

Nan Goldin

an interview BY TIMOTHY MCELREAVY

NAN GOLDIN IS BUSY: EXHIBITIONS IN NEW York, London, and Paris; photographic assignments for the *New York Times Magazine* and *Elle Décor*; award-winning films; writing assignments for *ARTFORUM*. All in addition to her own art and her own writing—both of which she produces prodigiously, one for public consumption and the other for private rumination. In the midst of this frenzied career, the Whitney Museum of American Art is mounting a retrospective of her work, which promises to be a cathartic experience for both Goldin and viewers alike. Her pictures—so specific to time, place, and people—transcend their subject matter to become anyone's memories, all of our desires for intimacy and connection. Their heady atmosphere of squalid apartments, sordid affairs, and drug-laced euphoria reach into the shadows of everybody's closets to confront the secrets locked within. But beyond the shock of its nihilistic hedonism, her work ultimately captures and preserves humanity, the love and pain of relationships, of friends, and of simply being. They aren't just pictures—they're too real for that.

Nan Goldin is intimidating. It's not candor—that's too delicate a word, too evocative of whispered confessions. Goldin's absolute frankness stares you down until you are ashamed of your own modesty. This arises, perhaps, from a life in photography, from constantly taking photographs and being photographed. She seems to have reached a point (probably reached long ago) where the camera has ceased to be a mediating factor in her conduct: her photographs aren't posed and neither is she. But along with this willingness to let it all hang out, there materializes the other Nan Goldin. Different from the one who snaps the shutter, this Nan Goldin is the one who has allowed herself to become involved in abusive relationships, who was so desperately searching for something in addiction, who has watched countless friends die, and the one who has allowed us all to become so intimate with her.

The Whitney retrospective will be an emotional event, especially for Goldin who will be forced to relive the past twenty-five years as they are blown up, framed, and hung on the walls. In addition to all these memories, a midcareer retrospective also measures success, marking a transition that inevitably forces an artist into a new phase, a new direction that will constantly be compared to the work that built the reputation in the first place. Where will Goldin go with her work? How will she change, experiment, maintain her quality and identity? Recently, her camera has taken her to Japan and Southeast Asia for documentary projects, the products of which one would expect to be distant, detached, interesting in a taxonomic or ethnographic sort of way. But they're not—even in faraway cultures, Goldin and her camera make connections with people.

Tim McElreavy: Do you think of your work as art, as testimony to your experience, or as your life itself? Nan Goldin: I don't think any of those things contradicts each other. Even Renaissance painting was done from life experience. It's only a contemporary concept that there's a difference between direct experience and art. That's what a lot of art, from writing to painting to film to photography, has always drawn on.

Are your photographs objects that are produced separately from, or are they inspired by, your experiences? They're directly from experiences I've had. It's my work. Work is pleasure to me.

Does that constitute a "career"? It's become a career. I've been doing it for twenty-five years—before I had a career. The career is different from the work, but it's based on the work. I never make an artistic decision based on my career. At my last show, I did these grids, but a lot of people do grids. I didn't do them because I saw other people doing them but because I've wanted to do them for ten years. Grids are another way of telling a narrative story with still images. So even if

something looks like it fits into art world trends, I never do it for that reason. I'm not that kind of artist.

Do you ever find there's a tension between what you produce and what others will want? No, I'm lucky that I wasn't known for the first twenty years of my work. I thought I was famous, but I wasn't. I had the best of both possible worlds. I experienced myself as famous from the beginning because I had my first show when I was nineteen; it was reviewed in *Popular Photography*. I enjoyed my fame while at the same time I was completely unknown. I think that when you really are known in the context of the art world, it puts a lot of pressure on you. People watch your work so closely. It's hard to make mistakes and to have time to not work. Every artist goes through periods where they can't work. There's all this pressure on you when you're successful but not when you're less known.... For me, [the work] has to come from real obsession, real passion and desire; otherwise, I'm not going to work. I try to keep that part of myself pure. I don't want to be absorbed by popular culture. I don't want them to eat me up and spit me out.

Are you satisfied with your career now? With my career, yeah. My work is going slowly at the moment, but that comes and goes. I've learned to accept that as part of the process of being an artist over the long run. It's very different to be an artist for a short time than it is to be an artist for a long time. That's what people aren't really prepared for when they come out of art school or when they become well known when they're young. Longevity is difficult to maintain; it takes an enormous amount of self-acceptance and acceptance of the periods when you can't work.

