How a midcentury archive of portraits, originally published in a Mexico City police magazine, blurred the boundaries of gender.

Posing Defiance
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In Mexico, the journalism industry began to take shape toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Even so, it was not until the 1930s that the first editorial offering was made available to the general public to better meet their tastes and economic means. As a result of this shift, Mexican print journalism became an active part of the country’s social life and an established source of employment. At the cutting edge of this expansion were illustrated publications, especially comic books and magazines, featuring topics ranging from general interest to specialized titles covering performance, sports, and crime.

At the time, neither the national population’s high rate of illiteracy nor their lack of education, for the most part, hindered the ability of daily and weekly publications to position themselves as vehicles for information and entertainment, as well as popularizers of mythologies that reinforced dominant ideologies and nourished the collective imagination. The presence of street kiosks where these ephemeral papers were sold multiplied in urban landscapes. Their racks displayed a wide range of magazines that accounted for the vastness and diversity of the world, events in the nation and its capital, supposed changes in the political landscape of an ultimately one-party system, and news—no matter how surprising, terrible, or strange—put the reader’s credulity to the test.
Over the course of more than three decades—from 1939 to the beginning of the 1970s—Magazine de Policía and, for a shorter period of time, Suplemento de Policía hit the streets at prices within all budgets, offering first-hand information about criminal activity in Mexico City: the metropolis that, from time immemorial, had been the center of both the secular and religious powers of the Mexican republic. The Magazine de Policía’s colophon declared the motto “To call out society’s ulcers is to serve it,” while also announcing that this printed material was “completely unaffiliated with public security bodies.” In keeping with that denunciatory mandate, the magazine combined reportage, photographic images, comic strips, photomontages, shocking titles and captions, prejudiced affirmations, and moralizing precepts. The distancing from official guardians of order seems more like a rhetorical declaration if one considers that the majority of the information published in the pages of Magazine de Policía and its supplement came from environs that were under the control of the police and judicial authorities.

From the first issue until the mid-1960s, Adrián Devars, Jr. was the principal photographer credited with the majority of the images in Magazine de Policía and Suplemento de Policía. These images showcased Devars’s skills as a reporter—his ability to be present at crime scenes, to photograph victims and murderers, and to move freely between police stations, morgues, and prisons—as well as his talent for setting up staged and fictional photographs, such as the photographic comics published on the back page of Magazine de Policía. Researcher Miguel Ángel Morales has followed the trail of this photographer who served as an example for other police-blotter photojournalists. One such reporter was Enrique Metinides, whose work is now published and exhibited internationally. He made a name for himself for his coverage in the newspaper La Prensa. Metinides had the opportunity to see Devars at work in Lecumberri Prison, where he converted the forensics department into a studio and would prepare cadavers—cleaning them up, combing their hair, dressing them, and even going as far as to insert objects (a knife in a wound, a brick to prop up a head) to add dramatic flair to his images.

In his early career, Devars was director and publisher, from 1926 to 1934, of the weekly paper Vida alegre, a role he gave up to become a photographer and to test his luck in pornographic films. From 1937 to 1939, he belonged to the staff of the magazine Veá, the epitome of erotic publications in Mexico in the last century, in whose pages he demonstrated an inclination toward the sinister and the gruesome. After being a star photographer for Magazine de Policía and Suplemento de Policía, Devars ended his career as a photojournalist working for Alerta, another weekly paper devoted to the police blotter.

The journalists with whom Devars shared the pages of Magazine de Policía and Suplemento de Policía—Rosa Vega, Renato Alanís, R. Lara, Lauro Vélez de Dargast, and Comandante Masuski, among others—practiced a kind of crime reporting that involved conducting fieldwork and collecting testimonies, but with a particular emphasis on the morbid and the scandalous. Mexico City proved an inexhaustible source for their stories. The metropolis had undergone rapid growth in an utterly disorganized way. It had turned into a cultural melting pot and a mesmerizing showcase of transformation, modernization, commercial exchanges, and new fashions. As the researcher Gabriela Pulido Llano has observed, one can clearly see the contradictions and tensions of Mexican modernity in these publications; their records of violence, crime, and debauchery reveal the dark side of mid-twentieth-century life in Mexico City.

