The photography works of Nan Goldin are a documentation of life. These are arguably some of the first to be seen of this kind of the late 1970s and early 80s. Categorising her flamboyant and raw daily scenes of her life within a series of various titles are used as a reflection yet a contradiction of a turbulent and unorganised lifestyle of Goldin. As seen within the photography by Goldin, the substance of the images ranging from Transgender, Sexuality, violence and death are captured in full colour, yet, Goldins undertones are extremely black and white.

"It is about keeping a record of the lives I lost," Nan Goldin.

2 Behind Nan

Nan Goldin, born in Washington DC in 1953. It was several years of living in with her father, liberal and progressive mother who rallied for civil rights, sisters Barbara Holly and Nancy and brothers Jonathan and Stephan. The Goldin family were a typical, intellectual Jewish family of suburban America. After several years the Goldin family moved to a suburb of Boston. It was in April 1965, aged eighteen Barbara violently took her own life, it was at this point life came to an end for the whole family. Survival came in denial for her parents and this became their way of life. An influential time for Nan was that ‘The neighbours shouldn’t know anything’ Nancy became known as Nan. It was in 1978 Goldin moved to the Bowery in New York City, it was here which marked a major life change in both her career and personal life. Excessive use of drugs and alcohol mixed with abusive relationships were commonplace in Goldin's circle of friends.

“I believe one should create, from what one knows and speak about ones tribe...you can only speak with true understanding and empathy about what you’ve experienced” 1988 after years of drug and alcohol abuse Nan admitted into detoxification clinic. Another base for another set of images. Such as “Self-portrait with milagro, The Lodge, Belmont, MA”

The camera had already became part of Nan’s everyday life, Images from this time from the late 1960s and early 1970s, were later to be collected in her series ‘Dazzle bag’ shown in 1996.

Nan studied at the Boston School of Fine Arts, it was during this time Nan, having previously used only black and white film, she started using colour film, this was later an integral part of her photographic style. Goldin was introduced to the drag subculture in Boston, and a particular club called ‘The Other Side’ Where she made friends with drag queens and began photographing the drag queens beauty contests, her aim was depict her subjects in a straightforward and non-celebratory fashion as these were people of her own social circle.

She started her career in the 1960s taking photographs of her friends and family while studying at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. She begun with a black and white snapshot recording the journey from young adolescence into adulthood, depicting intimate and uncompromising shots. Nan Goldin is internationally recognised as one of America's leading photographers.
“Goldin is a Romantic artist, anti-ideological and a little heavy handed. Goldins work is seen as a mirror held up to her generation” – Telegraph

Examples of artists who have connections to Goldin who use photography as their tool. From those who came before her and influenced the works she produced, friends with whom she socialised with, the social circle she moved within, political themes which framed the country at the time through to contemporary artists using themes and styles of photography like the works of Nan Goldin

3 Influential Film:

Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-1982) was a movie director, screen writer and actor. He was known to have had tortured personal relationships with the actors and technicians around him who formed a surrogate family. Within his avant-garde film works, he only used people he knew and continued to cast them time and time again. The base of his 41 feature films he made in his 14-year career, he like Goldin only the people who surrounded him and those he trusted. It was this connection with his subjects which made for such compelling work. It is this which echoes though the subjects chosen within Goldins’ work much later. “make us feel deeply, even as they allow is to contemplate the nature of society”

" Fassbinder only used people he knew.... I was very influenced by Fassbinder ... Fassbinder was important. I saw all his works”(1b)

“I was very influenced by film, because I did not go to high school. I went to the movies. Sometimes I went to the movies two or three times per day. I saw every movie from the 1940s and the 1950s” <Nan Goldin> 1

American Film Director, stand-up comedian, writer journalist, art collector and visual artist, working along the same lines as Goldin was John Samuel Waters, Jr. (born April 22, 1946) He rose to fame in the early 1970s for his transgressive cult films. Waters’ 1970s and early ‘80s trash films feature his regular troupe of actors known as the ‘Dreamlanders’.

It was a this time, when Walters was barely out of his teens when his gift for black comedy would confine him to what was a very American and strongly ideological stereotype. Goldins’ approach was more human and genuinely, sad and truthful. Referring to the social circles moved in, Nans’ best friend and the object of Goldins work during her struggle living with AIDS, Cookie Mueller featured in his1972 film titled Pink Flamingos (This a representation of how closely all the creative arts worked and socialised in the 70’s-80’s.

