

ENGLISH TEXTS



Mimí Pons
1969



Vanessa Show
1976



Es la Frescura
Teatro Maipo, 1967



Es la Frescura
Teatro Maipo, 1967



Fantástica
Teatro El Nacional, 1972



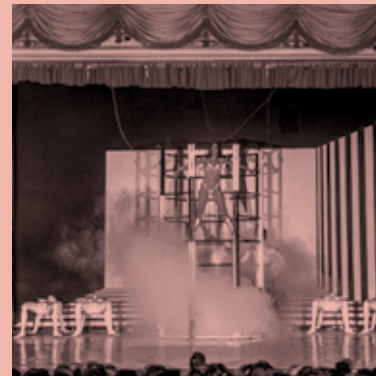
Eva-Adán... y la dulce vida
Teatro Maipo, 1969



Pedro Sombra
Teatro Maipo, 1968



Néida Lobato,
Gran despiplume en el Maipo, 1972



Maipo Superstar
Teatro Maipo, 1973



Ethel y Gogó Rojo, Maipo Superstar
Teatro Maipo, 1973



Ethel y Gogó Rojo, Maipo Superstar
Teatro Maipo, 1973



Cena Para Amante
Teatro El Nacional, 1972

INTRODUCTION

Once seen as dusty folders, archives have, in recent decades, come to be considered shimmering treasure troves not only for academic research but also for artistic and curatorial practice and for art institutions and collections. Archives are, today, an added value, a contemporary source of prestige in the conceptualization of art.

Temporada fulgor. Foto Estudio Luisita exhibits a selection of a photography archive of Argentine show business, mostly from the country's golden years of revue theater. Born in Cali, Colombia in 1929, Luisa Escarria came to Buenos Aires along with her sisters in 1958. They set up their home and studio on Corrientes Avenue. Revue theater sex symbols, actors, dancers, comedians, and other figures key to the history of Argentine pop culture came before their lens—hundreds of celebrities captured in over 40,000 images.

In the last five years, this archive gained visibility thanks to a documentary film and a number of exhibitions organized by Sol Miraglia—the current custodian of the Foto Estudio Luisita archive—in collaboration with Hugo Manso. The framework for the revalorization of this archive is the transformation of the parameters for the legitimation of photography and its circuits. Photography of this sort—that is, photography used for advertising and for the promotion of stars—was marginal at best to the values of artistic and experimental photography that reflected on the medium itself. A number of figures who were once outsiders now form part of the contemporary circuit, among them Malian portraitist Malick Sidibé, whose work was exhibited at Fondation Cartier in 2017.

Women photographers have been receiving more attention in recent years as well. *The New Woman Behind the Camera*, a show held at the Metropolitan Museum this year, reassesses photography through the gaze of the feminine ideal of the “new woman.” Photography is key to a re-examination of gender, since the medium has historically acted as a catalyst for female desire for economic autonomy and creativity. Recent interest in the Foto Estudio Luisita is tied to the contemporary perspective of Sol Miraglia (represented by Galería Hache). Her work salvaging the archive has shed light on, among other things, unretouched

shots that, when the original negatives are developed, reveal the domesticity of life in the studio.

The fervor for museums is, according to Andreas Huyssen, on the rise both in culture in general and in everyday experience. Obsession with memory is a symptom of these times: everything can, it seems, be saved from the clenches of forgetting. The museum has lost its clear boundaries and its role as keeper of the canon; it has opened up to a whole range of contemporary activities and practices. In keeping with this new conception of the museum, Malba invites its viewers to experience the Foto Estudio Luisita and its iconography, where a renewed sensibility and contemporary expectations converge: the glamour of show business moves us thanks to our affective bond to the persons portrayed; a revision that questions the heteronormativity of revue theater; and feathers and glitter that resonate in some contemporary works of art.

