

the passionate camera

photography and bodies of desire

edited by deborah bright



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aesthetics of “intimacy”

After the 1996 Nan Goldin retrospective at the Whitney Museum, the responses of friends I talked to varied enormously. Some who had lived similar lives during parts of the 1980s – “not that life, but the next one over,” in one’s words – appreciated the show. It gave them a sense of recognition, and an occasion to retrieve a sensation of a world now gone. A writer friend who’d spent years developing the form to narrate her own chaotic experiences suggested that sometimes Goldin’s images “monumentalize in a way that trashy lives don’t.” And another, a visual artist, emerged from the show horrified at the mawkish wall texts and Goldin’s forced naivety. She remarked: “They should have called this show ‘Nan Goldin: One Lie After Another.’”

The extremes of these responses tell us something about this kind of work, this loose genre of personal photography that gets termed “insider” documentary or “subcultural” photography. For starters, that even those who would seem to be “insiders” can’t agree. The critical response, in both the art and the popular press, was exceptionally uninformative, ranging from the usual gushing paeans to Goldin’s “brutal honesty” and “emotional directness,” to the predictable charges of “exploitation” or bad taste, to not unsurprising praise for her “formal beauty.” We already know all of those terms, and I think we know they’re not really adequate. What, then, might be more useful terms to discuss this work?

At the outset, Goldin’s work presents some particular problems: what we’re looking at is not just “work,” but something more like a “phenomenon.” As anyone who has spent any time in the visual art world in recent years well knows, a certain kind of work is everywhere: gritty, quasi-documentary color images of individuals, families, or groupings, presented in an apparently intimate, unposed manner, shot in an off-kilter, snapshot style, often a bit grainy, unfocused, or off-color. The subjects are outside the apparent “mainstream” (although they are almost always white): gay people, transvestites, the drug culture and punk rock, urban bohemians, club kids, an occasional maladroit family (Figs 11.1–11.2). Some are in distress, but not all. Overtly “marginal” subjects, they are types of people supposedly “outside” mainstream representation, outside the dominant culture. And in some senses this work can be viewed as a kind of “self-representation,” particularly as gay self-representation. By and large, the people shooting the images more-or-less



Fig. 11.1 Nan Goldin, *Cookie at Tin Pan Alley, NYC, 1983*. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

belong to the groups they are photographing: that is one of the premises of this kind of work, though exactly what this might mean or do is not totally clear.

Besides Goldin, the photographers we might associate with this loose grouping of work could include Larry Clark, Jack Pierson, Wolfgang Tillmans, Mark Morrisroe, even Richard Billingham. This last is particularly telling, because at first he doesn't seem to fit: a young British art grad who has made a sudden sensation with beautiful, chaotic images of his screwed-up, apparently sub-proletarian family, largely confined within their hideous public housing flat. You can buy his large color coffee-table book at any decent bookstore, right alongside the brand new Jack Pierson book (his third), the new Wolfgang Tillmans (his second), or the recent Nan Goldin/Nobuyoshi Araki collaboration (her fourth).

The fact that this work is so easily available, so lushly produced, so widely commercially circulated, is part of the "phenomenon." Of course, you can't buy Larry Clark's books, at least in the United States, since the most recent one was banned for alleged depiction of underage sexual activity, and the older ones, *Tulsa* and *Teenage Lust*, are long out of print, rare, and quite expensive.¹ Yet on one level access to the "original" images barely matters, since this look has so disseminated throughout the culture, passing over into fashion and advertising. Open almost any fashion magazine, especially British ones, or a recent copy of *Interview*, and you may see its stylistic derivatives: awkwardly posed, garishly lit images for an era of guilty consumption.² Of the artists I've named, only the late Mark Morrisroe, whose work was both more modest in scale and more diffuse, is not so easily accessible, although a number of his images are reproduced in the recent *Boston School* catalogue; a Polaroid-ish shot with the text "Dismal Boston Skyline – Mark Morrisroe c. 86 1/12" scrawled haphazardly below, is on the cover (Fig. 11.3).

