

Through careful representation and close reading of images, Spector illuminates the role of intimacy in Nan Goldin's photographs. The essay moves reflectively from a concrete problem—how can photographs be both real and imagined, composed and spontaneous?—to speculate about our own role as audience. (Instructor: Normandy Sherwood)

REFLECTIONS

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In the photograph, she looks like a young Brooke Shields: dark permed hair, rouged cheeks, red lips. It's the kind of face that belongs on the cover of *Vogue*, or on a poster over a teen girl's bed, Cyndi Lauper blasting from the stereo. The year is 1985, if you couldn't tell.

Now zoom out to the reflection of the woman's bare shoulders, the towel wrapped around her chest. Step back further still to the borderless edge of the mirror, the dingy bathroom walls, until you see the real woman, named Sandra, standing in profile on the other side. Notice the holes in the walls, the cracks in the tiles. Notice the barren countertop, save for the used makeup wipe, single stick of lipstick, and compact of blush. And notice, too, the way in which Sandra's reflection, and not Sandra herself, seems to star in this photograph. It is as if she, the reflection, is looking for something in her real-life counterpart. Amidst her lackluster and grimy surroundings, she searches for glamor, like Alice looking backwards through a rather dilapidated looking glass.

"Sandra in the mirror, New York City" (1985) is just one image out of dozens in photographer Nan Goldin's seminal work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (24). It is a single frozen sliver of time, as all photographs are, and yet to Goldin it carries a greater significance. Each photograph in this illuminating collection, described by Goldin as her "visual diary," captures a private moment in the lives of Goldin and her friends, the sole subjects of her photography (6).

To Goldin, photography can be as intimate as sex: "People get pissed off when I won't let them photograph me. But I won't photo-

graph anyone I don't know," she told a reporter from *The Guardian* in 1998 (qtd. in Jackson). It's "a kind of logic" with roots in Goldin's childhood that has remained central to her life's work (Jackson).

When Nan Goldin was just eleven years old, her eighteen-year-old sister Barbara committed suicide by train (Thomas). It was undeniably the most formative event of her life, something Goldin "never got over" (Thomas). In a 2001 interview with *Newsweek*, thirty-seven years after the suicide, Goldin still "reached for a napkin, weeping" when recounting the story (Thomas). She and Barbara were close as children, yet Goldin admits she has no real "tangible sense of who [her sister] was" (9). In the introduction to *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, she declares, "I don't ever want to be susceptible to anyone else's version of my history. I don't ever want to lose the real memory of anyone again" (9). And thus, Goldin's lifelong philosophy was born.

But Barbara Goldin didn't jump in front of a moving train, as the *Newsweek* article seems to suggest. While the article reports that she "threw herself across the railroad tracks outside Union Station in Washington and was killed by an oncoming train," Goldin tells a slightly different story (Thomas). As Goldin describes it in the introduction of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Barbara "[lay] down on the tracks," a small but important difference (8). Certainly, the former story is more sensational. How thrilling it is to imagine—the heat of the moment! The train getting closer! Is she gonna do it?!—but it is not the truth. So in this regard, perhaps Goldin has more journalistic integrity than the news magazine interviewing her. It's a testament to her unshakable desire to provide truth and "real memory" in her work (9).

To most of us viewing Goldin's work, little is known about the people in her pictures. We know they are her old lovers and friends, people who have touched her life in some way, but their lives are foreign to us save one or two frozen moments. Yet her images often feel familiar to viewers; they hold within them an innate quality of what it means to be young and wild, to feel things deeply and to love with abandon. In many ways, Goldin's photographs are like Sandra's reflection in the mirror, looking back out into the real world; they are

mimetic, yet they seem to possess their own greater consciousness distinct from the real-life people they reflect.

Take a look at “Nan and Brian in bed, New York City” (1983), for example (137). See how it appears hot to the touch? The photograph’s warm orange tones burn brightly in a dance of both passion and warning, perhaps suggesting something dangerous and abusive about the relationship between Goldin and her then-boyfriend Brian. Brian sits on the edge of the bed, smoking a cigarette while Nan lies curled up behind him. With Brian turned the other way, Nan can steal a look at him without him seeing the frightened longing in her eyes. Over the bed is a black and white print of another of Nan’s photographs, “Brian with the Flintstones, New York City” (1981), half out of frame, so that only a shirtless Brian with a cigarette dangling from his mouth can be seen. It is almost impossible not to immediately compare the idealized, James Dean-esque Brian of 1981 to the Brian of 1983. The Brian in the poster over the bed exudes power and coolness by staring directly into the camera, but Brian of 1983 is looking away. His imposing power instead comes from camera angles; there is a considerable distance between the couple, but the camera cannot tell. What is lost in perceived depth is replaced by perceived size, so Brian, in the photo’s foreground and shot from the waist up, seems to tower over Nan. All of these elements—the scene’s heat, the difference in size, the reminder of what once was looming over their heads—culminate to create a Nan who appears fearful, small, and painfully nostalgic. No background information is needed to feel the emotions radiating from this photo; they come naturally when confronted with a woman shrouded in passion and danger, pushed into the background.