If each era has its way of seeing and photography is, arguably, the device that best captures transformations in those ways of seeing, the aperture and exhibition of the Foto Estudio Luisita archive brings a new turn in the appreciation of the medium of photography and its uses. We would like to thank Sol Miraglia, Sofía Dourron, Herminda Lahitte, and Silvina Pirraglia for keeping that fulgor ablaze.

María Amalia García
Chief Curator, Malba

TEMPORADA FULGOR
FOTO ESTUDIO LUISITA, BUENOS AIRES
By Sofía Dourron

Aperture: The Stars

From the time of their reencounter in Buenos Aires in 1958, Luisa and Chela Escarria—the Colombian sisters who founded, owned, and ran, singlehandedly, the Foto Estudio Luisita—began building a domestic temple devoted to capturing the beauty of others. In their home-studio on Corrientes Avenue, they portrayed *vedettes*, models, dancers, comics, singers, musicians, actors, contortionists and

acrobats, tropical bands and drum troupes; an occasional child might, in all their innocence, be portrayed on the same plush ottoman as the others. These stars and starlets would pose, one after another, in the same three-square meters at the entrance to the apartment where the sisters lived and worked along with their mother, Eva, their pets and competition canaries. Born into a family of photographers, Luisa and Chela put together a ritual based on repetition and an economy of resources, creating some of the most iconic images of Argentine popular culture.

This peculiar archive is a whimsical selection of the Escarria sisters' vast production created over the course of their long career. Guided by memories, affects, and fetishes, and limited by the small size of their shared home, they themselves were the ones who did the selecting. The negatives, prints, and contact sheets that were not thrown out ended up in drawers along with café-sized bags of saccharine and teaspoons, in shoeboxes carefully arranged and stored under their beds, in little glittery boxes, in labeled envelopes and jumpacked albums. The sisters catered almost exclusively to the demands of show business, and revue theater—with its feather clouds and glitter, its elaborate choreography and popular music, its crude jokes and biting political commentary, its inconceivable acrobatics and even ventriloquists—was their preferred theme, the one they plunged into with most enthusiasm. They created images for marquees, billboards, handbills and other publications, and photographs whose fate was to act as support for the star's autograph. This—the heart of the Foto Estudio Luisita archive—offers us an opportunity to blur the boundaries of the photography canon with its rigid limits between the commercial and the artistic, between institutions and the vast world that lives at their margins, an opportunity to delve into the images of the body with no intellectual qualms or squeamishness.

Temporada fulgor. Foto Estudio Luisita, the show and the book published with it, draws on the largest body of work the sisters decided to preserve, that is, the photos for the revue theater taken from 1964 to 1980. The beam of light shed by this group of images enables us to rediscover, from new perspectives, an Argentine popular-culture phenomenon that occupied the stages on Corrientes Avenue starting in the nineteen-twenties. It acted as a thermometer of the political, economic, social, and cultural changes the country was experiencing. Furthermore, these mass-circulation images draw back the curtain to show what was going on behind the scenes, making us party to their highly personal construction. The archive combines finished and retouched photographs ready to hit the streets and photographs of production processes, stagings, and retouches, intimate scenes that took place inside the small studio.

The result of this amalgam is a canon of beauty of a time when hegemonic and patriarchal corporality and eroticism were centerstage, a canon assembled for the mass consumption that dominated popular culture and that, under so many retouched phantasmagoric layers, begins to

crack. But neither the canon nor the mass circulation of these images is what makes them iconic. That, rather, is the working of Luisita's tender and overarching vision—she captures subjectivities through gestures that range from an imperceptible blink of the eye to the choreographic display of a monumental body—and Chela's technical skill. Thanks to them we have Nélide Lobato sheathed in a tiny red onesie; Nélide Roca immersed in a feather boa; Norma and Mimí Pons with their blond soufflé-like hairdos; Ethel and Gogó Rojo golden from head to toe on the legendary Maipo stage.

