocal, mutual, an exchange of inspirational energy. Photography has traditionally been used to objectify and violate women, so Lesbian photographers' vision is clouded by many photographic conventions used especially in portraying women's bodies. The words associated with photography are heavy with the uses to which it has been put: "load and shoot" the camera, "take" your picture, "capture" the image. The very word "photography" looks too much like "pornography" for

comfort. The camera, especially with a long lens, looks phallic. Lesbian photographers must work against this male definition of the photographic process as predatory. We can change the way we talk about what we are doing, helping ourselves to change the way we think about it: "make" a picture, "embrace" the muse, and so on. But we must also change the process.

A woman being photographed will choose how she presents herself based, in part, upon who the photographer is and how well they know and understand each other. If I expect a woman to trust me, to reveal herself to me, I have to be willing to reciprocate, to trust her with revelations of my own. This could be as simple as taking my clothes off if she is nude. Most often, though, I will try to explain why I am moved to make a picture with her, tell her what it is about her that I find attractive. Then, at some point before or after the actual photographing, we discuss the possible uses of the photographs and how much control she would like to maintain. It seems Lesbian photographers often assume that women don't want to be photographed rather than asking and giving them the choice. By encouraging this kind of dialogue, I hope that more rather than fewer images will result.

If the photographer plans to publish or exhibit the photographs, it is best to have a written agreement with the muse.⁸ "Standard" release forms do not deal with the question of whether or not the "model" wishes to be identified as a Lesbian or what type of publications she would allow her photograph to appear in. Lesbian photographers have a responsibility to our muses never to place them in danger of losing their jobs, their children, their immigration status, or something of which we might not even be aware. Publishing or exhibiting photographs irresponsibly jeopardizes not only the muses' rights but the special trust that is growing among Lesbian photographers and women in the movement/community. The imperatives of sharing any particular image (even one's very best photographs) must be weighed carefully in a scale that is tipped toward the rights of the individual women involved.

In some "primitive" cultures, art forms are more valued for the activity involved in the process of creating than for the product. For example, the body state—the energy flow—achieved by the potter making a pot is just as important as having something in which to put porridge (Gina 1974:13–14). By reversing the male myth of the objective observer, seeing but not seen, present but not participating, Lesbian photographers may become emotionally involved while we are photographing. This is not a license to disrupt anything or intrude upon anyone. If we are acutely aware of a woman's feelings, we will probably act in a sensitive, caring way. If we pretend we are not photographing someone when we are, the distance we put

between us introduces the possibility of abuse. If we are oriented toward producing a "usable, professional" photograph, we may lose our inspiration and objectify our muse. Only by allowing ourselves to feel passionately in these exchanges are we, the photographers, transforming ourselves through the process of getting to know our muses. The energy that is exchanged between the Lesbian photographer and her muse becomes transformed into the image, and later the image radiates that same energy.

Although Lesbian photographers have made visible so much that has been invisible, I am amazed at how many images still simply do not exist—images of everyday, ordinary Lesbian lives. We need more of these images which can be so extraordinarily moving. Just as there is power in words, in naming, there is power in visual images, in being truly seen. Making Lesbian images is a way for Lesbians to empower ourselves.

Acknowledgments

For me, making photographs is easier than writing about them. I am grateful to all the women who have previously written about Lesbian art and culture and to all the friends who have discussed Lesbian photography with me for aiding me in articulating my thoughts and feelings.

The title of this article comes, in part, from Susan Griffin's *Her Vision: Now She Sees Through Her Own Eyes*, which is the name of the fourth book in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1978.

Notes

- 1 This is the complete version of an article that was published in part in *The Blatant Image: A Magazine of Feminist Photography*, no. 1, 1981. The photographs are from a new, as yet untitled, book of Lesbian photographs by JEB now in progress; from *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians*, by JEB, published in 1979 (available for \$10 from Glad Hag Books, P.O. Box 2934, Washington, D.C. 20013, discreetly packaged); and from *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck (Persephone Press, 1982).
- 2 Audre Lorde, from her remarks at the 1977 Modern Language Association meeting, reprinted in *Sinister Wisdom*, no. 6, pp. 13 and 15.
- 3 *Sinister Wisdom* is available from P.O. Box 660, Amherst, MA 01004.
- 4 Although I am exploring the process from the perspective of a Lesbian photographer, it obviously applies to other Lesbian artists. In the model diagramed here, the photographer could be thought of as the artist or creator; the viewer could be thought of as the audience or context; and the muse could be thought of as either the subject or content of the work. But I have never liked referring to the women in my photographs as my subjects, so I prefer muse. I was introduced to the concept of the muse in Arlene Raven and Ruth Iskin (1977).
I have chosen to explore the interactions among Lesbian muses, photographers, and viewers. I am not unaware of the other possibilities: where, for example, the photographer and the viewer are Lesbians but the muse is not Lesbian, or the muse is Lesbian but the photographer and the viewer are not Lesbians. We could discuss which (if either) is a Lesbian photograph: the picture of a flower I made for my (non-Lesbian) mother's birthday present or male photographer Skrebneski's book cover portrait of Lesbian author Rita Mae Brown? But consideration of these questions is so new that I believe we will gain the most by focusing on the most clearly Lesbian situation first.
- 5 The entire issue of *Heresies*, no. 3 (Fall), 1977, is devoted to Lesbian art and artists.
- 6 See Kerr (1980:206), "a cultural Feminist document in the form of a doctoral dissertation." University of California, Irvine.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