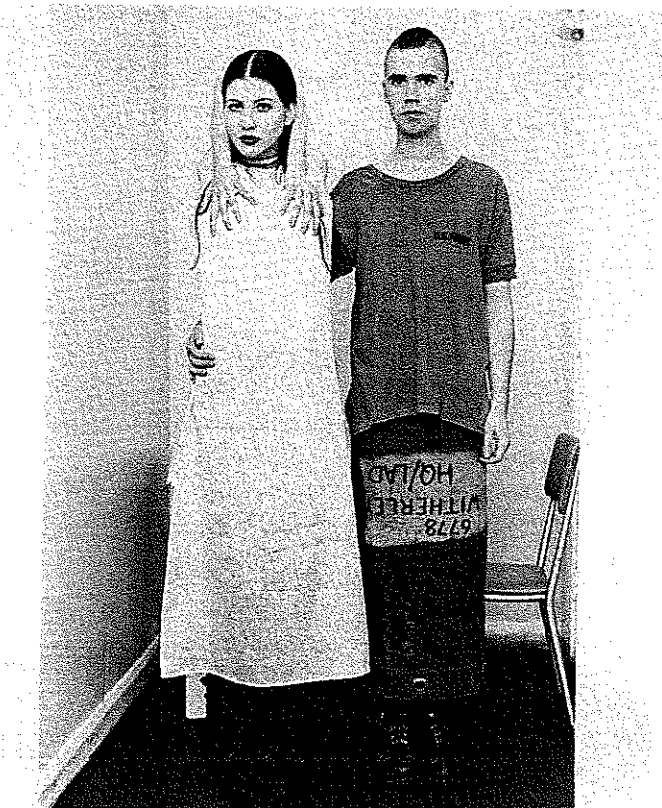


Fig. 11.2 Wolfgang Tillmans, *Suzanne & Lutz, White Dress, Army Shirt*, 1993. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

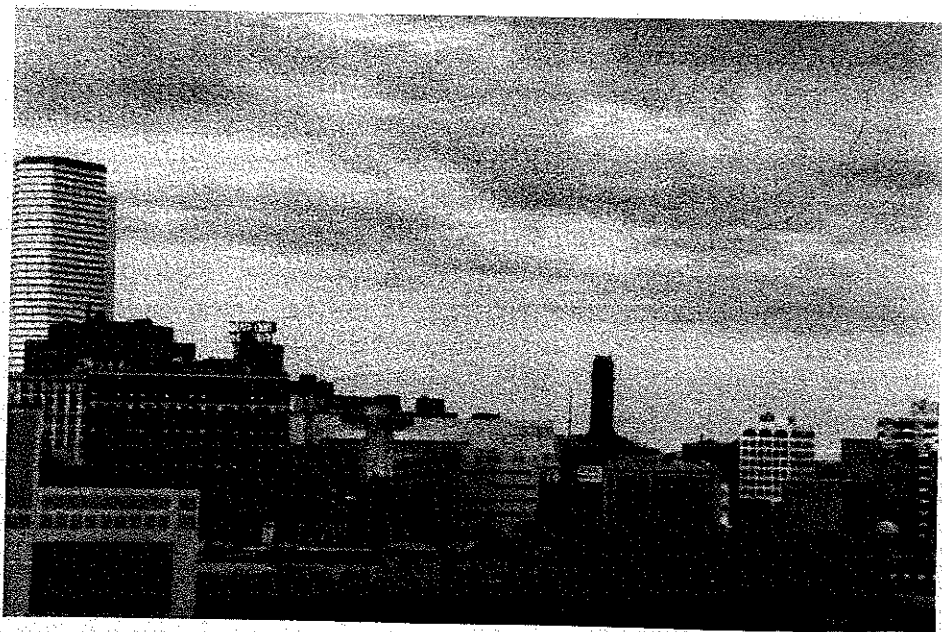


Fig. 11.3 Mark Morrisroe, *Dismal Boston Skyline*, 1986. Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

