

# **Intimate Reflections: The absent-presence of public and social institutions in Nan Goldin's Photographic Work**

Garance Maréchal University of Liverpool ([g.marechal@liv.ac.uk](mailto:g.marechal@liv.ac.uk))

## **ABSTRACT**

Winner of the 2007 Hasselblatt Award, Nan Goldin's intimate treatment of her personal story and her participation in a community of relatives is distinctive in its relational treatment of self through intimacy, friendship and belonging. This essay aims critically to consider the absence-presence of social and public institutions (including social care, health institutions or the family) in the photographic work of Nan Goldin. In this paper, I will first examine whether Nan Goldin's personal and autobiographical photographic collections portray institutions in a way that can be considered autoethnographic. If so, which form or forms (emotional/expressive or poststructuralist/evocative) do they most typically instantiate?. I will then further visually analyse Goldin's distinctive photographic style and gaze, and investigate how the intimate portrayal of her community acts as a representational foil that materially highlights the presence of institutions in counterpoint to personal trajectories and human relationships. Finally, I will critically discuss Goldin's potential contribution to a visual ethnography of public institutions from an autobiographical, and possibly autoethnographic, point of view. I believe that Goldin offers a style that usefully complements and challenges existing approaches, not just to photography, but to autoethnography that would reward further exploration.

## **Nan Goldin's photo autobiographies**

"These are my friends, these are my family, this is myself. There is no separation between me and what I photograph". Nan Goldin

Evocative and emotional autoethnography (Marechal, 2009) promotes the ethnographic project as a relational commitment to studying the ordinary practices of human life, which involves engaged self-participation, makes sense in the context of lived experience and contributes to social criticism. In the context of expressive autobiography, photography can act narratively rather than simply as pictorial representation. Nan Goldin's photographic work has been described as "a portrait of her mind, a catalog of consciousness and lifestyle" and "she has conceived of her life as art and provided a massive saga of chronicle of one type of life lived at the end of the century" (Zimmermann, 1997: 45, 45). Her auto-biographic style intersects expressive and evocative forms of auto-ethnography (Marechal, 2009).

For Walter Benjamin, the photographic snapshot "structures the order of historical knowledge" (Liu, 2003: 525). Nan Goldin's casual and 'intimate' use of photography to document her personal history adopts a direct aesthetics of *snapshot* photography and her participation-relational style has been characterized as 'intense immediacy'. As Chrisafis (2008: 24) also notes, "Goldin's most powerful subject is herself, in every state of naked hope and desperation, from heroin high (she is a former drug

addict) to rehab.” She tries to photograph “everything she goes through. My camera has saved my life. It’s made bearable things that feel unbearable” (Chrisafis, 2008: 25). Her photographic recollection inscribes and is meaningful with regard to her life story and those shared moments with the ones she loves (Holland, 2004).

Nan Goldin’s photographic gaze and style preference blurs divisions between public and private, and evokes interiority as well as subjectivity and intimacy. Her family and community gathers ‘minorities and sometimes excluded groups’ but her photographic project transcends any particular location and socio-economic context, her images reflecting “a humanitarian notion of universal similarities in the condition of humankind” (Price and Wells, 2004: 39). The quality (or punctum; see: Barthes, 1981) of Nan Goldin’s pictures comes precisely from her treatment of her subjects and its unique combination of individuality, singularity and universalism: “her pictures combine trust, candor and vulnerability, which, after all, is the mix we look for in a friend” (Zimmerman, quoted in Apter, 1999: 147). Her conception of self is relational: it includes a diverse unity, loose and fluid where self and identity are considered in relation to a familiar community, in an attempt to escape the question of marginalization: “Marginalised from whom? We didn’t want to be part of the ‘straight’ or ‘normal’ community. We were a community by choice” (Chrisafis, 2008: 25).

Nan Goldin’s documentary pictures of harmful experiences combine bodily realism and abstraction. She photographed her own hospital stays, picturing herself in delirium at The Priory (London) or shooting pictures of her damaged body (her wrist) showing different stages of harm and recovery, and highlighting her scars - in the disseminated bodies (postures and gazes, in particular) of some of her close friends thanks to her distinctive style. In this paper, we set to analyse the way the artist visually inscribes the presence of public institutions (taking the example of the hospital) as part of her documenting of her mental and health issues.



This self-portrait was shot in The Priory in 2002 during a rehabilitation cure. She portrayed herself in delirium.

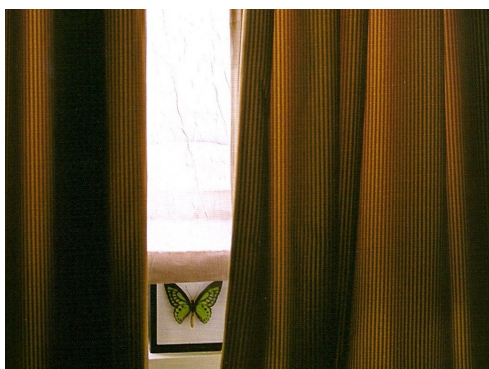
Her relational conception of self as recollection is immanent and distributed as her projections are inscribed in others and materiality. He/she emerges *from* relationality (post-structuralist, evocative) and not *in* relationality (expressive/experiential). Translucent, it subsumes her pictures but is refracted in materiality and others, and not directly expressed.

For instance, as part of a before/after narrative, Nan Goldin contrasted the anonymous and plain hospital room as existing at her arrival and her personalized version of the same room. The focus is on the bed. Considered individually, this transformed space evokes life and materializes the singularity of her being. It also inscribes relationality (through pictures of relatives) as well as activities which escape the usual frame of hospitals. For Kotz (1998: 212), “the emotional response and pathos Goldin’s images can, at times, elicit” paradoxically depends “precisely on her capacity to disavow these processes, while nonetheless engaging them” (Kotz, 1998: 212). Her pictures of her hospital rooms contribute to such effects.



*Decorated bed, suite 22, Roosevelt Hospital, NYC 2000*

In the picture below, Nan Goldin's way of enclosing the picture of a butterfly within the frame created by hospital curtains invites the viewer to reflect on the status of singularity, and singular experience, in the context of institutionalisation - health institutions’ practices of standardisation in relation to the definition of the individual patient.



*Nan Goldin © 2000 Butterfly in my window, suite 22, Roosevelt Hospital, NYC*



*View of my room, Hospital for Special Surgery, NYC 2000*



Worry, anxiety and tiredness emerge from Ric's expression which seems to embody Nan's feelings and physical experience.



*Ric on the window sill, suite 22, Roosevelt Hospital, NYC  
2000*



*Raymonde on my bed; Deborah with Corinne at  
the hospital (Clinique de la main), Paris, 2002*

These last two pictures incarnate strong emotions of hope, empathy and connection. Barthes' *punctum* is particularly elicited through the very spiritual gaze of Deborah which evokes Mary's piety. Traditional images of femininity are conveyed like softness, compassion and love. Love is materially signified on Deborah's T-shirt, in a fairly kitsch manner, giving a twist to the whole scene, alleviating the emotional weighting of the women's expressions and transcending the material location of the scene in a hospital. These women also invite the viewer to critically address the place and importance of relatives and visitors for hospital stays.

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