Image taken by Nan Goldin. 6B
Robert Frank moved to the United States in 1947 photographer for the fashion and advertising industries in New York. As he drove through the States, he photographed everywhere, everything and every person he came into contact with, it was his ability to capture which caught the attention of two photographers who would later become his sponsors, Walker Evans and Edward Steichen. Both Evans and Steichen photography is known for the sense of surroundings, to avoid drawing attention to himself he would take images from his hip, or with the camera peeking out from his jacket. It is said that this technique made him feel more like a stalker than a spy. Such like the style and documentation works by Robert Franks this can be closely linked to the works of Nan Goldin, to whom the he was an inspiration.

Diane Arbus (March 14, 1923 – July 26, 1971) was a photographer who were working along themes which were later approached by Nan Goldins’ an example can be seen in the works by Arbus which are examples of using similar themes which aim ‘to shock’ the viewer. “I really believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them.”

These themes were explored and practised during 1960 - 1970. The American photographer known for her black and white square photographs of the deviant and marginal, intellectual disabilities these were the types of people who are on the edge of society. Midgets, dwarfs, transvestites, circus performers and nudists were all seen within her works. Her subjects are the walks of life who are seen as socially ‘unacceptable’.

"Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. ... Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats." 

Arbus works held a shock factor, when commenting on her own works, it was stated that she viewed these images as "lyric and tender and pretty"
It has been reported within an article for the Telegraph, when questioned about her connection and similarities in styles to Arbus, Goldin has suggested that Arbus work was hated by the drag queens community around Goldin. Goldin reflected on the feelings of her friends by stating "her work stripped them of their identities" (5).

An example of this can be seen below. You can strongly compare this image to one of Goldins', where the harsh realities of the drag queens are projected to the public eye.

In contrast to the works of Goldin, Arbus took to photographing communities outside of her own. Her subjects who were not linked or known by Arbus before the images were taken. The journey taken by both artists were very separate and different in how they came to take particular images, but the overall imagery is very similar. Both artists have works with undertones of shock to the viewer. They both explore a variety of people who hold their own stories. Although Arbus was working before Goldin, it is quite clear that Goldin had a story to tell, in comparison to Arbus who represented stories of others.

"... we are similar, because both of us have an unusal degree of empathy, but it is manifested in a different way". (6)

Goldin’s work is heavily based on gender politics, she explores what it is to be male, female questioning whether it is possible to clearly define male and female in non biological terms. A clear example of this theme of Goldin is portrayed in ‘The Ballad of Sexual Dependency’ (1976-96) This is very much about gender politics long before this kind of title or topic would be taught within institutions and widely discussed both within academia and societies of the West. It was in the 1970s when gender politics became widely discussed in western societies. Goldin was part of this new growing discussion. The path towards establishing it on academic curricular had started, with few, early courses in womens studies. Within an interview Nan was reported to confirm her personal hints of feministic values.

"I decided at the age of five that there was nothing my brothers can do and I cannot do"
6 The Factory

It was in the 1970s when her social life excelled into a wild affair. She started documenting the post punk-and new wave music scene. She got most of her influences from her close friends. Her time was spent socialising at ‘The Factory’ which belonged to Andy Wahol. After moving there in 1968, this became the place to be for its ground-breaking parties and a meeting place of artists and musicians, adult film performers, transgender male and females along-side drag queens would be seen at the Factory creating a decadent and carefree lifestyle full of money, parties, drugs and fame. As an artist, Andy Warhol frequently used these women and other sexual non-conformists in his films, plays, and partying. His subjects, like Nan Goldins’ were considered socially unacceptable, even appalling at the time.

The years Goldin spent at the Factory were known as ‘the scene’ and ‘Silver Era’, not solely because of the design of silver foil covering the walls and ceilings, to which the factory was decorated by photographer, filmmaker and lighting designer and close friend, Billy Name. After a brief romance and friendship with Andy Wahol. He was known as one of Warhols Superstar. These friends and art workers helped him create his paintings, star in his films and create this atmosphere of a factory, for which became legendary. This is a clear example of how important surroundings were, which Goldin found her inspiration. It was social hubs, like the factory and later Studio 54 which influenced and sculpted her work and how she practised as a photographer.

