BOOK REVIEW

Ken. To be destroyed
By Sara Davidmann
130 pp./$60.00 (hb)

Throughout its history, photography has sat at the intersection of truth and fiction. That photographic images are based on reality is incontrovertible. That things might not be as they seem to appear is equally true. It is fair to say that the ability of photography to capture the real world helped to shape the twentieth century into one that would become almost obsessed with truth and accuracy, until interrupted by the digital revolution. Ironically, the digital medium, which is able to capture the world with the utmost of fidelity, has also been so easy to alter that it reveals that image manipulation has been present throughout photography’s short history. This ability of photography to show, but somehow not reveal, while emphasizing surface over depth, is instrumental to Sara Davidmann’s project Ken. To be destroyed (2013–15).

In 2011, Davidmann and her siblings moved their mother to a nursing home. While cleaning out her house, they discovered a trove of letters, photographs, and documents in envelopes upon which were written the words, “Ken. To be destroyed.” The materials contained in the envelopes document the attempts by her mother, father, and Aunt Hazel to understand and deal with her Uncle Ken’s transgender identity during an era remarkable for little understanding and no acceptance of the condition. For Davidmann this was an astounding find, as she had previously worked with transgender people as part of her PhD studies. The find, as rich as it is, also presents an incomplete narrative, one that fails to adequately explain or to give voice to Ken. Davidmann has been exploring the material from two directions—through artistic exploration and as an archive. The results are several series, some of which deconstruct the few original images of Hazel and Ken, as well as new photography of the archive material. All of the series to date have been brought together in the text with Davidmann’s own explanatory writing and an essay by writer and curator Val Williams.

I began reading the letters that Hazel wrote to my mother. They are vivid and powerful, and I found them very moving. They brought to light how little was known about transgender people in the 1950s and ’60s, and the difficulties Hazel had to try to reconcile the fact that Ken was transgender with society’s (and her own) expectations of marriage. (71–72)

Whether due to financial insecurity along with the perceived role of women during that time period or Hazel’s love for Ken despite the challenges, she was trapped in a marriage that she felt unable to leave. The marriage was never consummated, but she stayed with Ken until his death in 1979.

Hazel and Ken had an agreement that he would present as male outside of the home and as a woman inside. Looking for K/Finding K (2014–15) is a group of images Davidmann has made of Ken, or K, as she calls him to refer to his female identity. These are altered images of Hazel with her face replaced by K’s. The images have been hand-colored with Marshall’s oils, which provide a palette that is quite soft and pastel, but lacking realism. With these images, Davidmann allows K to leave the home as a woman, poignantly realizing what s/he was never allowed with these doctored images. This group is followed by the last section of the book, For Ken (2015), which presents this fictional, feminized version of Ken/K emerging from the photographic paper through partial development techniques. Some of the images feel emergent, while others seem to be disintegrating. As with most of the newly created images in each of the series, there is an uncomfortable feeling about the images—they are at once wonderful and awful, certainly unsettled. The images appear almost like film that has been caught by the projector and as a result appears to melt upon the screen. There is something uncanny and sad about the loss of the image. These images feel abused and incomplete, yet some of the poses, especially in For Ken VIII (2015), are delicate and vulnerable.
With Ken. To be destroyed, Davidmann presents a necessary investigation of a subject matter that, unless one has experienced it oneself, is profoundly difficult to understand. Highlighting photography’s preoccupation with surface, she reminds us that we can never pinpoint the emotional depths of such great need; yet her multiple investigations express the complexity contained in our relationships with ourselves and others. Although Ken. To be destroyed is a beautiful text, it leaves the reader wanting to see the work in person and experience these surfaces firsthand rather than mediated by the printed page. Davidmann tells readers that the work is one in progress, and, indeed, we are left with a degree of dissatisfaction appropriate to a compelling story not quite finished.1

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NOTE 1. Sara Davidmann’s digital archive of Ken. To be destroyed can be viewed at http://sara davidmann.com/ken.html.