At this point in your career, it seems that people are making you do a lot of looking back. There was the *Boston School* show at the ICA, the upcoming midcareer retrospective at the Whitney... The death knell? I don't really care; I just probably won't be able to work for a

while after that. Then I'll do something different.

So you don't think that this is going to trap you into always having to look back? No, the slide show still involves constantly looking back, although I do very few live performances. My work is a continuum. It's never been about my '90s work versus my '80s work. My work is very much about history and tracing lives, so there's a lot of incorporation of old work and new work in that way.

In *Tokyo Love*, you wrote at the beginning that it was about a journey back to your adolescence, back to the garden. Why go back? Well, it was only a little trip. I didn't stay there. But, of course, there's a pleasure in going back.

Because you see this "rebirth of innocence" in the youth culture of Japan? I was sort of an emissary from the future—I was sort of like a moral missionary, helping a few people come out as gay or come out with AIDS. I found my tribe there, too. I definitely helped some people directly and hopefully encouraged people to help others.

What about the work from Thailand and the Philippines? I went with [a friend] who was making a film about gay life in Southeast Asia, and I wanted to do the stills. That was a first for me because I've never photographed people I don't know. [I] went to the parks and photographed the kids and gave them money. I've never been a white person going to the Third World to photograph people; it made me feel weird. The kids would always ask if I wanted them to take their clothes off. They thought there were all these other expectations involved in the transaction.

Do you think that because you are a white woman photographing Eastern culture that that may have been a reason for some of the criticism of *Desire by Numbers*?... Who chose the pictures? Were they chosen before or after the story was written? I took the pictures a couple of years before [the book's publication]. Klaus [Kertess] and I chose the pictures together. Then he wrote the story. I like the book. I'm not politically correct, and I don't give a fuck about that stuff. That's not what real life is about. Most people who are really serious about that stuff live in the academic world. In the real world, life is much more complicated.

Well, to be academic for a minute, Walter Benjamin once wrote that in order for photographs to have meaning they require a caption. Do you think that the story itself or the whole book changes the original intention of your photographs by "changing their caption"? No, otherwise I wouldn't have published them in that context. I don't think it's exploitative. The story is Klaus's fantasy not mine. It's a collaboration. I don't take responsibility for the writing, and he doesn't take responsibility for the images.... I love to collaborate.

What do you find so stimulating about it? I love other artists, and I like the process of working with another person's art and the excitement of working together. I'm not a person who really likes to work alone; otherwise, I'd be a writer. Photography is very interactive. Collaboration inspires me to think about my work in

new ways. I did *A Double Life* because my publisher wanted to do another book with me, and I didn't feel ready. It was Barbara Bloom's idea for me to do a book with David [Armstrong]. And what else? *Vakat*. I was in love with a man, and instead of having sex, we made a book. He's married.... *Tokyo Love*. I wanted to spend time in Japan, and I figured that if I did a project with [Nobuyoshi] Araki that someone would pay for me to spend time in Japan. I like Araki's work very much. My books are based on my personal relationships with the people I collaborate with.

You seem to be writing a lot about other artists lately... I've always written. I write a diary that I've kept for eighteen years, so I don't have much time to write for publication. I'm too busy writing about myself for myself. I've always written, ever since I was a kid. I once wrote a forty-page play about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. So writing was my passion. As I get older, I like people less, so I'll probably become a writer. I like to spend more and more time alone. When I was in my twenties and thirties I hated to be alone. Photography is great for that.

