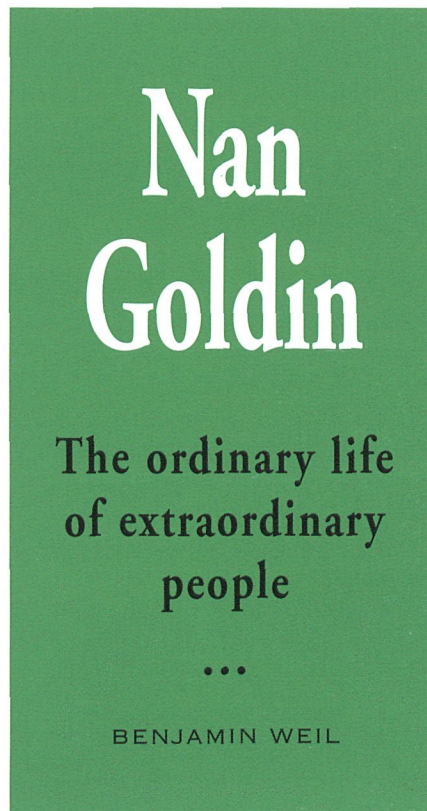


REVIEWS

Photography is often discussed in terms of voyeurism. This term has seldom been applied to other creative practices, and specifically to other media such as painting or sculpture. Most likely because the photographer stands behind the camera, as she or he “makes art”; there is no evident time lapse between the instant when the artist selects a subject and the time when the resulting work is included in the continuum of her or his work. This becomes even more so when photography very specifically addresses the instant as its subject. Nan Goldin makes snapshots. How sophisticated they are is only determined by the “instant specific” quality of her photographs. Nan Goldin has chosen to be a witness of those moments: her camera is involved, as it documents lives; it has become part of those lives. It is a silent yet compelling presence, a friend of some sort that is always here. This is most strongly felt in self portraits, where the camera literally becomes the third eye, then detached from Nan Goldin’s, as if it was taking on a life of its own.

With that companion, Nan Goldin records –reveals– the life of who she calls her family. From restaurants to night clubs, stations and trains; from hotel rooms to dressing rooms, bedrooms, or living rooms, she catches fragility and intimacy, as well as instants of security or strength. In those pictures,



the dichotomy between the private and public fades to expose the gap between those two states of being. It is precisely what Nan Goldin focuses on; those moments of abandonment in a public setting, when one gets in touch with the innermost part of oneself, as in a public rest room when one peeks at a mirror as if the rest of the world had ceased to exist; or those instants of complete detachment in a very intimate setting, such as those glimpses of self consciousness in a lovemaking situation. The camera catches those moments as an ally, without intruding; it plainly witnesses.

Nan Goldin’s family is a group of people whose ties are defined by their

shared choice to live at the boundaries of the social structure. They have adopted life styles which are often recognized as marginal, in that they have decidedly given up the social protections most people usually abide by: they seem to believe in a constant reassessment of those rules that the social structure perpetuates for the sake of immediate comfort. They challenge those rules to define their own conception of life. They expose the hidden parts of being. Hence, they reveal what anyone shares, the bare essentials of human feelings, the rawness of emotions. Nan Goldin photographs those people anywhere: her family is not limited to long time friends; it grows, as the camera travels and retrieves familiarity, as it recognizes and traces those people’s lives at specific moments. In that sense the photographs then function as an instrument of identification, in that the subject is co-opted. Recent series of work were shot in the Philippines and in Japan. They echo that mechanism of identification even more clearly, as they tend to reveal an aspect of those cultures that is seldom documented; there again, the photographic model is being questioned, as Goldin builds her own version of the travelogue. Those pictures demonstrate the conscience of one’s own intimacy, those short time lapses when one faces one’s deeper self, the extreme awareness



Nan Goldin. *Ballad Couples*, 1978-89/95. Nine mounted cibachrome photographs. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

of being alive, as well as the essence of relationships. Human feelings might have been adapted to the specificity of each culture. However, they tend to remain very similar when one aims at the essentials.

Looking at one's family album, one triggers memory, and all sorts of details come out of one's mind. Usually, family albums tend to embellish the past: a family is a social order that can only be represented in its perfected state. There is a strong sense of unperturbed genealogy, of immaculateness. No sadness, no pain troubles the perfected arrangement of those pictures. Using both the album and the slide show as

formats of presentation, Nan Goldin deliberately grounds her photographic exploration in the realm of collective picture gathering and arrangement. That may serve as a point of entry into her photographs, and displace voyeurism onto the viewer: one finds oneself looking at someone else's photo album, having to confront the issue of pleasure and shame that voyeurism entails. However, those pictures are more "true" to the moments she captures with her camera. Not only does she eventually display violence or grief, but she also seems to focus on relationships – between the subjects and the camera, between the subjects among themselves

–rather than just portraits of individuals, thereby exposing more emotions than the typical set of pictures one would find in a family album. In that sense, they tend to be a more vivid memory support. Those photographs are her "public diary" (1). They function as an interface to share.

The Ballad of Sexual Dependency works as the core piece in Nan Goldin's body of work. The project was developed over the last 18 years and has evolved to encompass over 800 photographs. The piece is presented as a slide show with a sound track that consists of various types of music ranging from soul or jazz to opera. Each



Nan Goldin. *Yuri in her mirror, Tokyo*, 1994. Cibachrome.
 Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

screening is different, as Nan Goldin rearranges and updates the selection of the photos and music. It is the departure point for other work. Most of them have at some point been included in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. More recently, photographs were presented as fragments of individual stories, such as for instance *Gilles and Gotscho*, which documents the friendship Nan Goldin has maintained with the two lovers. In the bottom picture she manages to catch the couple at one of their very last moments together, as one is about to pass away, a victim of AIDS. This picture exemplifies the unobtrusiveness of Goldin's camera, as she captures the scene without infringing their intimacy, and yet marks her presence and most likely her own grief. Other series are arranged topically, as a mosaic of memories, that suggest as many stories

as there are individuals to live them and to look at them. Interpretation is an element that may serve as a blurring of the position of the spectator.

In the introduction to the book version of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Nan Goldin talks about how the process of taking pictures is in fact a way to remember, a memory support. The process echoes references to her own history; as a random sum of



Nan Goldin.
Inoue after kissing, 1994.
 Cibachrome.
 Courtesy
 Matthew
 Marks Gallery,
 New York.

moments shared with people which echoes her life that needs to be remembered (2). When those pictures become public, they somehow function as a fragment of collective memory; one engages with those pictures as being part of some remote recollection of instants that feel similar. They function as a pendant to those images one finds in magazines or on television that seem to promote a very controlled life style. Rather than being critical, these snapshots are seductive, and propose a necessary alternative to the ready-to-be representation conveyed by mass media pictures.

Benjamin Weil is a regular contributor to *Alltónica* and other art publications. He is the co-director of *āda*, a multimedia art-project for the Internet.

- 1: "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency is the diary I let people read" excerpted from the introductory text of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 1986
- 2: "I don't 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" *Ibid.*, cit.