Precarious Spaces: The Arts, Social and Organizational Change
Edited by Katarzyna Kosmala and Miguel Imas
Intellect, 2016
249 pp./$86.00 (hb)

Precarious Spaces: The Arts, Social and Organizational Change contributes to discussions about the power of art-informed interventions and artistic projects and how these seek to boost social and community transformations on different scales. Editors Katarzyna Kosmala and Miguel Imas focus on examples from socially and economically unstable and marginalized spaces, mainly in South America. This book fills significant gaps in both the arts and social sciences literatures in English concerning art-informed interventions in the Global South.

Each of the twelve chapters of Precarious Spaces discusses case studies and key concepts concerning precariousness, art-informed interventions, and social transformations. Coming from various academic fields ranging from the arts to sociology, the book’s contributors bring diverse perspectives to the conversation, and aim to create an interdisciplinary framework. Excerpting ideas from the writings of theorists such as Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriaud, Néstor García Canclini, Henri Lefebvre, and Gayatri Spivak, the contributors articulate the book’s theoretical and conceptual structure. Some of the concepts analyzed together with the examples of art-informed interventions are relational aesthetics, planetarity, autonomy, and precarity. The examples included in Precarious Spaces are specific cases of community and social organization, alternative creative spaces, public art works, art exhibitions, photography-based research, publications, and media activism. In each chapter, the contributors provide information about particularities of both the interventions and the specific geopolitical contexts in which these projects take place.

Despite the welcome effort to gather cases from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Mexico, supplemented with comments about examples from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, the book lacks variety. The publication mainly focuses on the Brazilian context, specifically on the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, camps of indigenous Mbyá-Guarani, Fábricas Recuperadas (occupied factories), and media activism. The lack of variety prevents the editors from entirely accomplishing their intention of portraying socially and community-engaged art practices in South America and contrasting them with similar issues in the Global North.

In the book, the concept of “precarious spaces” refers to territories where physical, spatial, and social manifestations make evident the instability embedded in contemporary life—for instance, the factories occupied by workers in 2000, during Argentina’s financial crisis. This instability primarily caused by the neoliberal economic model is, in turn, what gave birth both to the book and to the art-informed interventions included in it. Based on the privatization of profits and the socialization of economic losses, the neoliberal model obstructs possibilities for the social and personal development of individuals within specific groups. As a result, devising social, cultural, economic, and political alternatives becomes vital to resist and overcome the precarious conditions of contemporary life.

Meanwhile, “art-informed interventions” refers to processes influenced by, but not specifically based in, the arts. Therefore, instead of presenting projects founded on the production of artistic objects, Precarious Spaces focuses on participatory practices applied as research methods and as interventional forms. In both cases, art is used in an effort to generate social and community changes. For instance, the Museum of Photography Lima (FOLi) developed an urban experiment during the First Biennial of Photography in Lima, Peru, in 2012. A public alternative space, FOLi Lab, was created from four shipping containers, and was designed to exhibit projects and to serve as a meeting point for dialogue, analysis, and research concerning photography. After the intervention, FOLi Lab had been visited by more than 45,000 people. Additionally, the museum collected information about attendees’ interests and perceptions about photography. By increasing community participation during the Biennial, FOLi Lab strengthened the relationship between the museum and the public.

Precarious Spaces, rather than being simply a catalog of successful and replicable art-based interventions, is instead an assortment of actions that challenge the logic of the neoliberal economic model. The volume demonstrates that precariousness and territories are systems in constant permutation, which cannot, therefore, be approached using predefined recipes. Each precarious space is particular in its social organization, spatial configuration, and inhabitants’ interests and needs. Beyond emptiness and marginalization, the publication approaches precarious spaces as an arena of possibilities. In other words, this book invites artists, urban designers, social workers, activists, and academics to understand precariousness as a condition under which imagining other ways of living and fighting is both necessary and viable.

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