

Cite this article: Miriam Kienle, review of *Body Language: The Queer Staged Photographs of George Platt Lynes and PajaMa*, by Nick Mauss and Angela Miller, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2025), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.20513>.

Body Language: The Queer Staged Photographs of George Platt Lynes and PajaMa

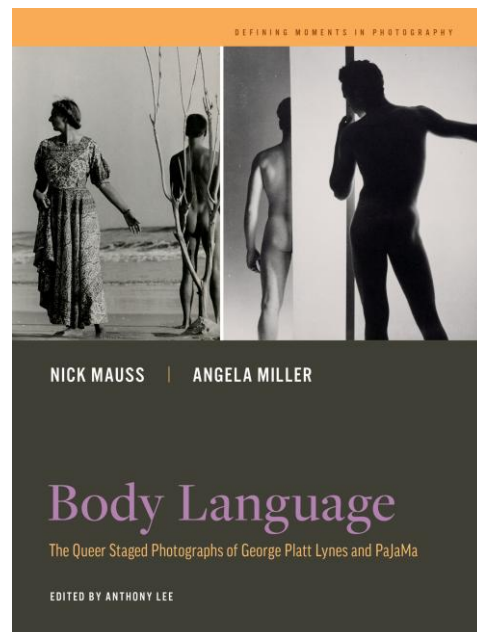
By Nick Mauss and Angela Miller

Ed. Anthony W. Lee. University of California Press, 2023. 168 pp.; 40 color illus. Paper: \$28.95 (ISBN: 9780520394629)

Reviewed by: Miriam Kienle

In an installation photograph that George Platt Lynes (1907–1955) took of his last solo exhibition, held at Pierre Matisse’s gallery in 1941, a large piece of driftwood anchors the center of the room. The dramatically backlit found object feels both at home and out of place in the exhibition of hundreds of photographic portraits. Turned and twisted by the tides and serendipitously discovered on the shores of Fire Island in New York, this driftwood “figure” serves not only as an evocative prop in some of Lynes’s staged photographs but also as an index of the tumultuous lives and rebellious spirit of Lynes and his friends in midcentury America. Appearing in Lynes’s personal scrapbook images and public-facing fashion photographs as well as the collectively produced photographs by his friends in the artistic trio PajaMa (Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and Margaret French), the uncanny piece of driftwood is one of many connecting elements found in the photographs examined by Nick Mauss and Angela Miller’s in their recent book *Body Language: The Queer Staged Photographs of George Platt Lynes and PajaMa*. As Mauss observes, the driftwood “served as a proxy for Lynes’s multiple lives as a photographer, and for the web of intimacies that bound his portrait subjects together” (65). Organized into two chapters—the first by Mauss on Lynes, and second by Miller on PajaMa, along with a short introduction cowritten by the authors and the series editor, Anthony W. Lee—the book weaves together a compelling narrative about these artists’ intersecting bodies of work.

In *Body Language*, Mauss and Miller draw connections between these artists’ photographs that speak to their intertwined personal and professional lives and underscore their innovative approaches to photography, which pushed against both the artistic conventions and the enforced heteronormativity of the early twentieth century. As Miller, Mauss, and Lee state in their introduction, these artists’ “ritualized gestures and



actions with symbolic props invent a new kind of queer social enactment taking shape beyond existing genres and practices” (4). Rather than use photography as a tool of individual self-expression, PajaMa and Lynes saw it as a means of enacting their shared lives and interconnected creative practices. Their photographic collaborations are queer not simply because they speak to their unconventional intimate lives of love triangles, homoerotic desire, and nonbinary gender but also because these works disrupted restrictive categories of authorship, identity, and photography by framing the self as mutable and multiple and by actively blurring the lines of photographic genres, like documentary, fashion, portraiture, still life, and landscape.

As the first in-depth analysis of the relationship between the works of Lynes and PajaMa, *Body Language* offers a rigorous and enjoyable study that features the authors’ extensive archival research, sensitive close analysis, and fruitful conversations with one another. Exploring the grammar of these photographers’ staged images, the authors examine how the embodied actions in these photographs disrupted social binaries of male/female, gay/straight, individual/collective, self/other, and animate/inanimate. Building on the publications of scholars such as Richard Meyer, they stress how social constraints and legal regulations in the United States in the decades before Stonewall did not simply suppress queer visual cultures but also fostered inventive approaches to queer world-building by Lynes, PajaMa, and other figures in their network.¹ The authors draw on the fullness of their artists’ archives to situate their practices historically in ways that account for the forces of heteronormativity and homophobia in 1940s America while also stressing the imaginative ways that these artists disrupted the restrictions of the closet and exceeded the limits of their temporal moment in order to map what Lynes presciently called a “future history of art” (11).

As a recent *New York Times* article attests, the works of Lynes and PajaMa have inspired new generations of queer artists, from those of the Pictures Generation of the 1970s and 1980s to present-day artists Paul Mpagi Sepuya and TM Davy.² Similarly, when reading David Getsy’s latest book, *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton’s Performance Art*, I found it striking how much Lynes’s and PajaMa’s photographs resonate with images of Burton’s 1970s performances in which he used his queer experience as a key primary source for investigating the body language of his day, which Burton (1939–1989) claimed “can be very subtle, very subversive, and very secret.”³ As Mauss and Miller demonstrate, PajaMa and Lynes make clear how artists’ intimate lives can vitally inform their aesthetic performances, and they did so in ways that “anticipate postmodern and contemporary modes of artistic production, collaboration, and self-presentation” (13). However, many of Lynes’s photographs and all of PajaMa’s production were shared privately among their network of friends, because they could not be staged and circulated in public in the way photographs of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century could. And yet, as *Body Language* effectively shows, Lynes and PajaMa’s works for public viewing share many aspects of their more personal pictures. As Mauss so convincingly argues in his chapter on Lynes, the photographer’s public-facing portraits and fashion photographs clearly echo the images that he produced for private scrapbooks, photocollages, and collections shared with friends.