- 8 A sample release form. Your name and address at the top, then:

PHOTOGRAPHER'S RELEASE FORM

PLEASE CROSS OUT THE PARTS THAT DO NOT APPLY.
THANK YOU.

For valuable consideration received, I hereby give (your name) the absolute right and permission, with respect to the photographs that she has taken of me or in which I may be included with others:

- a) To copyright the same in her own name or any name that she may choose.
- b) To use, re-use, publish and re-publish the same in any medium for any purpose. This permission includes lesbian media, gay media, feminist media, and mass media.
- c) To state that I am a Lesbian if she so chooses.
- d) To use my name or nickname in connection with the photograph if she so chooses.
- e) To use the name of the city or place where the photograph was taken or where I live in connection with the photograph if she so chooses.

I hereby waive any right that I may have to inspect or approve the finished photograph or the use to which it may be applied and release (your name) from any and all claims, including claims for libel arising out of the use of the photographs.

(LEAVE SPACE HERE FOR OTHER AGREEMENTS
TO BE WRITTEN IN)

I am over the age of twenty-one and have every right to contract in my own name in the above regard.

Date: _____

Legal Signature: _____

PRINT Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Zip _____

Phone: (Area Code) _____

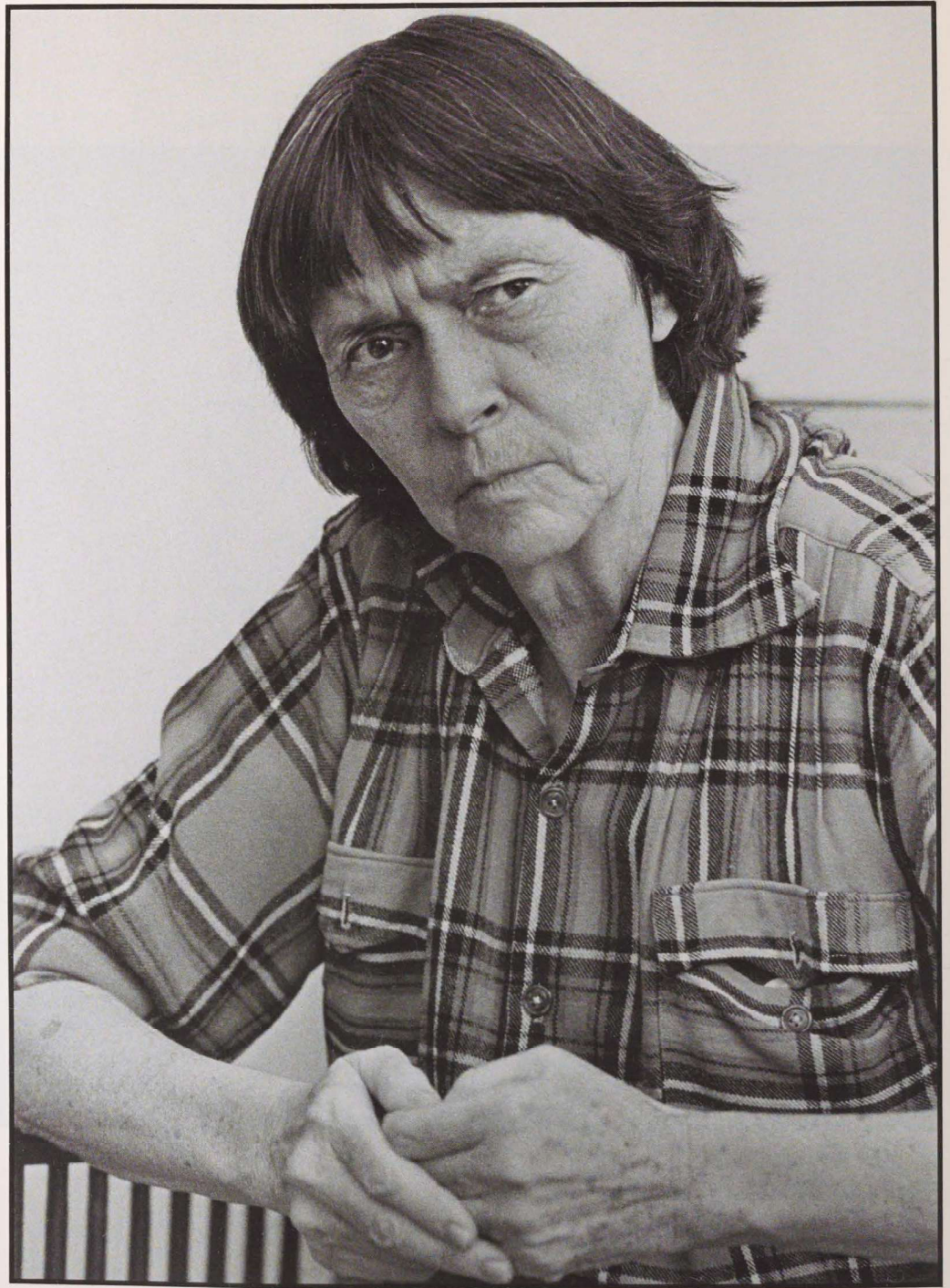
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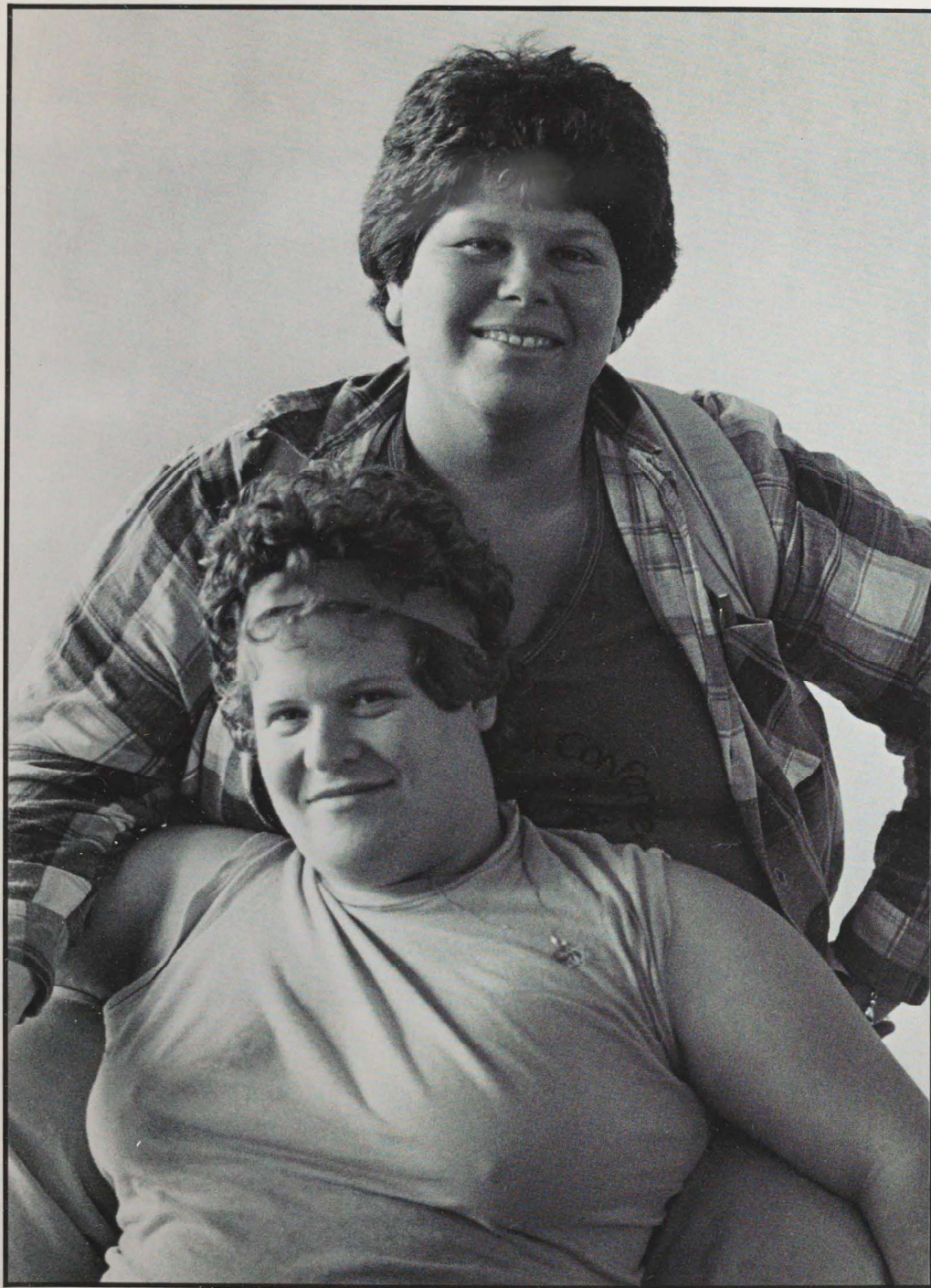
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Kady and Pagan, New York, 1978. Copyright © JEB (Joan E. Biren), 1979; from *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians*.