Temporada fulgor binds the world of show business and the domestic world, Corrientes Avenue and the sisters' home-studio, evidencing the intersections and divergencies between the two on both material and conceptual levels. Silent clashes between the Escarria matriarchy and a doggedly conservative and patriarchal society are revealed, as are the clashes between the monumentality of bodies covered in feathers and the studio's homey warmth, the luminous Luisita and the images' mass circulation, the transformations in the politics of the body and desire and Chela's retouching and image-manipulation techniques. In short, a young topless Beba Granados covering her torso (that is, her tits) with Diana, the Escarrias' weiner dog.

The Studio: Photographic Gymnastics

Katia Iaros in a perfectly straight lunge against a white background. Her right knee crosses her left leg. The toes of her stiletto heels barely touch the floor. One hand rests calmly on her knee and the other, wrapped in a glittery band, lies by her side. The colossal hairpiece floats above her erect neck (the feathers at the top can barely fit into the frame). Luisita is forced, by the smallness of the apartment, to perform her usual photographic gymnastics. She shoots her Hasselblad and reveals the enormous and complex world that revolves around the adorned body of the *vedette*. The infinite confesses its own finitude, and peach lace window curtains do their best to serve as theater curtain on a domestic stage. Like eager theatergoers, the lights and camera flashes look straight at Katia; a cable hanging down to the left in the foreground clamors for attention; the calendar, illustrated with two parrots, on a wall in the background to the right brings time to a standstill at the exact moment of the shoot.

The sessions at Foto Estudio Luisita yielded tiny negatives (just 120 mm) that take in not only the posing subject, but also the entire universe astir around that subject. In them, objects come to life, turn into agents, and webs of meaning as sticky as spiderwebs are spun, titillating webs of personalities, eras, objects, and processes whose unlikely encounter is a treasure in and of itself. Many of these negatives were retouched: layer by layer, red ink eliminated any information that seemed irrelevant. Nonetheless, behind the ink we can make out, if just barely, the removed silhouettes that, like ghost, try to return to the light. Those still-intact negatives are what best reveal, what show with

greatest intensity, all the life that the sisters managed to capture; they thus become bearers of a cultural memory, instruments of work, affective archives.

As opposed to the images that left the studio in final form, without the slightest trace of where they came from, the negatives that were not altered tell their own stories and bear marks of the conditions in which they were produced. They even betray the tools and processes that made their existence possible: flashes, lights, cables, hands that come in the frame and do something to the bodies to extract every last bit of beauty they have to give. Chela's body—her back to Mariano Mores as she holds a yellow filter in front of a light to keep the magenta jacket from obscuring the musician's charisma—takes on a new dimension in the construction of an image that circulates anonymously in the field of mass culture. That body shows labor, collective creation, individual tenacities that converge in the space—nothing could be further from the anonymity and hygiene of the imaginary of industrial production.

Layers of another sort are at play in the negatives that have not been intervened. These layers narrate a hodgepodge of minimal stories and small relegated gestures that together assemble a complex narrative riddled with contradiction and paradox. They capture the encounter in a single space between diverse subjectivities, each with a biography, background, and everyday life; between glamour, the poetics of the night, the changing politics of sexuality, and the nascent embodiment of desire; the tensions part and parcel of show business, an immigrant matriarchy and its affective economics, a multispecies community of humans, doggies, and birds; the warmth of the home, spirituality, and religious morality. In disinterested and surprising fashion, these images offer us a concatenation of snapshots that attest to the transformations facing Argentine society even today.

By examining this working material now made public, we are able to reconstruct a fragment of the history of patriarchal and heteronormative demand enacted on bodies. It is part of the symbolic legacy passed down to us, and it represents, among other things, masculine and heterosexual domination as accepted social norm. The bodies and faces of stars were retouched without a second thought, just as fans, flashes, and curtains were edited out. Tummies and hips were slimmed; cellulitis, wrinkles, creases, and dark rings under eyes erased; perfect curves and porcelain skin invented. The contrasts in the archive's various materials (negatives, retouched negatives, and vintage prints) evidence changing ways of conceiving and consuming bodies and media representations that influenced the construction of desire as well as how generations of locals perceived themselves. But something slips through those norms, leaks in and starts to strain the surfaces of the stereotypes. Little by little, it works away at gender mandates to make room for dissident sexualities and bodies that rebel against normativity.

