

PARTY PICTURES

An interview with Jeremy Kost



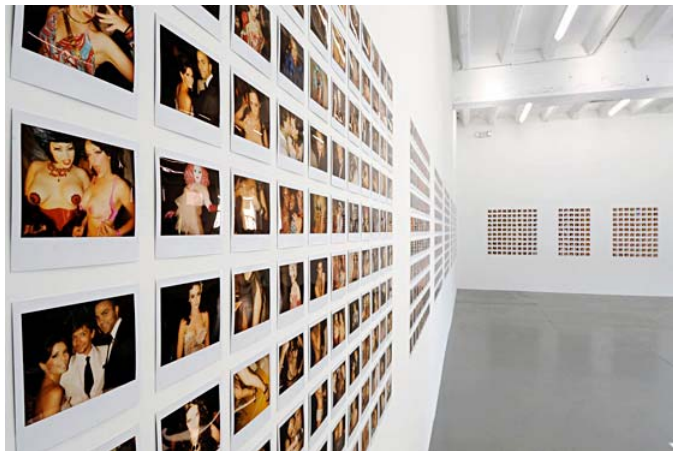
by Walter Robinson

Sometimes it seems like 20-somethings are all about partying. During the day it's nose to the grindstone, but at night fun comes at bars and parties, drinking and dancing. Though transitory, the party experience is expressive, euphoric even -- a ritual of contemporary capitalism. A handful of people have made party-going their permanent profession; they are the shamans of this all-to-familiar culture.

In the last few years, a certain kind of party -- notably, raves that draw young hipsters as well as drag queens and costumed revelers -- has been the subject of the New York artist Jeremy Kost (b. 1977), whose current exhibition, "Anyone Other Than Me," is on view at Conner Contemporary Art in Washington, D.C. Typically, Kost chronicles a single night's festivity in a grid of Polaroids of individual partygoers, zeroing in for an intimate portrait of each subject, while at the same time producing a collective picture of the overall event.

Born in Texas, Kost lived in Washington, D.C., where he helped run one of the city's most popular nightclubs from 1999 to 2004. After coming to New York, he only started showing seriously in 2007, having his first solo show at the Gallery at the SoHo Grand Hotel. His snapshots of the new party culture -- the New York Times reports just today that young people are beginning to dress up to go out again -- quickly sparked art-world interest, and his work was included, for instance, in the recent International Center of Photography Triennial and is featured in a solo show at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, scheduled for the fall.

The people in Kost's Polaroids are by turns glamorous, transformed, confident, memorable, wild, hard-boiled, vulnerable and young. Invariably, they are in transit. The pictures are concrete signs of the universality of change, the simplicity and wealth of the passing moment. Yet, somehow, buried in their DNA are markers of individual and cultural history, future repositories of memory, feeling and longing. Kost's pictures form a



complicated nexus of desire, observation and display, mixing together the forces of vanity, status and all the uncertainties surrounding identity. In today's world, masquerade is key.

The following interview was conducted via a rather extenuated email exchange. The photographs at Conner range in price from \$7,000 for a composite to \$12,000 for a large grid.

Walter Robinson: Going to parties -- is that any way to make art?

Jeremy Kost: Ha! I guess I've seen/heard crazier things, but yah I believe so!

WR: What gave you the idea, anyway?

JK: Well, it really all happened by mistake. While visiting my friends Scott and Pedro in New York, I more or less randomly took Pedro's Polaroid camera out to the Cock (the old Cock at 13th and Avenue A) while he was coat-checking, and started taking pictures. I still have the very first Polaroids I took that night, including some engaging ones of Amanda Lepore, Sophia Lamar, and a naked woman eating raw eggs on stage.

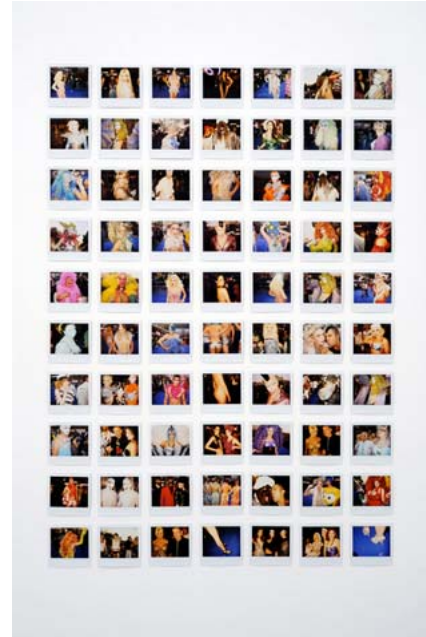
Anyway, I kept shooting during my trips to New York (I was living in D.C.) and eventually, in January 2004, had a crazy night with David LaChapelle in Pamela Anderson's hotel suite at the Four Seasons on the night of Amanda's birthday soiree. David saw the pictures I'd taken that night and encouraged me to take it more seriously. The rest is history.

WR: You're clearly a portrait artist -- who are your subjects?

JK: I have a myriad of subjects. . . denizens of New York's gay nightlife -- I've been documenting the scene consistently for nearly a decade -- celebrities, young men, transsexuals in Thailand, etc. I try not to limit my subjects and don't really like putting myself in a box when it comes to what I shoot.

WR: So you've made the drag scene your specialty.

JK: To be honest, I actually prefer that my work isn't lumped into the veritable "gay ghetto." Though I'm proud of who I am and what I'm doing, I'm also keen that the work is less about gayness and drag culture than it is about personal presentation, notions of transformation, celebration, and things like that. The drag scene, while undeniably a uniquely gay experience, can also be seen as a larger metaphor for transformation.



WR: So these pictures, are they an extension of Warhol's 15 minutes of fame, but translated into the split-second of a Polaroid flash?