Dismal Boston Skyline Mark Morrisroe
1/12 86

Oddly, that caption says it all: that if you were young and sensitive and looking out the window of your small cramped miserable apartment, at that truly dismal skyline, in 1986, in Boston, one of the most miserable cities in the world, you too might want to take drugs and act out and long for escape by any means possible. At least I would. This kind of nondescript little image stops me cold, stops me from launching the kind of dismissive critique it would be only too easy to make. And the image is really "nothing special," just an average skyline shot of a downtown on a sort of overcast day, a little too dark, pretty banal. It could be a postcard reject, or an amateur shot – almost anyone's. It's that very ordinariness that makes it work: that the image *could* have been anyone's, that you might have taken that image if you'd been there then, feeling like that. Operating precariously on the amorphous boundary between "art" and vernacular uses of photography, Morrisroe's work allows viewers to project themselves and their own pasts into the image while also insisting on its specificity as a document of *his* life, not ours.

That's one way this work works, when it does work: a possibly banal image, or even a gruesome one, that triggers a flood of memory, a spark of recognition, and a sense that something private and precious has been disclosed to you. It's precisely the fragility of this private disclosure that gets trampled by the rampant consumerism of the coffee-table book and the museum catalogue. By its very definition as a private, haphazard, accidental meaning, a *punctum* isn't a *punctum* if it's the same for everyone; then it's the *studium*: the coded, public, official meaning.³ Part of the pleasure this work offers is to allow the *viewer* to feel like an "insider," an intimate, partaking in an experience that is neither public nor official. When the same images are reproduced too many times, in too many places, and are liked *in the same way* by too many people, this intimacy is inevitably compromised. If we all feel the same sentimental rush before the same image, it ceases to be poignant, and instead becomes trite, coded, formulaic: an index of bland liberal humanism rather than acute social difference. And few things are more repellent than a programmed sense of "intimacy" or a regulated experience of "accident."

Perversely, one of the things that initially drew me to writing on Goldin's work was the claim, by countless writers, that her work is "not voyeuristic," that "there is no voyeurism in these images," and so on. Accompanying these claims was the constant affirmation of Goldin's status as insider, participant and survivor of the worlds that she records, often supported by quoting from statements by the artist, as in her introduction to *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*: "There is a popular notion that this photographer is by nature a voyeur, the last one to be invited to the party. But I'm not crashing; this is my party. This is my family, my friends."⁴ To prop up this persistent naturalization of the photographic activity, and further repress the mediation of the technological apparatus, the camera is refigured as a bodily extension, of human sight, of touch: "Taking a picture of someone is like caressing them." As Goldin states:

People in the pictures say my camera is as much a part of being with me as any other aspect of knowing me. It's as if my hand were a camera. If it were possible, I'd want no mechanism between me and the moment of photographing. The camera is as much a part of my everyday life as talking or eating or sex. The instance of photographing, instead of creating distance, is a moment of clarity and emotional connection for me.⁵

Why the persistent need, on the part of artist and viewers, to disavow the voyeurism which is so patently and obviously present in these images? Clearly, it is not just Goldin's voyeurism, but our own, which is pervasively disavowed in such claims. Presented under the guise of an "intimate" relationship between artist and subject, these images relegitimize the codes and conventions of social documentary, presumably by ridding them of their problematic enmeshment

with histories of social surveillance and coercion. Such blind faith in authorial self-understanding and intention, however, ignores the extraordinary power of the photographic language employed: a language with a history and an inscribed structure of power relations that cannot be easily evaded by the spontaneous performance before the lens.

If museum curators, critics, and the art world as a whole rush to embrace Goldin's apparent naivety – “Nan is so honest, there's no screen of theory between her and her work”⁶ – it is in part because her enthusiastic willingness to naturalize the photographic transaction allows us to ignore everything we know about the history of photography. It's not so much Goldin's tendency to repress certain historically problematic legacies or to present herself in public as “naive” that troubles me (I have no doubt that she is quite intelligently acute about her practice) but the idea that this somehow “permits” an entire art establishment (which is anything *but* naive) to systematically repress the past twenty years' critical and artistic work investigating such transactions.⁷

As critics and artists such as Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, and others have long insisted, documentary photography has always been premised on the transgressive pleasures of looking either down the social scale (Strand, Stieglitz, *et al.*) or, more rarely, up (Weegee). If earlier American social documentary practices, such as those of Lewis Hine and the Farm Security Administration, legitimized this pervasive looking at the lives of the poor and disempowered by doing so in the name of reformist social philanthropy or government aid, postwar photography takes the *camera itself* as a license to look. This “New York School” work of Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, and others derives, critics have argued, from the *failure* of the overtly reformist projects of the 1930s, producing a postwar photographic practice in which (in Benjamin Buchloh's words) “the masochistic identification with the victim” takes over.

