

Insurgent bodies
Lisetta Carmi | Jürgen Klauke
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Text by Anna Daneri

“Image as knowledge. As a gaze that sees far more than it consciously perceives,” wrote Lisetta Carmi in 1972 in the introduction to her book *I travestiti* (transvestites). Not a mere recording of reality, but a device capable of bringing to light what normative structures obscure. In the five photographs on view, drawn from the cycle produced between 1965 and 1970 in the former Jewish ghetto of Genoa, this knowledge takes the form of proximity: bodies seated on a bed, domestic embraces, a bare breast illuminated by light, a red robe in a peeling interior, a proud pose outdoors. They are Renée, La Sissi, Morena, Audrey, among others.

Here, transition is neither allegory nor provocation: it is everyday life. It appears in gestures of make-up, posture, complicity, waiting. Carmi establishes a relationship of trust that suspends sensationalism and frees her subjects from the pathologizing reduction that dominated Italy in the 1960s. When the Italian gay liberation movement FUORI! (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano) was founded in 1971, the work had already been done: the images preceded political language, granting visibility to subjectivities excluded from public narratives. “Observing transvestites (today she would write trans women) made me realize that everything masculine can also be feminine, and vice versa,” Carmi writes. Her discovery is not theoretical but relational: it emerges from encounter and familiarity. In this sense, photography becomes an ethical space before it is an aesthetic one. The people portrayed are not symbols but presences, and in their irony, pride, or melancholy they open a fracture within the authoritarian tradition of gender roles.

For a long time the series *I travestiti* was known through its black-and-white versions, inscribed within the tradition of twentieth-century social photography. The rediscovery in 2017 of the colour slides taken in those same years—brought to light through the work on the archive carried out with Giovanni Battista Martini, the artist’s close friend and curator of her estate—has revealed another dimension of the project. At the time, colour printing required complex and costly processes that Carmi disliked, and the images remained unseen. Yet colour had been deliberately sought and envisioned.

Their present-day printing reveals a different psychological and anthropological stratification: the make-up, the fabrics, the tonal nuances of clothing, the models of femininity to which the portrayed individuals looked. Colour amplifies the materiality of desire and the construction of the self, restoring details that black and white tended to abstract. If monochrome had granted the work documentary strength, colour emphasizes its embodied, affective and situated dimension. In an era when “art photography” was expected to be strictly black and white, this choice repositions Carmi as a surprisingly anticipatory figure—one might think, for instance, of Nan Goldin.

If for Carmi transition is represented in its concrete and communal dimension, in the work of Jürgen Klauke it is instead embodied as a critical device. In the climate of post-1968 Germany—still marked by Paragraph 175, which criminalized male homosexuality (abolished only in 1994), and shaped by the mobilizations that followed Rosa von Praunheim’s film *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt* (1971), as well as by the founding of Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin that same year—Klauke used his own body as a field of experimentation.

“The denouncing of social norms through my pictures [...] was at the time as untoward as initiating my body into art,” he states. The body becomes “working material,” an “idea carrier,” a surface onto which multiple identities are projected. In the work on view *Das menschliche Antlitz im Spiegel soziologisch-nervöser Prozesse* (*The human face in the mirror of sociological-nervous processes*, 1976/77), part of the series *Die Lust zu Leben* (*The joy of living*), the artist’s face is repeated in an almost sign-like sequence while labels—Richter, Artist, Soldat, Mörder, Priester, ...—assign social and moral roles: judge,

artist, soldier, murderer, priest. ... Identity is not revealed but attributed. Seriality exposes the supposed naturalness of these roles: what appears stable is in fact a linguistic and social construction.

The destabilization of gender identity is only one of the fronts on which Klauke intervenes. Already in the series *Transformer* (1970–1976), the artist adopts ambiguous poses, emphasizing make-up, jewellery, prosthetics and fetishistic details that oscillate between attraction and disturbance. The aim is not to imitate femininity but to appropriate it in order to empty it from within, revealing its coded nature. At the same time, his drawings and graphic diaries produced between 1970 and 1980 push this destabilization even further: hybrid bodies composed almost exclusively of sexual organs dissolve the male/female dichotomy in an erotic proliferation that is both poetic and analytical. The body appears fragmented, veiled, at times reduced to an abstract sign, as if identity were consumed in its confrontation with technological systems and increasingly invasive dispositifs of control.