While Magazine de Policía published accusations against beneficiaries of female prostitution, proprietors of hole-in-the-wall nightclubs, and corrupt police officers, they also made note of men of “wrongful habits,” those who did not fit within heterosexual normativity and who chose to identify as women. Merely appearing
feminine raised suspicion toward these “lilos,” “queers,” and “effeminate,” who were often victims of extortion and imprisonment, especially if they dared to walk through the streets offering up their charms for sale. The magazine’s texts and images ridiculing los travestis (transvestites) revealed not only the authoritarian reflection of a macho mentality, but also the not-so-hidden fascination with people who blurred traditional gender boundaries. Proof of the latter lies in the stories of supposed deceit that befell certain male wooers, including police officers who boasted Don Juan prowess, who discovered to their surprise, in moments of intimacy, that “she” was in fact a “he.”

The portraits of transvestites taken by Devars for Magazine de Policía are extensions of the police bookings where the personal data and infractions of the detained were recorded. Nevertheless, in spite of the weight of the investigative and derogatory gaze cast upon these people with the aim of exposing their rarity and grotesqueness, the subjects of Devars’s photographs—at least to a certain degree—reclaim their capacity for self-representation and declare their own defiant presence. Individuals unjustly punished for their sexual preferences pose as if on an imaginary catwalk in the bleak and depressing police precinct interior, affirming the boldness of their manifold identities and the right, as expressed by one subject, to dress “however she may please, so long as the Constitution allowed it.”

This confrontation between a classifying typology and individual agency is on display in the set of portraits by Devars that are found in the photographic archive of the late writer Carlos Monsiváis, one of the most influential Mexican intellectuals of the twentieth century. It remains unclear whether the prolific essayist and journalist—who chose not to reveal his own homosexuality though he was a tireless defender of sexual rights—ever planned to do something specific with these images. His writings that reference transvestites reveal some reservations with regard to what he viewed as a proclivity toward dramatization and subservience to stereotypes. However, these are characteristics that Monsiváis greatly admired in the 1977 Canadian film Outrageous! starring the drag queen Craig Russell, for which Monsiváis wrote the Spanish subtitles. His most empathic work about las vestidas (cross-dressers) can be found in an article about a performance by the artist Xóchitl during Carnival in the Port of Veracruz. In this 1984 piece, for Su Otro Yo magazine, Monsiváis writes: “A transvestite is the joke made in seriousness and the parody of seriousness … someone who doesn’t care to comply with patrolled boundaries between masculinity and femininity and who, lacking a theory in that regard, receives what they are told and quickly transforms into the being as described by its own critics (and into the reduction, taken to the absurd, of the critics’ description).”

These portraits, bearing Deviers’s and the Magazine de Policía’s stamps on the back, were first displayed in the exhibition Pasado venidero (Forseeable past), in 2015, at the Museo del Estanquillo in Mexico City. Founded in 2006, the museum is charged with caring for and disseminating Monsiváis’s collections of sculptures, paintings, prints, comics, photographs, books, and magazines. If the literary and journalistic work of Monsiváis left no subject untouched—from poetry of the highest order to expressions of popular culture, from the ups and downs of politics to the vibrant chaos of street life—as a collector he was no less omnivorous. He gave shape to an archive that has value as cultural memory while also serving as a faithful portrait of his interests and obsessions. For this celebrated author of Días de guardar (Days to remember) and Amor perdido (Lost love), photography was a subject for investigation, a source of inspiration, and a creative resource. Monsiváis not only utilized photographs by referencing them in his essays, but he also integrated images into his style of writing, a quality that earned him the role of innovator of Mexican literature.
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