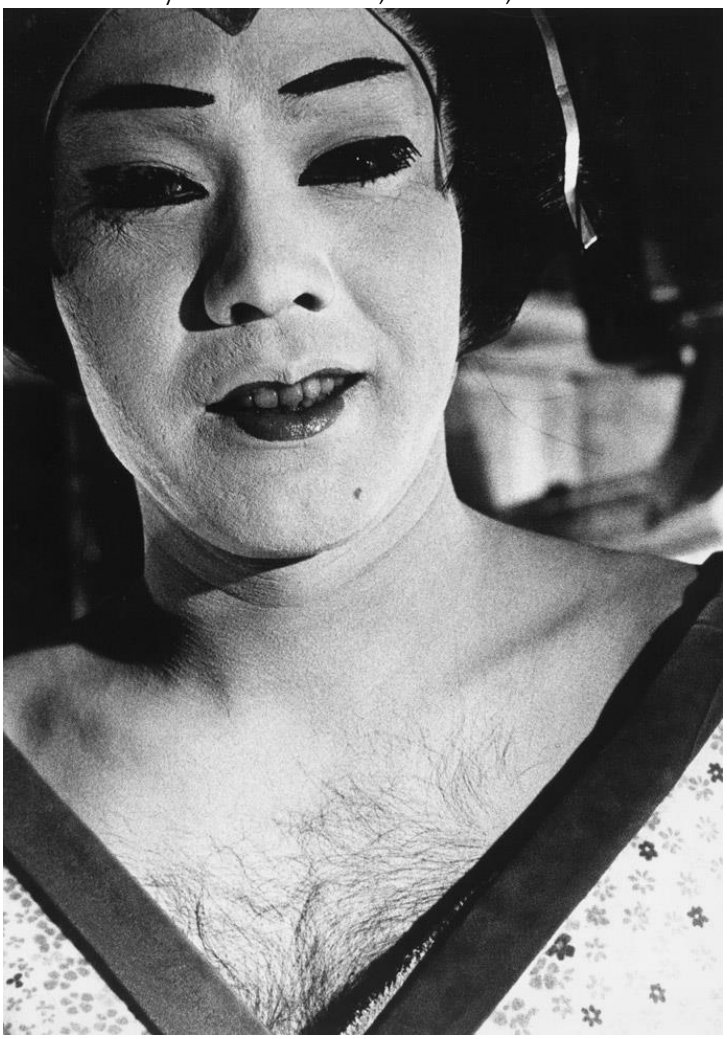
STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

Wallpaper*

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS WHO CAPTURED REBELS, REJECTS AND OUTCASTS ON THE EDGES OF SOCIETY

By Charlotte Jansen, March 13, 2018



Diane Arbus, the photographer of people on the peripheral, famously once said: 'A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know.'

Her words ring true at 'Another Kind of Life: Photography on the Margins', the Barbican Art Gallery's new photography exhibition in London – a group show of some 20 contemporary artists who fascinated with life on the edges of society. Like Arbus, their position, and relationship with the people they portray, is often complicated, and sometimes problematic. Arbus was driven to the edge herself by her own work, committing suicide in 1971.

The erotic frisson and illicit allure of pictures of rebels, rejects and reprobates by Larry Clark or Daido Moriyama – darkly lit, edgy, morbose – points at the perversion of peeking in, something the camera has allowed artists to do. Images they shot between the 1960s and 80s, included in the show, unearthed urban subcultures in the pre-digital age, making them visible to the masses, for better and worse.

Decades later, works like Katy Grannan's series – inspired by Robert Frank's The Americans – leaves the identity of her liminal subjects as 'anonymous' – the new kind of social outcast in the Insta-famous age.

Being cast out by society can lead to psychological and physical suffering, and representing the underrepresented often makes the personal political. Chilean photographer Paz Errázuriz shot Adam's Apple, portraits of transgender sex workers in a brothel, in the mid 1980s, during the military dictatorship of Pinochet, and as the AIDs crisis raged worldwide – but the focus of her images is the faces.

The lives of many of the photographers here – such as Walter Pfeiffer, Dayanita Singh – were intertwined with the subcultures they shot, some of them photographing close friends, their pictures a way to preserve memories for each other. Why and how people end up living on the fringes of society is a poignant question their pictures raise.

The people and places may have changed, but the pictures remain, anonymous but symbolic. Bruce Davidson's prolific documentation of a safe haven for transvestites in the 1950s presents a history that would have otherwise been invisible today, and is a celebration above all of how people find support in one another when the rest of the world has turned them away.