Barbara, Florida, 1981. Copyright © JEB (Joan E. Biren), 1982.



Leah and Judith (rear), California, 1982. Copyright © JEB
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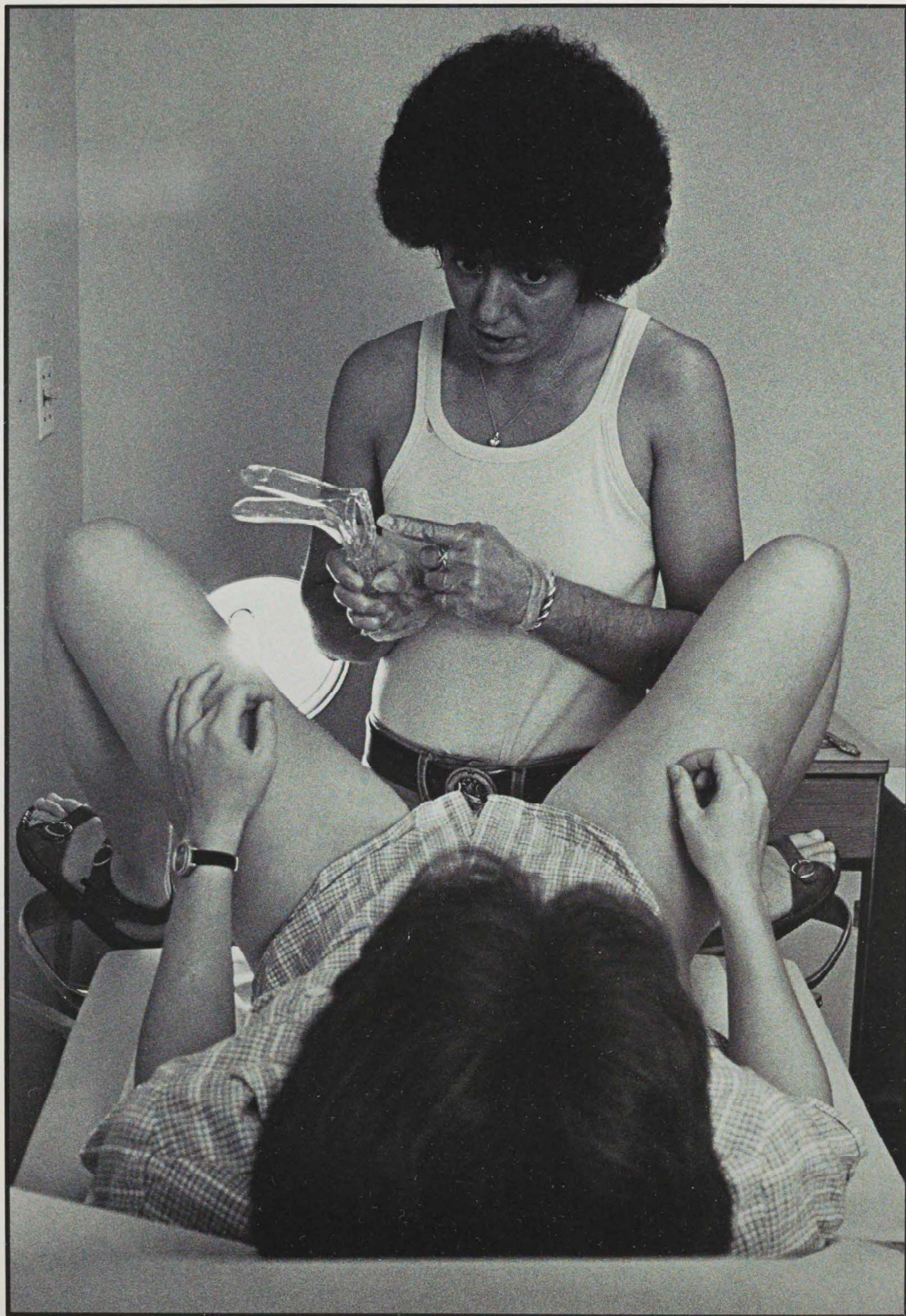
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Dana, Texas, 1980. Copyright © JEB (Joan E. Biren), 1981.



San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Freedom Day, 1980.
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