JK: These characters may never exist again, outside of these specific moments -- that's interesting to me, and I think somewhat important. While I think that "fame" is involved, I'm more interested in the idea of personal presentation and costume, and what all that represents. I love the idea that these people become these characters from the time they leave their apartments until the time they return home, never breaking and always remaining confident.

They are similar to the work that ICP featured in its recent "Dress Codes" Triennial of Photography and Video, but different in a sense that every Polaroid that I made within a very specific time-frame (referenced in the title of each work), goes into the piece, without editing. Regardless of the quality of the image, it is included.

WR: So, there are no mistakes! Your pictures seem to mix celebrities and regular partiers -- is everyone a celebrity?

JK: I think that everyone is a celebrity in their own little world, it's just a matter of varying degrees. I think that a celebrity going to a red-carpet premiere is looking for attention, much in the same way that a drag queen dressing up in Queens is.

In my work I treat them all the same -- a celebrity, a drag queen, or a boy in a photo shoot, each subject is approached as an equal, even though the process might be slightly different depending on the context in which the work is created.

WR: Tell me more about your working method -- do you go out every night? Do you target special parties?

JK: Well, the show at Conner Contemporary has a few different series.



For the night-life-based grid work -- like *One Night of Drama*, October 29, 2009, 9 pm-4 am (Los Angeles), which includes 90 Polaroids -- I generally prepare myself mentally to go out and shoot pictures that night. There are a few parties that I love to go to, mostly ones that have my friends working or hosting, and parties where I know there will be great costumes and "looks." The process of making this work is generally really free, in a sense that once I enter the party, I allow myself to simply see what's happening and capture the moments as I see them. The grids are resolved in the studio afterwards as I look at how the images relate visually with each other. Generally I try to create a sense of movement towards the center and look at curating them around things like mouth gestures, hands, and so forth.

I have a major "golden rule" when shooting the Polaroids. I don't allow myself (or anyone else for that matter) to see them while I'm making them, generally I wait until I've returned to the studio that night or the next morning. I've found that when I look at the images while making them, I end up rethinking and attempting to recreate moments, as opposed to simply seeing them.

I really don't shoot every night. I have to really "feel" like shooting that specific night to put myself into the zone to do it.

The Conner Contemporary show also features three grids of Polaroids where I've taken two of the nightlife characters, Rainblo and Ericka Toure Aviance, outside of nightlife context and photographed them very similarly to the way that I do boys, in almost quasi-narrative form.

I'm becoming quite interested in taking these nightlife characters outside of nightlife to really investigate the questions of what it means to become this alter-persona and importantly, what it means to perform when nobody is watching but me. The video in the show (made at the same time as the image for the "Harlem Postcards" show this summer at the Studio Museum), it was really my first work in this direction. . . .

WR: A longer, more intensive character study, then?

JK: Naomi Beckwith at the Studio Museum asked me to really think about my relationship to Harlem, and I thought immediately about how 125th Street is basically the neighbourhood's Champs-Élysées, a center of presentation, bravado, social interaction and life itself. The video shows Ericka Toure coming down the stairs from the elevated train at 125th and Park (I had earlier made a video of myself walking down Fifth Avenue in really awful drag with two enormous black bodyguards). She's sauntering and strutting west, eventually entering the subway to go "downtown." She walks confidently, turning 125th into her own private runway of sorts, ignoring the comments, both celebratory and hateful, from passersby.

WR: Some of the works at Conner aren't grids of individual Polaroids, but gang several photos together to add up to larger portraits of individual subjects, a technique made famous a while back by David Hockney, of all people. Is this a new direction in your work?

JK: I started making the collages in 2008 with a piece that I made for Editions Fawbush. They've since grown in their abstraction of the content, but I'd like to think also in their sculptural quality of the overall form. I love Hockney's collage works and they're an obvious reference point, but I often look at his Polaroid collages as much more formal in their structure.

I'm fascinated with the flaws of my subjects, often beautiful boys and/or "beautiful" characters, and what it might mean for me to pick them apart, frame by frame, only to reassemble them based on how I see them. Recently I've started to build out the context around the subject, paying specific attention to their physical location and emphasizing how important it is that this character is outside of a traditional nightlife setting.



WR: Tell me more about your series of photos of boys. Is this a specifically homoerotic gaze?

JK: The work I make with boys really has as much to do with my own former body issues and notions of power than anything. I had given the series a working title of "objectification," because it really does look at these boys as objects of desire. They're guys who would have never given me the time of day when I was heavy (I weighed 250 pounds when I was 21 years old), and now I have them sitting for me in various states of undress, sometimes playing with toys or objects that they'd never have thought of. The one key thing about this work is the level of respect that I maintain for the subjects and the restraint that I exhibit in what I photograph. In the more than 100 sitters, I think that I've shot less than ten of them completely naked and exposed. Somehow, a fully naked guy doesn't tell you anything more than a guy who is covering up.

WR: You have a show coming up at the National Arts Club, which opens Mar. 4, 2010.

JK: It's called "The Ladies that Lunch" and I'm super excited about it! I had the pleasure of meeting Stacy Engman, the Arts Club's contemporary arts curator, at the opening of the ICP Triennial and she was immediately enthusiastic about my work. I thought it would be really interesting to create a dialogue with the history of the National Arts Club itself, challenging my characters to reference "society women" and/or their interpretation of society women, and shooting them in the actual Arts Club the space. I've made a series of grids and collages with a total of seven people taking part in various activities in the club, including Kenny Kenny and Dirty Martini. It's interesting to see how much they actually seem as though they "fit" in the spaces vs. looking as though they were imported.

WALTER ROBINSON is editor of Artnet Magazine.