



# EDGE OF TWILIGHT

*Ken Gonzales-Day*

It is night. A single-wide trailer is seen from the front. It is centered, almost deadpan in its composition. Beneath the RV's A-frame roof are three rectangular windows topped by a half-moon atrium window. The image is startling because all the windows are covered with what appears to be brown paper. The paper completely blocks the view outward and, perhaps more to the point, it blocks the view inward. A greenish yellow light spills across the white corrugated metal siding, a familiar, if often undesired, effect caused by photographing under mercury-vapor lights, which Samaras has left purposefully visible. A precarious pile of rocks and five painted chickens are in the foreground. Three of them appear to be roosters, but who can really be sure when you are looking at plaster garden sculptures? Their crested heads point visitors toward a small set of stairs that lead to a covered entryway, which also doubles as a parking space. A motionless rainbow flag protrudes from a simple white pot located between the roosters and the rock pile. To the right, the edge of another covered parking space is visible, and it suggests the sequence of tightly placed mobile homes and campers that is typical of RV parks just about anywhere.

The photograph resists classification. It is familiar and even a little humorous, but the image isn't a classically formalist study of light or a gritty documentary catch. Despite some correspondences with the genre of photographic work of the seventies that is associated with the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of the Man-Altered Landscape*, Samaras's work couldn't be categorized under that rubric because her approach is distinctly feminist and points to a history beyond the particulars of form. Nor does Samaras document the world in the conventional sense of the "decisive moment" or street photography, yet the image does speak to the challenges of representing a community that wishes to remain outside of the public eye. In a very simple way, the mobile home structures suggest portraits of their owners, but Samaras strives for much more. The image is from a larger project that looks at queer retirement communities in the United States, particularly ones that are predominantly lesbian.

The *Edge of Twilight* series takes its name from the pre-Stonewall pulp fiction novels that used "twilight" in their titles to signal lesbian content to a knowing audience, just as the rainbow flag signals solidarity with, and

within, the LGBT community today. As Samaras notes in her reflections on *Edge of Twilight*, this project marks a radical shift in her practice "from looking at the future of imaginaries of global capitalism to focusing on communities that have origins in social change movements."\*

As with many of her previous projects, the slow exposure times (from two to four minutes) and the harsh contrasts of night photography evoke a sense of otherworldliness. Shot on film and intentionally uncorrected, the colors shift, blend, and clash: acid green, incandescent yellow, brown black, and white. The palette draws attention to the industrial aesthetic of light poles, metal siding, and skirted trailers. But unlike lesbian science fiction novels that sought to discover distant planets, these women have created a world of their own, and without a billion-dollar mission into outer space. These industrially fabricated trailers are economical mobile spaceships that can travel between worlds, and can survive on what may be the most hostile of planets—Earth.

Samaras's work should also be seen as a meaningful example for those that wonder if we have reached the end of photography. Like the speculation about the end of painting, such questions often come across as more strategic than radical, but there can be no doubt that social media, handheld devices, and digital technologies have forever altered our experience of the photograph. Images pour from screened surfaces and fill our heads. But rather than responding by discarding all aesthetics, projects like Samaras's *Edge of Twilight* make it clear that there is still plenty of room for exploration right here. In Samaras's case, the work opens up a space from which to rethink more than just the work of making images; it allows the viewer to consider how economic and political mobility has served, and perhaps even shaped, at least one community and demonstrates that the difference between seeing and being seen is not always as simple as updating your Facebook profile.

\*Connie Samaras, artist's statement about *Edge of Twilight*, provided to the author by the exhibition's curator, Irene Tsatsos, in an email on June 9, 2012.