Richard Avedon was another photographer, who did not conform to the standard technique of taking pictures of models in fashion shoot poses. He found more emotion getting the models to smile, laugh and often in action. At the time when fashion was glossy, Avedon, like Goldin’ captured the subjects in what was seen as compromising and radical at this time in the history of photography. It was Avedon choice to not conform with any typical style seen at this time, his work created attention for the same reason Goldin had.

“When I first started to take pictures of drag queens my influences were glamour magazines, fashion magazines” (Goldin) 7

7 Social Circles and Studio 54

‘Studio 54’ originally named the Palladium Theatre was re named in 1943, which was owned CBS who used the theatre radio board Casting. It was in 1976 when CBS marketed the studio various interested was expressed by various artists from the art and fashion world who wanted to turn it into a nightclub. It was at this time the night life and social circles began and in the 1970s life became incredibly wild for Goldin it was at this time, she found a place which not only became her backdrop but fuelled her work. The club was operated by flamboyant, publically visible Steve Rubell and silent partner Ian Schrager. Rubell run and ‘audition’ style selecting a mixture of ‘beautiful nobodies amongst celebrities. Going as far as asking doormen to “cast a play” when selecting a perfect mixture of people on entry each night. The opening night brought in celebrities from Michael Jackson, Liza Minnelli, Janice Dickinson to Woody Alan mixing Film, Music and Fashion worlds. Studio 54, became notorious for what was known to be happening within its walls. From sexual encounters to rampant drug use, hints of this could be seen in decorations shaped like cocaine spoons
and a room titled 'The Rubber Room' where walls and floor alike were covered with rubber. In 1981, JSA took over ownership, directed by Rubell where the next generation of artists were invited, names such as Andy Wahol, Calvin Klein, Cary Grant, emerging artists such as Madonna, Duran Duran and Wham also joined. Goldin circulated in around this array of flamboyant people.

Goldin saw her social circle as her extended family. Her viewers look at uncomfortable situations within the lives of her subjects. These people are friends within her life at the time the image is taken. These are all people who she has direct links to both socially and psychologically. What is interesting is her aim as a photographer of wanting the viewer to be, or feel like, they are part of her scene allowing them to absorb the emotions and stir feelings which the audience left with. Upon reading the story behind the image confirms what the initial thoughts are dirty, pornographic, raw, lower class and hard. Golding documents the lives of people around her, merging the middle class with the lower class, exposing subjects within those lives the Middle Class could only speculate about. Within Goldings' images, the Middle Class are allowed to feel the uncomfortable sense that they are imposing on the subject and leaves them with a memory stamp from the exposures they have seen within these works.


8 Documentation of life and death

An example of her early works titled 'The Cookie Portfolio 1976-1989' this was a documentation of her friend, and underground actress Cookie Mueller and her son during a time where Mueller was at the peak of her drug abuse. The series starts off with a portrait of her and her son, capturing her life of suffering continuing through to the last image of cookie in her coffin, standing beside her is her son grieving. She captures her subjects and their gritty realities ranging from friends making love and in Cookie story, dying of AIDS. There was no aspect of the underground life of drugs and sex which was not captured in Goldins’ journalistic images.

She despairs at still being known, as she puts it, as “that woman photographer who photographed the downtown New York scene in the late 70s and early 80s of marginalised people, drug addicts and prostitutes. Marginalised from whom?” she sighs, exhaling smoke. "We didn't want to be part of the 'straight' or 'normal' community. We were a community by choice." She says she is neither a voyeur nor a narcissist. "In between those two things, there are a million other options, like compassion, curiosity, real interest in other people, the desire to understand other people's experience." – Guardian

Miroslav Tichy is a photographer who at the end of the 1960s begun to take photographs using cameras he made by hand. Using local women, in his hometown Kyjov, Moravia, Czech Republic as his subject. These were strikingly unusual with his use of women who were typically posed in a semi nude composition. He portrays the feminine figure with anonymity. Examples of this are seen within his work titled 'NAME OF PHOTO'. Techniques of cropping the head of his subjects and concealing some
identifiable features of the subject are visible. This last master of the 20th century photography was only discovered some years ago and left a radical and unorthodox body of photography focussed on the female figure. Here we see an example of a photographer who carries hints of Goldin and the compassion for who she captures are echoed though Tichys’ who was practicing using people known to him personally, and socially within his works. His style which was disregarded the rules of conventional photography.