The narrative contains an arch of images that spans from seminude *vedettes* and models doing acrobatics with boas, nipple pasties, doggies, and balloons to cover themselves to Mariola Bosse showing off her gifts like full moons just barely wrapped in a scrap of silver fabric; it eloquently illustrates transformations in the politics of sexuality. What Ezequiel Lozano describes as a “discreet revolution” took place in Argentine theater in the nineteen-sixties between a model of domesticity associated with family normativity and developments like divorce, women's entry into the workforce on mass scale, new discourses on sexuality, and a weakening of gender prejudice and double standards in, for instance, the rejection of the longstanding association between decency and female virginity. That double standard is particularly poignant in revue theater, where patriarchal logics of organization and domination reign but women are the ones in command on stage. Cis sexuality is a primordial topic of jokes and stand-up routines, but they are performed on occasion by dissident identities and sexualities embodied in dance troupes. We thus see, from negative to negative, how lines of flight emerge, lines that escape a morality still conservative and phobic and censorship and institutional violence at the hand of civic-military governments.

The image of a topless Adriana Parets crowned like a peacock by an enormous halo of blue and white feathers and flanked by a body of seminude dancers against an absolutely Pop curtain forms part of the narrative of the hypersexualization of women and of show business. It is a story of contrasts and contradictions that swings back and forth from the sexual-liberation movements of the sixties to the incipient encroachment of the free market and the neocolonial commercialization of bodies. This single image epitomizes the processes that, in the nineteen-eighties, would overthrow the hegemony of revue theater as supreme space for the public display of bodies and sexualities; it would fall to television programs that would take those same precepts to the dining rooms, living rooms, and bedrooms of all Argentines. The body, here, becomes agent of history, historiographic instrument par excellence; revue theater, its vehicle; and the Foto Estudio Luisita archive, one of its best-kept repositories.

Intermediate Frame

Covered in bright tassel that hangs down from a bra with flower trim, Pochi Grey, against a black background, gently stretches her right leg and, seductive, looks over her shoulder. The neon lights of the Maipo theater marquee accompany the movement of her leg; they fall toward the left edge of the photograph and announce Jorge Porcel in *Altavista*. Chela's staging monumentalizes the *vedette*, who seems to storm the city like a glamorous Godzilla, taking Corrientes Avenue with her and gobbling up anything that crosses her path. The image is a perfect cross of inside and outside, of studio portrait and street photography. It is one of the only

photographs in Foto Estudio Luisita's oeuvre that was taken in the street. It is a perfect cross of fiction and reality.

Whatever the limited space of the sisters' home-studio kept them from displaying, they would invent. Cutting and pasting negatives, layering and retouching them, or altering the color by hand, Luisa and Chela created images that sometimes border on the surrealist: a tiny José Marrone lounging on a telephone three times his size; the entire Bombos Ranqueles troupe floating in space; Juanita Martínez posing next to a giant cocktail and flower. While the sisters deploy their greatest staging resources in their work with tropical bands, making musicians and instrument fly over mountains, cross scores, and pose beside Caribbean palm trees, their stagings for revue theater playfully bring something of the performance's magic of motion to the static image on flat paper.

Revue: Glamor and Resilience

The restless audience fidgets in their seats, their shoes tap the wood floor, the racket sweeps through the hall like waves, and light bounces off the mirrors and golden surfaces that outfit the main arena of the Maipo theater. The red velvet curtain is drawn heavily to reveal an *invraisemblable* image. The Rojo sisters, motionless on a stairway: golden faces, golden crowns, magenta capes, ruffle hairpieces in like tone topped with feathers shield their backs. In the shadows, Chela points the heavy Metz flashes she has hauled down from her house, while Luisita shoots Kodachrome (color slides film) with her Hasselblad camera. Neither one knows for sure what they will capture. They shoot, and then shoot again and again and again. The Rojos take off their capes and—bodies golden from head to toe—walk down the stairs. The Rojos dance. The Rojos exit the stage.