In both “Sandra in the mirror, New York City” and “Nan and Brian in bed, New York City” there is a mirroring of the main subject, a recurring theme in Goldin’s work. The duplicated images of Sandra and Brian put real-life people and their reflections into tension with each other; they suggest that oftentimes our lives aren’t quite as pretty as they appear on camera. Both tug at the idea of expectation versus reality, idealism versus realism. These themes are seen, too, in the grimy and run-down settings of each of the photographs. Goldin’s photography shows “exactly what [her] world looks like, without

glamorization, without glorification,” but that does not necessarily mean that her subjects aren’t glamorous (Goldin 6). Sandra still radiates in a world that is dirty and lackluster. It is worth noting that Goldin’s photos aren’t doctored—if someone looks glamorous, it is because they inherently are.

The reason I keep coming back to Sandra is because of how incongruous she feels with her surroundings. Her face is everything the eighties were; her environment is everything they weren’t. It’s like looking at a young Cindy Crawford held hostage in the middle of the Bowery. And just like the rest of Goldin’s friends and subjects, Sandra is completely unknowable except her name. Who was she? A member of mainstream pop culture, dipping her toes in the downtown grunge scene (and thus becoming a precursor to the hipster club scene aesthetic of today)? Or perhaps I am judging based on stereotypes. Perhaps Sandra was actually the wildest, most heroin-addicted member of Goldin’s clan. I don’t expect to ever know the answer, and that’s okay. No matter who Sandra was prior to being photographed by Nan Goldin, she still ended up in that bathroom in 1985, at the point of collision between glamor and harsh reality.

As *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* progresses, beauty, pain, and abuse grow increasingly inseparable, culminating in one photograph, “Nan after being battered” (1984), which Goldin describes as the book’s “central image” (83). Dressed in pearls and “dangly earrings,” Nan’s face is covered in dark bruises from a recent beating by her then-lover, Brian. The “intense red blood in the white of her swollen left eye mirrors the shade of her lipstick,” and the two feel in tandem with one another (Manchester). It’s a difficult image to sit with, but it demands one’s attention. While the dark frame of Goldin’s body seems to float shadow-like into the dim background, her brightly lit face, intense gaze, and brutal wounds push forward into sharp focus. Every detail of her abuse is made abundantly clear, and her solemn but dignified face seems to be saying, “look.” But most striking to me are those bright red lips, a universal symbol of sex and vanity, unadulterated. Because the color of Nan’s bloodied left eye matches so closely to the color of her lips, it is impossible not to associate the latter with blood as well. Suddenly, a kiss represents more than just sex—it represents violence and pain.

In the book's acknowledgments, Goldin attributes this photo to her friend (and oft-photographed subject) Suzanne Fletcher (147). I can't help but think of the story behind this photo—Brian beats Nan, Nan calls up Suzanne, Nan tells Suzanne to take a picture of what he did to her. It becomes clear that while Nan was very much a part of the world she photographed, there was still a planned and posed nature to her work, too.

This is the part of Goldin's work that both confuses and intrigues me the most. If the mission of her photography is to capture the true and "real memory" of her friends and loved ones, shouldn't all of her photos be completely candid? Wouldn't a posed photograph add a level of artificiality to the work? If a subject poses when being photographed, the picture is then doctored; the photo shows less of who the subject is and more of who they want to be. But the very action of making art is a conscious one (for the artist, that is), so it raises the question: to capture their true humanity, must the subjects be completely oblivious to the fact that they are being photographed?

This question is further complicated in Goldin's "Bobby masturbating, New York City" (1980), which is literally a photo of a young man masturbating (68). He is slender and hairy all over, and his head is tilted downwards, eyes closed. Bobby's right hand grips his erect penis and his left hand is right below it, too far out of frame for the viewer to see exactly what it is doing. The shot itself is very tight—from the top of his head to his mid-thighs—and the lighting is tenebristic. The dramatic lighting and tight frame place an intimate yet public and illuminating spotlight on an otherwise private activity. Bobby is not looking at the camera, and his expression is blank, as if he is in a mental state closer to meditation than ecstasy. Yet I wonder what role candor plays in capturing both Bobby's world and the worlds of Goldin's subjects. Certainly, Bobby consented to being photographed, right? And on some conscious level, he must have been aware of the presence of an audience.