In the first chapter, Mauss explores the work of Lynes, a high-profile fashion, celebrity, and fine art photographer who rose to prominence during the 1930s by shooting for

Vogue and *Harper's Bazaar* and by capturing the dancers of the New York City Ballet. Known for his use of theatrical lighting, surreal props, and refined poses, Lynes also produced an extensive body of homoerotic male nudes that he bequeathed to the Kinsey Institute before his death in 1955. While these erotic nudes, which Lynes shared privately, have historically been treated as existing in a separate and "closeted" category of image making from his published fashion photographs and commissioned portraits, Mauss demonstrates that these bodies of work were mutually informing and their distinction porous. The sense of fantasy, sensuality, and high-key artifice extends across his photographs, which often used the same sets, props, and poses. With the studio acting as a parallel space in which "the intimate, the social, the imaginary, the commercial, and the personal coexisted," Lynes, Mauss argues, created "new hybrid image types" that not only combined photographic genres but also questioned photography's claim to truth and objectivity, stressing instead the medium's potential for "theatricality" and "intersubjectivity" (53, 64).

Both Mauss and Miller highlight how the "intersubjective nature of PaJaMa's and Lynes's queer artistic production blurred the boundary between self and other, public and private worlds, transforming the very subject of photography by implicating the photographer as much as the photographed subjects as co-conspirators in the making of images" (5). As Miller writes in her essay on PaJaMa, "Their performed actions, rather than *expressing* anterior emotions, actively scripted the raw material of their shared lives. The photographs they made were trace, or record, of this collective process" (77). From 1937, and for more than a decade after, the artists Paul Cadmus (1904–1999), Jared French (1905–1988), and Margret French (1906–1998)—under the playful moniker PaJaMa (which was formed using the first syllable of each of their names)—summered by the sea, where they staged photographs that spoke to their queer domesticity. These "performed actions" creatively structured and preserved their private lives, documenting the "delicate negotiations among three people, driven by a complex alchemy of love, desire, longing, resentment and envy" (85). In Miller's analysis, key terms such as "triangulation" and "symbolic action" serve as useful frameworks for analyzing how PaJaMa choreographed the theater of their everyday lives while also engaging critically and creatively with historical forces. Additionally, Miller looks at how they engaged artistic movements from Surrealism and Symbolic Realism to the emergent ideas of Abstract Expressionism. Unlike the heroic individualism and hypermasculinity of Abstract Expressionism, their campy staged photographs on the shores of Fire Island, Provincetown, and Nantucket evidence cross-pollination and collaboration, enacting a collective vision rather than asserting individual expression as they ironically quote a wide range of sources, from tableaux vivants and family photo albums to surrealist paintings and film noir.

Although more attention could have been paid to their engagement with other prominent American photographers and the wider political struggles to which their photographs speak, Miller and Mauss do well to situate these images among period philosophies, visual cultures, and figures in the artists' milieu. Following the model of David Leddick's *Intimate Companions*,⁴ the authors explore the interconnected influences of Lynes's and PaJaMa's dense network of friends and lovers, including the writer Glenway Wescott; publisher and exhibition director of the Museum of Modern Art Monroe Wheeler; choreographer George Balanchine; artists Pavel Tchelitchew, Bernard Perlin, George Tooker, and Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein; and Fidelma's husband, Lincoln Kirstein, who cofounded the New York City Ballet.

However, the authors of *Body Language* push this contextualization further by analyzing how PajaMa's and Lynes's photographs served as a connective tissue among friends that actively dramatized, circulated, and preserved their nonnormative intimacies while also staging a critical investigation of agency, visibility, and narrative that anticipate contemporary artistic practices.

Like the contours of the driftwood that appears so differently depending upon the lighting and scene, the photographs explored in *Body Language* have had many lives as documents, mementos, gifts, sources of inspiration, and art objects that have now received multiple waves of reception. As many of these images were not publicly shown until decades after their making, they arrive like messages in a bottle to our contemporary art world, in which they feel at once of another world and eerily familiar. As Mauss states of Lynes photographs, "They were made for those closest to him and those furthest away, the viewers of the future" (74).

Miriam Kienle is assistant professor of art history and visual studies at the University of Kentucky

Notes

¹ Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in 20th Century American Art* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 15–17; Richard Meyer, "Lookout: On Queer American Art and Art History," in *A Companion to American Art*, ed. John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason LaFountain (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 436.

² Nick Haramis, "The Trio Whose Erotic Photographs Inspired a Generation of Artists," *New York Times*, May 16, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/13/t-magazine/pajama-art-paul-cadmus.html>.

³ David J. Getsy, *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton's Performance Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 117.

⁴ David Leddick, *Intimate Companions: A Triography of George Platt Lynes, Paul Cadmus, Lincoln Kirstein, and Their Circle* (St. Martin's Press, 2000).