Despite their boundless imagination—or perhaps thanks to it—the Escarria sisters rarely left their apartment. When they did, they were usually heading down to the Maipo theater, where Foto Estudio Luisita was tasked with registering the sets for all the performances. These color slides and black-and-white negatives were carefully kept for decades in a little box labelled “Exteriors” and “Maipo.” Once placed on the screen of the negatoscope, these slides and negatives bring to the surface sumptuous sets, glamorous wardrobes, enormous dance troupes, impressive solos, baffling scenes, distracted dancers, skewed sets, fallen hairpieces, and even members of the audience where they shouldn't be.

These images are the bearers of one world that is coming to an end and another that is emerging, a golden age burning out and *vedettes* retiring as nascent stars rise; new forms of cultural consumption, televisions by the millions, pop culture, and the sexual revolution that clashes with military governments, censorship, and institutional violence. The original aim of revue theater was to provide an exuberant lift to offset everyday hustle and bustle and the unease

it brings. But, as its name indicates, it also *reviewed* current events. It managed to survive the ups and downs of Buenos Aires life, resiliently adapting to whatever it came up against. It might have lost poignancy, but it managed to stay open and evade censorship. It paid fines for the jokes told by its comics and got along with the military officers who sat in its box seats and seduced its sex-symbol stars. It did not give in until the nineties under the weight of television and media culture. Transformations in the media and image production also brought a rupture in the work of Foto Estudio Luisita and, especially, in its tie to revue theater. The sisters visited the Maipo less and less often; theater stars stopped visiting the studio making way for a new kind of subject.

Both revue theater and the images that document it form part of popular culture, and as such they were, for a long time, ignored by the cultural systems that determine and dominate the fields of the arts and the academy. Paradoxically, today these systems seek out those marginal archives and characters obscured by time to renew their own languages and canons that were so hermetic for so long. Negative by negative, the Foto Estudio Luisita archive shows the enormous contribution both revue theater and the sisters' studio made to our visual culture, to the formation of our collective identities, to the construction—as well as the deconstruction—of subjectivities. From their first ventures into a field dominated by men, the Escarria sisters captured a silent force with which to undermine, even involuntarily, the stereotypes that both Colombian and Argentine society would impose on them. In the same meticulous way they captured extraordinary scenes and retouched them to the point of exhaustion, this photographic duo, these image workers, continue to take apart myths and mandates, even the mandate of the intellectual, modern or contemporary, photography.

Last Dance

Temporada fulgor proposes a poetic and aesthetic exploration of an image-creating project that ensued solely, at both production and consumption phases, on commercial circuits. This new understanding of that regime of visibility, its re-placement in the framework of contemporary artistic practices is not an attempt to erase or deny its mass-scale and pop-culture essence or to paralyze it as an archivist and nostalgic fetish. On the contrary, it seeks to reawaken a sensibility laden with glitter and meaning and anchored not only in the universe of work and production but also in the exuberance and excess of the night, in domestic tenderness and affectivity.

The Foto Estudio Luisita archive holds within it a small revolution of micro-stories: women who, through their work and minimal gestures under the cover of daily life, shattered the patriarchal mandates of their time; a field of popular culture that resists submission to the banalization

of superfluous readings; bodies on display on the stage in choreographies that empower beyond the scrutinizing gaze. We find as well a burst of honky-tonk luxury and joy that, to paraphrase Emma Goldman, seems to declare, “If I can't shine, I don't want to be part of your revolution.”