For better or worse, such fantasied identifications, and the relentless social voyeurism they authorize, historically open up an entire range of potential new photographic subjects, inadvertently creating the conditions for the relatively new practices of “insider” documentary photography which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. After all, with photography, one is always in the realm of surveillance, and we really *do* want to look. In the work of subcultural photographers such as Clark and Goldin, the claim to inside-ness, to belonging to the group which is being surveilled, seems to have two principal functions: it allows us greater access, and, as insiders, the photographers' voyeurism authorizes our own.

Given its problematic roots in projects of social surveillance and overt exoticism, the ongoing “ethics” of subcultural documentary demands that the transaction between artist and subject be represented as an *exchange*. For the photograph which is taken, something must be given to the subjects in return: the photographer must endeavor to provide political or reformist help, confer “truth,” “dignity,” or “humanity” upon the subjects, or at the very least, give them a print. The very relentlessness with which the literature surrounding this work informs us of such “gifts” is perhaps a very good indication of just how queasy such transactions can be – even when subject and photographer are “friends,” intimates, or share the same social milieu.

Paradoxically, in the current moment, in which liberal myths of benevolent social “help” have long ceased to be credible, what is most valuably offered by the photographer is simply “recognition.” In a recent profile, Goldin recounts how “A TV crew in Paris asked my friend Gotscho, ‘What's it like to be photographed by Nan? Don't you feel like you're being imposed upon in your private moments?’ And he said, ‘No, I feel I'm more myself when Nan's looking at me than I ever am in the rest of my life.’”⁸ It's as if, in our current lives of fragile identity and purely privatized experience of social power (I can't change the world, but I can change my hair



Fig. 11.4 Jack Pierson, *Et Maintenant?*, 1993–94. Courtesy the artist and Luhring-Augustine Gallery, New York

color), our very existence as subjects must be constantly confirmed by the gaze of others. We’ve all encountered this exchange in the gaze of a lover or intimate. But what does it mean for such moments of recognition to be monumentalized into images, photographs that are no longer consigned to the photo album or dresser drawer but publicly disseminated through mass reproduction or museum exhibition?

It is in comparison with the superficially similar work of Jack Pierson that Goldin’s relative conformity to the conventions of liberal social documentary emerges most tellingly. By presenting his images as pure appearance, pure image, Pierson refuses the illusion of transparency promised by social documentary, and with it, the expectation that one can learn something about others through photography. A viewer can read the images as “gay,” but one learns little or nothing about the subjects. If, in Pierson’s work, the overall aesthetic effect is the object, we realize that, in Goldin’s photographs, the image is utterly dependent on the caption, on the identity of the subject (hence the endless and heavy-handed wall texts featured in her Whitney retrospective). Whereas Goldin’s work continues to make a claim on “benevolent” liberal understanding – playing to an art-world version of Madame de Staël’s “tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner” (to understand all is to forgive all) – Pierson asks for neither comprehension nor moral pardon: removing anything overtly “political,” no claims are being staked.

Thus, while frequently grouped with the work of Goldin and other “Boston School” photographers, Pierson’s project may actually be closer to the quotational practices of artists like Richard Prince. Although Pierson doesn’t *literally* rephotograph existing images, he takes his “own” photographs which somehow uncannily echo or resemble pre-existing cultural documents and motifs. In so doing, he clearly understands photography as fully semioticized,

fully coded, and knowingly uses it to recirculate certain motifs, not to hold these myths up for scrutiny, but to re-open them for sentimental investment by artist and viewer alike:

