



Boffin, Tessa (1962-1993)

by Tamsin Wilton

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Queer dyke activist Tessa Boffin was a photographer and performance artist. The first British lesbian artist to produce work in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, she was a founding member of the London-based AIDS and Photography group. Together, she and Sunil Gupta curated the travelling exhibition "Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology," and edited the accompanying book. Her *Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex* (1989), remains one of the most important photographic artworks to address AIDS from a lesbian perspective.

Living and working in London at a time when lesbians and gay men were starting to call themselves "queer" and when sadomasochistic sex play moved out of the margins in this new queer culture, Boffin was an outspoken advocate of lesbian sexual freedom. Working with her partner, Nerina Ferguson, she developed a queer sex-show "Crucifixion Cabaret," performed in 1992 to great controversy.

Ferguson also participated in a photographic sequence *Two Dykes and a Strait Man, The Sailor and the Whore* (1992), in which a butch lesbian in sailor drag romances a gay man in full femme get up.

Boffin's work celebrates queer gender-fuck as liberating for lesbians, a stance that challenged the earlier lesbian-feminist doctrine that lesbians should, at all costs, beware of being "male-identified."

Boffin was active in promoting the importance of lesbian photography, and in bringing it to a largely ignorant audience. In 1991 she co-edited with Jean Fraser *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*, the first collection of its kind. As a photographic artist she took the staged tableau-sequence formula, used most famously by gay photographer Duane Michals, and molded it into a subtle language with which to articulate specific aspects of the lesbian experience generally erased in mainstream culture.

In her 1991 tableau-sequence *The Knight's Move* she presents as lesbian heroes such iconic figures as the knight in shining armor, his leather-jerkined squire, Casanova and a lady-in-waiting, all played by women. Joining them is a lesbian angel, a fantasy figure that features in much of her work.

In the accompanying commentary in *Stolen Glances*, Boffin writes that she wants to place herself and her fantasy figures "into the great heterosexual narratives of courtly and romantic love: by making the Knight's Move--a lateral or sideways leap."

Unselfish with her time and energy, and eager to explore and support innovation in the lesbian arts, Boffin participated in the work of others far more generously than is usual with creative artists. She may be seen, for example, as one of the actors in short tableaux between the main features in *Lesbian Lycra Shorts* (1992), a collection of short films from independent lesbian filmmakers.

Sadly, her continuing creativity and her growing reputation as an artist were not enough to bring her contentment. In October 1993, Tessa Boffin took her own life, in the bathroom of her London home.

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About the Author

Tamsin Wilton was Reader in Sociology at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She published widely on lesbian and gay issues since 1988, and visited many countries to lecture on lesbian studies and on the sociology of HIV/AIDS. Her books include *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*; *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*; and *Sexualities in Health and Social Care*.