Notes

1. The word *vedette* refers to revue theater principal dancers and sex symbols.
2. Translator's note: A classic revue theater located at 449 Esmeralda Street in downtown Buenos Aires. It opened to the public in 1908.
3. Lozano, Ezequiel. *Sexualidades disidentes en el teatro: Buenos Aires, años 60*. Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2015.
4. Cosse, Isabella. “Ilegitimidades de origen y vulnerabilidad en la Argentina de mediados del siglo XX,” in *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, n° 1, 2007, pp. 1-2.
5. The etymology of the word *revue* lies in the French word for “review,” as in a “show presenting a review of current events.” See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revue#Etymology>
6. Translator's note: Argentina was under the rule of a blood civic-military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983.

THIS BEAUTY WILL NEVER AGAIN RETURN INTERVIEW WITH SOL MIRAGLIA By Josefina Barcia

To tell the story of Luisita Photo Studio means to narrate the life of two sisters, Luisa and Chela Escarria, through testimonies, anecdotes, a film, a few documents, and a vast wealth of photographs. A problem runs through that story, which is structured by conversations I had with Sol Miraglia, the one who salvaged from oblivion the archive of a photography studio visited by over ten thousand subjects: its protagonists are evasive; they deny their central role and their privilege affective ties over recognition of their work as photographers.

JB: How did you come into contact with Luisa?

SM: It was 2009, and I was giving classes in Photoshop at a camera repair office on the corner of Libertad and Corrientes streets, the heart of where photography supplies were bought and sold in Buenos Aires at that time. I was nineteen and studying photography when I started working at that typical carpeted downtown office. That was where I saw the calendar. Elsa, the owner of the business, hung it up in the office at the end of the year. I was struck by the pastel colors—it was odd. The Escarria sisters stuck a generic stationary-store calendar on a laminated sheet of A4 paper with an image of theirs on it and gave it out as

a Christmas gift to local businesses they frequented. The calendar read “Buenos Aires Stars – Luisita Photo Studio,” and on a background of blue stars were images of Olmedo, Moria Casán, Tita Merello, and others. These were full-body portraits floating on the calendar like stickers.

“You've got to meet her,” the people at the office told Sol. And a few days later, Luisa showed up looking for a flash. With the excuse of a photojournalism project, Sol started visiting Luisita at her home on Corrientes Avenue every week.

Luisa Escarria, the author of the photo in the calendar, was born in 1929 in Cali, where her parents were well-known photographers. Luis Felipe Escarria shot landscapes, and Eva Iglesias de Escarria did society portraits. They worked hard to support their four daughters: Rosa, Luisa, Graciela (Chela)—just eleven months younger than Luisa—and Teresa. Photography had reached Colombia in the mid-nineteenth century at the hand of French diplomat and painter Baron Gros, a pioneer in the daguerreotype technique. Initially in Medellín, and later in Cali and Bogotá, the first photographers were also painters, and photographs, like painted portraits, served as a sort of letter of presentation. Studio portraits and fotoagüita portraits, where a mobile camera-laboratory was used by street photographers, were the dominant types of photography in Colombia in the early twentieth century. While the Escarria Photo Studio formed part of the society-photography tradition, Luis Felipe Escarria was an eminent early figure in landscape photography in the Valle del Cauca region.

JB: Was the girls' father the one who taught the trade to their mother?

SM: I asked Chela that same question, and she told me, “I don't think taking photos is hard enough to merit a teacher.” The father was a *bon vivant*. A photojournalist, he worked in the tobacco industry. He owned amusement parts—the family was comfortable. The sisters didn't talk much about those days, but when they did they would always say, “By the time we were just four or five, we would be perched on the stool by our father's side as he developed photos: the red light, the chemical smell, we would rinse the prints and everything.”

Chela said her nails would turn yellow from the chemicals; she would get a manicure on weekends because she had used her hands so much during the week. Her contact with photography was natural—an organic part of her life. The sisters and their parents got along well. The parents worked at home, as would the girls when they grew up—the trade was performed at home, almost like from inside the womb.