Within this gradual shift from questions of gender toward broader existential inquiries, transition becomes for Klauke a methodological matrix: a way of traversing and sabotaging every form of classification. It is not only masculinity that becomes unstable, but the very idea of a coherent subject. Klauke also speaks of his images as “spaces for reflection or resonance,” environments in which the performative body and the viewer’s gaze enter into tension: indeterminate spaces that deny stability and compel the viewer to confront the artificiality of social roles. As the artist himself states: “Neither ideology, nor morality, nor reason are categories that drive our artistic work forward. Disagreement, subversion, rule violations, and overstrain are essential components of our actions. Art deviates and creates contradictions and conflicts. In the best case, it deepens and broadens perception.”

If in Lisetta Carmi transition emerges through the relational density of everyday life, in Jürgen Klauke it radicalizes into an act of disidentification: an operation at once cold and sensual that transforms the body into a field of interference where norm and desire, individual and system, expose themselves in a conflict without synthesis. The dialogue activated for the first time by this exhibition thus unfolds across two complementary modalities: representation and embodiment. Carmi works on the ethics of the gaze, constructing an affective counter-archive of the Italian trans and transvestite community before the full emergence of political discourse. Klauke operates on the ontology of the image, turning his own body into a semiotic laboratory that destabilizes from within the categories of gender and social role.

Formally, too, the comparison is eloquent: the rediscovered and vibrant colour of Carmi—restoring the material density of the lives portrayed—stands alongside Klauke’s analytical black and white, which emphasizes the conceptual and systemic dimension of the norm. On one side flesh, fabric, the room; on the other mask, sign, classification.

José Esteban Muñoz wrote In *Cruising Utopia* (2009) that “queerness is not yet here” and that it “exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.” Queerness is a horizon, a potentiality that traverses the present as a promise. Carmi’s photographs and Klauke’s staged images inhabit this tension: they do not merely describe a condition but prefigure a space of freedom still unfinished. “We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world,” Muñoz insists.

This is precisely what occurs in the domestic complicity of the Genoese portraits and in the identity multiplication of Klauke’s face: other ways of inhabiting the world are being rehearsed.

The persistence of these works becomes particularly evident in the present. The trans-exclusionary policies and anti-trans political tendencies that today traverse several contexts—especially aggressively

in the United States—demonstrate how the question of gender remains a terrain of conflict. Why does such a numerically small minority provoke such a violent reaction? Perhaps because, by embodying the overcoming of binary structures, trans subjectivities challenge the symbolic architecture upon which patriarchal powers and normative economic structures of the global North are built?

In *Reverse Cowgirl* (2020), McKenzie Wark describes the trans experience as a material traversal of the infrastructures of gender: not an identity to be claimed in the abstract, but a practice that exposes the constructed and technological nature of bodies and roles: “Gender is a set of protocols, and transition is a way of hacking them”. Transition, in this perspective, reveals that gender is a dispositif—and that, precisely because it is constructed, it can be transformed. Carmi and Klauke, each in their own way, had already intuited this subversive force.

Insurgent Bodies thus brings into relation two distinct yet complementary trajectories. Carmi represents, restoring dignity and concreteness to marginalized lives. Klauke embodies, turning his own body into a field of interference and symbolic conflict.

Between colour and black and white, between intimacy and staging, between document and performativity, a shared awareness emerges: identity is not destiny but construction. And precisely for this reason it can be transformed. Transition is neither pathological deviation nor a mere stylistic variation of identity: it is a critical practice, an act of self-determination, a space in which the individual withdraws from the norm and makes visible the possibility of another way of being in the world. In this possibility—fragile, conflictual, never fully secured—resides its insurgent force.

Anna Daneri, Genoa, March 2026