But although there is something about the secluded, individual, and taboo act of masturbation that we instantly associate with privacy, maybe there is a quality to being Goldin's friend that anyone outside of her circle would never be able to understand. The woman and her camera were one and the same. She states in an interview with *Vogue*,

“If anyone took as many pictures as I do, they’d be standing up here, too” (qtd. in Bengal). Perhaps at some point, people like Bobby stopped noticing the camera in her hand. Truly, from the expression on his face, he does not look like he knows he is being photographed.

But then again, look at how tight the shot is! It’s almost as if the photographer had to touch knees with Bobby to get it. And notice, too, how his right hand does not appear to be in motion; it is firmly grasping the base of his penis, so that its full length and size is purposefully in view. Could this image of Bobby really just be the lucky shot, one of the few images out of “thousands and thousands” that came out worthy of printing (qtd. in Bengal)? Are there other shots out there, lost to time, with his arm a little too blurry, or his penis out of view? Or (and the two don’t have to be mutually exclusive, per se), was Bobby posing, presenting himself how he wished to be seen by all viewers to come?

This answer varies depending on who is included in the word ‘viewers.’ When it was first exhibited, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* was presented as a slideshow, screened exclusively for the “people in the pictures” (qtd. in Bengal). It was never meant to reach a greater audience, and most definitely was never expected to receive the critical and scholarly acclaim it has garnered today. So, if Bobby really was trying to look a certain way for the camera, it would have been geared towards Goldin and Bobby’s friends, not some massive international audience. How could Bobby have known that he (and his genitalia) would one day be the subject of extensive academic research? In this regard, any sort of intent on his part—or on the part of the photographer—no longer matters. Was he posing? Was he not? Who cares? Time has since warped and twisted his original intentions.

So can art ever capture life—real, true, unadulterated life—without modifying it in some way? Let me leave Nan Goldin completely for a moment to look at the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the Artist in Residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation. In her 1969 manifesto, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, Ukeles proposes the idea for an exhibition titled *CARE* that she never got to carry out. The proposal is complicated and contains many parts, but I

am interested in one particular section titled “Part One: Personal.” It reads as follows:

I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife.
I am a mother. (Random order).

I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking,
renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also,
(up to now separately I “do” Art.

Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things,
and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art.
I will live in the museum as I customarily do at home with
my husband and my baby, for the duration of the exhibition.
(Right? or if you don’t want me around at night I would
come in every day) and do all these things as public Art
activities: I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything,
wash the walls (i.e. “floor paintings, dust works, soap-
sculpture, wall-paintings”) cook, invite people to eat,
Make agglomerations and dispositions of all functional
Refuse.

The exhibition area might look “empty” of art, but it will be
maintained in full public view.

MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK (Ukeles)

Her ideas are by all means intriguing. Her exhibition would be a presentation of real life itself, free of all bells and whistles, only considered art because “Everything I say is Art is Art” (Ukeles). Yet I still question whether the two—art and real life—are mutually exclusive.

Say Ukeles really did carry out her plan. Say she relocated to a museum and led her life entirely in public view. Undoubtedly, that new life would be real because she would really be there. To quote filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, “every film is a documentary of its actors.” (For example: where was Leonardo DiCaprio when Jack died in *Titanic*? He was in a wave pool in front of a bunch of cameras, that’s where.) But would that new, real life inside the museum be a true reflection of the real life Ukeles led before she started living in

public view? Or would that pesky label ‘art’ suddenly force her everyday behaviors to change in some way?

I believe it must. I believe that on some level, conscious or not, Ukeles would always be aware of her audience, and it would somehow always shape her behavior. And if this is true for Ukeles, then it is true for Bobby and Sandra and Nan Goldin as well. Goldin is sixty-three years old now, and admittedly different. In a recent 2015 interview with *Vogue*, she reflects:

That I thought it could save the person somehow. That I thought I could keep people alive. I really believed it until recently. And I also thought I could preserve the memory of the person through a photograph. But without the voice, without the body, without the smell, without the laugh, it doesn’t do much. Well, it keeps a memory, but then it becomes a memory of the picture at some point. (qtd. in Bengal)

This is true for Goldin, because the photos are her memories. But what about those of us who never knew the people in the pictures? To us, Sandra and Bobby have only ever existed as Goldin’s memories, cherry-picked reflections of her past. We will never know Sandra once the makeup has been wiped away, nor Bobby, once he puts on some pants—not unless Goldin releases new photos of them, that is. Because the future of their memories is entirely in the artist’s hands, we do not know what is captured and what is lost, or what is true and what is extrapolated. Like Sandra, we look back out into the real world, praying there are no smudges on the mirror.

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