My work has the ability to be a specific reference and also an available one. It can become part of someone else's story, because it's oblique and kind of empty stylistically . . . I've geared my work toward getting people to think in that way, toward having romantic allusions that they could take and run with. By presenting certain language clues in my work, people will write the rest of the story, because there's a collective knowledge of cliches and stereotypes that operates.⁹

Given this account, which itself uncannily resembles the logic embedded in advertising images, it should come as no surprise to learn that Pierson was initially trained in graphic design, rather than photography. It accounts for his extraordinary attention to form and presentation, and his use of photographs as tools for total effect rather than as an end in themselves. (We should know, for instance, that Pierson routinely crops his prints to evoke the vertical look of the snapshot, or the horizontal frame of cinema.) The legitimating values of subcultural documentary – “immediacy,” “honesty,” “intimacy,” and the like – are understood as effects of photographic codes, rather than as spontaneous intersubjective performances communicated neutrally via the photograph.

Thus, unlike Goldin's work, there is no real sociological content here, no illusion of transparency, no appeal to liberal humanist understanding. Instead, it operates as sheer sensibility. It's not hard to grasp Pierson's relation to Morrisroe's project, which also functions on the level of sensibility, sentimentality, and the poignant. If all three artists share a tendency towards highly self-conscious self-fashioning, both Morrisroe and Pierson go outside the boundaries of photography proper, extending the exploration of subjectivity and self-portraiture to found materials and text. Self-consciously playing on existing genres and images, both Pierson's and Morrisroe's works continually reveal how subjectivity itself is propped up on an amalgam of desired images: ideal images which we may strive towards, yet to which we feel perpetually inadequate. As Pierson's gridded “self-portrait” (1993), collaged from pages of a James Dean fanzine, attests, we have all seen these images before, yet they still have a certain power to move us, to elicit fantasy and identification (Fig. 11.5).

There is no small irony, then, in the claims of some who support the “Boston School,” that this work represents a welcome return of documentary and portrait photography in all their sincerity, transparency, and capacity to function as a “window onto the world,” particularly one representing marginalized subjects and subcultures. For if Goldin willingly upholds these beliefs as somehow still possible in late twentieth-century culture, what viewers and critics consistently find “disappointing” and “contrived” about Pierson's work is its inherent construction as a prop for the viewer's fantasies and fantasized identifications, and its implicit address to the viewer's own narcissism and self-recognition. As Pierson states:

You can draw certain language clues and get anybody to believe anything. And I'm a narcissist, and I understand the mechanisms of language and visual clues. I can create a persona from them. Easily . . . Everybody is a narcissist. That's why people can respond to my work.¹⁰

Such overt recognition of projective content could not be further from the discourse on Goldin's work, yet many of the same mechanisms are in play. What in Goldin's work is still presented as chance documentary effect (however unbelievably so at this point) is fully stylized and controlled in Pierson's avowedly aestheticized practice. As a gradual but inescapable aesthetic



Fig. 11.5 Jack Pierson, *Self-portrait*, 1993. Courtesy the artist and Lahring-Augustine Gallery, New York

codification deprives us of the *punctum* as accidental detail, it may be through this kind of narcissistic identification, this moment of self-recognition in the image, that viewers are offered the experience of constructing an uncoded private meaning in the public coded world of the photograph.

Paradoxically, the emotional response and pathos Goldin's images can at times elicit may depend precisely on her capacity to disavow these processes, while nonetheless engaging them. Sumptuous and sometimes astonishingly beautiful, Pierson's images are not quite what I would describe as "moving": we witness a sense of longing, but whatever pathos seeps in remains resolutely outside the frame. For in the end, nothing could be more different than how Goldin's and Pierson's images "speak of" AIDS. What is explicitly imaged in Goldin's photographs – the deaths of friends, the gradual succumbing to disease – is completely invisible as a subject in Pierson's work, yet nonetheless strongly present as an emotional undertow. Death, poverty, and intense deprivation remain off-frame as precisely that which makes the everyday "banal" pleasures depicted in Pierson's book *Angel Youth* (1992) – pretty boys, flowers, sun-drenched meals with friends – feel so rare and poignant (Fig. 11.6).