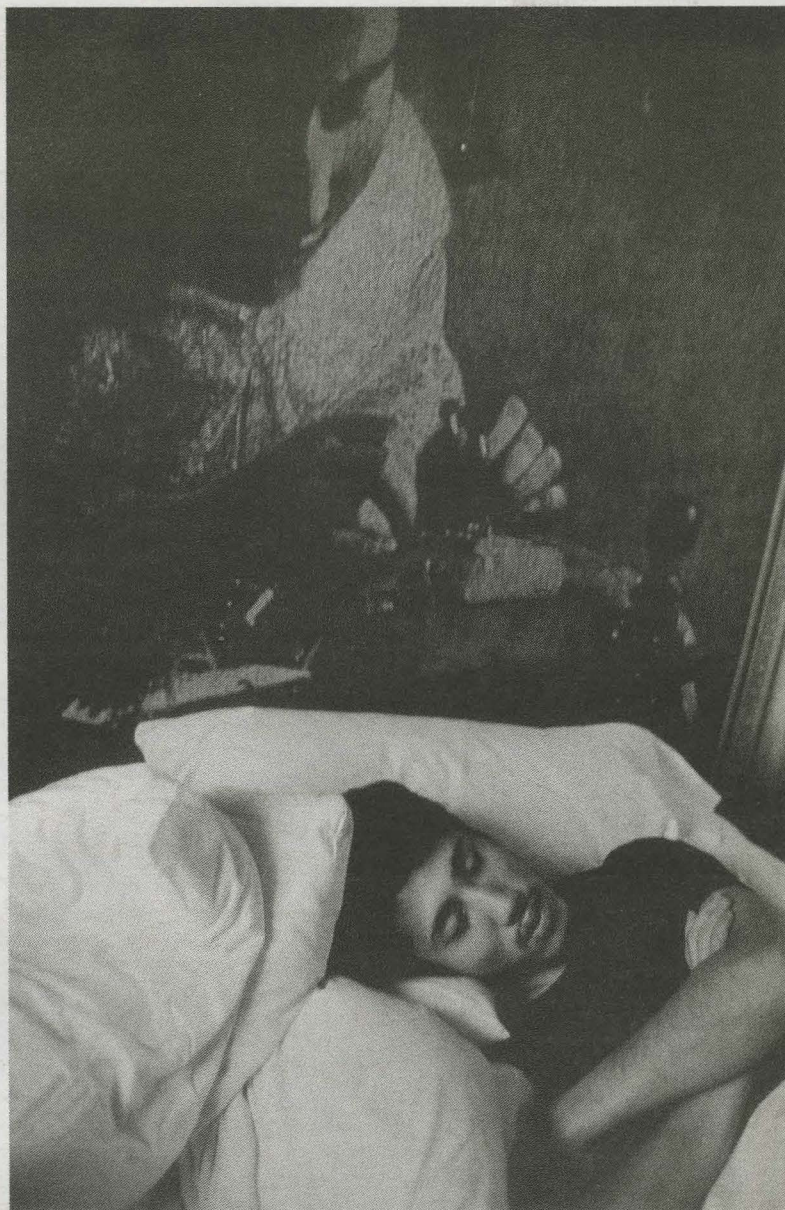
What will you write about? Will you ever publish your diaries? I don't know. I am interested in writing more—maybe from the diaries.

Do you only write about the artists that you admire in some way? Yes. I [also] won't photograph people that I don't love or desire. Life's too short.

Do you think your pictures have a life of their own? They seem like stills from home movies that transfix and absorb viewers into their production. Your books have the same effect. When the images are on the wall, people seem to ask themselves what their part in these pictures, these memories, is. Maybe it's the immediacy of their format or the aura they create. The show I do with David is like that, and the *Ballad* has a life of its own. Yes, the photos seem to [have a life of their own]; otherwise, they wouldn't be circulating without me. For years, I manually operated the whole slide show. The [*Ballad*] was published in 1986, and I was out of commission for a couple of years. When I came back to the real world in 1988, all these people had seen the book without me around. It's really interesting the way the work travels without you and the way it can affect people. I had a relationship to my work from when I first started in 1972 until 1986 when I presented it to people directly as a performance. I had no experience with the work having a life of its own, but now I do.

You've photographed drug addiction, sex, and what some would call aberrant behavior. How do you think your subject matter resonates to the public at large? It always surprises me that anything like that is considered aberrant at this point.

To what do you attribute your success among people who aren't necessarily familiar with or connected to your subjects—the bourgeois collectors? I don't know anything about that. I must have leaked in enough for them to buy the work. I don't really know how much of staid or middle-class America appreciates my work. From my experience, my work is



still mainly known in the art world and a bit in the fashion and film worlds. I don't have any contact with middle-class people, so I don't know if they know my work or not. I don't think they do. I think you're exaggerating my success—it's very much in the milieu of the art museum, the galleries. I can talk about its success in the art world which is because it moves people. They like it because it's about love, and it's honest.

What are your plans now? I've started working with this new larger-format camera. I'm doing the Whitney retrospective. I want to move back to Europe for a while. Maybe Paris. I want to do a book or some kind of project with Helmut Lang because I love his vision. And maybe make some more movies. ■

(Nan Goldin: *I'll Be Your Mirror* will be on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City from October 3, 1996, through January 5, 1997.)

Timothy McElreavy is an independent writer and visiting curator at Tufts University, where he is working on several projects including a retrospective of the work of Friedel Dzubas.

Facing page: Sharon in the River, Eagles Mere, PA, 1995.

Left: Detail from *Self-Portrait*, sixteen mounted Cibachrome photographs, edition of 3, 36 1/4 x 54 1/2", 1978-1994/95, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

Above: Kee in the Paramount Hotel, NYC, 1995.

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