

**Kaucyila Brooke**  
*X (formerly Lily's), San Diego, CA*  
 2001 Colour photograph 114x152cm



## Kaucyila Brooke

### Plattform, Berlin, Germany

Back when duelling Cold War patriarchal systems compared the sizes of their respective missile arsenals and penetrated Outer Space, feminism taught us that space on our planet is a gender-political issue still at stake. Kaucyila Brooke's documentary video and photographic project *The Boy Mechanic* (1996–ongoing) is a local case study and social history of lesbian bars in San Diego, examining the ups and downs of some women's attempts to find and keep a social space of their own. In Berlin, Brooke presented for the first time six large-format photographs of the façades of some of these bars, a 30-minute split-screen video that is the end-result of many hours of interview footage and which has been shown over the past few years in different formats, together with a new series of ten postcards.

For more than two decades Brooke's work as an artist, activist, writer and project initiator has dealt openly with lesbian identity and experience. In the 1980s a series of portraits of women Brooke got to know 'at the one dyke bar in town ... a Country & Western dance hall' were an attempt to make visible 'a lesbian visual language'. Later her *Dry Kisses Only* (1990), a collaboration with Jane Cottis, was a critical analysis of women's relationships in classic Hollywood plots. Moving from film to television, her lush cut-out photographic series 'Tit for Twat' (from 1993) featured *Madam and Eve*, a naked, frolicking interracial union being shamelessly questioned by talk-show hosts. At this year's Berlin Biennale, Brooke exhibited a series of photographs of Kathy Acker's clothes, *Untitled from the series of Kathy Acker's Clothes* (1999–2004).

The video component of *The Boy Mechanic* consists of interviews with mostly middle-aged women who, with an enormous amount of charm and wit, tell Brooke about their favourite women's bars, the bar owners and décor, and their own experiences. The exhibition looked unpretentious and low-key: photographs on the walls, a small television monitor on the floor with a seat for viewers, a presentation style at which Berlin venues used to excel in the 1990s, when

it seemed obligatory constantly to chant the mantra of content over display. But like the subject of this project, this seemed appropriately direct – after all, budget restraints don't have to reflect mental ones – and it seemed to fit the knowing casualness of the video's shooting and editing. Many of the bars lovingly remembered no longer exist. Brooke emphasizes this by integrating rough footage documenting only occasionally successful pilgrimages to the sites of former night-time revelries, while not always getting into the reasons of why the scene has moved on – whether they be structural, economic or generational.

Some commentators interpreted the disappearance of these bars as an example of how the hard-won and rare women's spaces are always under threat of closure, and yet what comes out of the work is not a sense of defeatism or victimization. On the contrary, the women in the video, who come from different socio-economic and racial backgrounds, have in common their fond memories and a sense of self-confidence and pride. Their sense of humour is reflected in the innuendo and camp of, for instance, the tongue-in-cheek bar names: the Box Office (now closed), the more romantically dubbed and short-lived Lillies (now Club X) or the exotic-sounding Matador. Only two of the many clubs in Brooke's photographs and video are apparently still running (at least at the time the video was made): The Flame, with its trashy Modernist exterior and striking signage, and Six Degrees (formerly Club Bombay). One of the women interviewed quips that these bars function as the catacombs did for early Christians – secret, low-lit places where like-minded people could meet, 'become friends and care about each other'. The resilience of their community – however loosely defined, heterogeneous and subjected to location changes – is one of the main points of Brooke's refreshing and engaging work. **Dominic Eichler**