However indirect, Pierson's insistent refusal to image death and disease implicitly challenges Goldin's increasingly monumentalizing efforts to image death and suffering. If, in the series of images of Cookie Mueller, AIDS enters the scene as a happenstance tragedy, by the time Goldin photographs her friend Gotscho dying, AIDS has become both the subject and the narrative. In an especially telling five-panel vertical series (1993) (Fig. 11.7), we follow Gotscho from health and vitality to disease and then death. While some viewers clearly find this sequence deeply moving, it struck me as pat and formulaic. Unlike the Mueller images, which present idiosyncratic moments from the life and death of a distinct individual, the later series monumentalizes Gotscho's death as heroic, exemplary, and fully spectacularized.



Fig. 11.6 Jack Pierson, page spread from *Angel Youth*, 1992. Courtesy the artist and Aurel Scheibler, Cologne



Fig. 11.7 Nan Goldin, *Gilles and Gotscho*, 1992–93. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

A key photograph, occurring late in Morrisroe's work (*Untitled*, 1988), depicts a grainy yellow sky with an out-of-focus silhouetted seagull hovering (Fig. 11.8). It too "speaks of" AIDS, of a life lived against its constant presence, but nothing could be further from the explicitness of the documentary image. By insisting on the importance of that which remains outside representation, the work provides a compelling challenge to the documentary tendency towards total specularization. An experience is offered, but it remains mute, ineffable. You're only given a little access, but maybe that's an antidote to being given too much.



Fig. 11.8 Mark Morrisroe, *Untitled*, 1988. Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

notes

My thanks to Diane Bonder, Pat Hearn, Matias Viegner, Simon Watson, and others for discussing this work with me, and to Deborah Bright for her endless patience and good will. The views expressed are of course my own.

- 1 See José Esteban Muñoz's essay in this volume.
- 2 Hence the peculiar perversity of Billingham's project, in which the look of present-day hip fashion photography, itself loosely derived from work by Clark, Goldin, and Pierson, is refashioned once more as a language for realist social documentary.
- 3 These classic terms come from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, in which he defines the *punctum* as that which can interrupt the stable, homogenous level of the *studium*: "In this habitually unitary space, occasionally (but alas all too rarely) a 'detail' attracts me" (p. 42). "The detail which interests me is not, or at least not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so; it occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful" (p. 47).
- 4 Nan Goldin, introduction to *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, New York, Aperture, 1986, p. 6.
- 5 Ibid. Almost identical statements could be culled from the Larry Clark literature, except that Clark, of course, entirely disavows the erotic dimension of photographic activity that Goldin so insistently affirms.
- 6 Whitney curator Elizabeth Sussman, as quoted in A. M. Homes, "The Intimate Eye," *Elle*, October 1996, p. 108. The quote continues: "To me, that proclaims a very specific moment, a shift out of the '80s, where there seemed to be an element of cynicism. Her art has never been about cynicism." Whether there is any element of cynicism in the Whitney's choice of the newly commercially successful Goldin as a subject for a mid-career retrospective – the first living female artist to receive one in almost four years – is, apparently, a question we shouldn't consider asking.
- 7 For instance, in a review of Mark Morrisroe's work, the art critic Peter Schjeldahl claims: "The Bostonians reacted authentically to a situation dominated, in '80s art culture, by theoretical prattle of 'postmodernism' and brittle pictorial mediating of, you know, mediated media mediations. Rather than brainily distance signs of signs and images of images, they sought bedrock in ferociously honed exposure of their first person, bodily, sex-saturated, fantasy-realizing, determinedly reckless experience." "Beantown Babylon," *Village Voice*, 9 April 1996, p. 81. Thus, a return to a prior model of photographic practice (a model of autobiographic self-display with roots well into the early twentieth century) is posed as the "authentic" in order to allow the critic to deny, it would seem, the very historicity of photographic images. One doubts that these artists, who were highly aware of their own photographic precedents, would be so naive.
- 8 Goldin, from A. M. Homes, "The Intimate Eye," p. 108.
- 9 Jack Pierson, quoted in Veralyn Behenna, "Jack Pierson: Little Triumphs of the Real," *Flash Art*, April 1994, pp. 88–90.
- 10 Ibid.