Nan Goldins’ work is notoriously known for her the sense of exposure of the un-seen real world to the viewer. There is also a sense that this world is untouchable, ranging from the celebrity night life through to the subject of AIDS. Its a world which the viewer would like to, with regards to the night life, but couldn’t.

An installation titled ‘The Hoerengracht’ by artists Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz; is a classic example of assemblage art, breaks down the barrier between art gallery space and the real world by using objects from everyday life to address the theme of prostitution in a direct and unadulterated way. The highly sexually charged street scene, explores the idea of ‘love for sale’ – a theme that has been interpreted by artists over many centuries.

It is a piece for voyeurs. As the viewer walks the streets of our red light district, he or she discovers girls in windows and doorways who are offering their bodies for sale. Goldin exposes a true life through the use of 2D photography, in comparison to the experience allowed by Reddin Kienholz who take photography as true to life as they possibly can. Allowing the viewer to interact with a scene which they would not be able to walk through and experience and inhale a world which they have only been allowed to see through journalistic photographs as seen in Goldins’ works. They have brought the works by Goldin to life. Seeing the visuals of the installation, it can be seen exactly how Goldin has a natural way of capturing light, tones, depth, atmospheres and life within her images. Looking over images of this installation, they could comfortably sit next to the life Goldin’ exposes within her works. In the works highlighted previously by Anne Arbus, this documentation of ‘The Hoerengracht’ is a documentary project about a world which is not their own, it is more of a representation of what is seen and lived within Goldin’s imagery. The substance and points which are being made within both works by Goldin and Keinholz are to shock and expose upper classes to a representation of true life beyond the haze of idealism.

‘The Hoerengracht’;

Goldin uses her role as an artist to portray the repercussions of sexualities of gay friends through her documentation of her friends who are dying of AIDS and HIV. More recently, photographer Zanele
Muholi, contributions in the study of a the Genders & Sexualities in Africa. Her photography work approaches both race and sexuality, representing the black female body in a frank yet intimate way that challenges the history of the portrayal of black women's bodies within her photography.

"It* became a way to talk to people and make contact. I used to call it a form of safe sex. But it was never voyeuristic." – Nan Golding. 13

This can be seen in the ‘Being series’ (2007) where Muholi interrogates black lesbian relationships and safer sex. She captures females in an nude and intimate composition. Taken within a studio, this gives a clinical visual, in comparison on the works of Golding who documents raw images of those who have and is suffering with these Diseases' Visually Muholi is displaying a 'cleaner' image to promote cleaner & safer sex within the gay community. Two very different images by two female artists who are raising awareness for the same topic but are expelled in very opposite styles.

“’Being Series’ (2007) 14

"I mean it became an extension of me, the camera," she says. "I never photograph out of hate, and I never photograph somebody I find ugly. Everyone I photograph comes out of desire. They touch me, or I find their face fascinating. And I don't think I've ever taken a mean picture intentionally in my life." – Guardian interview – 15

Scot Sotherns' series titled ‘Lowlife’, is a chronicle of a father with a secret. In 1980 nights were spent in the company of prostitutes and transgender men of Los Angeles. This gritty, black and white photographic journey though the motels and back alleys of street prostitution was documented and his experience of this lower class life captured on camera. Sothern takes the approach of Goldin’ who documents other people within her life at a point in time. But unlike Goldin, Sothern has no emotional attachment. What I argue is that Sotherns' works are more on a voyeuristic level in one day in the lives, of which, Sothern has no involvement other despite taking this snapshot style of other peoples desperate lives reflected in his degrading title of the subject.

“Sothern is not a mere voyeur, he wades deeply into zones most never will and renders his subjects with dignity and compassion.” –Henry Rollins (2011) 16

"Immediate Family

Goldin called her friends ‘her family' who throughout all of the works under the belt of Goldin stand as the focus. Like in the style of Goldin’ Sally Manns collection titled ‘family portraits’ her third collection, published
in 1992 hung in the Tate. The images taken from 1984-1991 detailed the complex childhood of her three children, Emmet, Jessie and Virginia. Blissfully unaware of the media attention her images would later cause. Being a mother, her instincts of capturing snapshots of her children were nothing but a motherly reflection. But to the viewers these were images of child porn and the mark of an irresponsible mother. This attention is an example of the times which they were produced. It asks more of the adult viewer then the intentions of the photographer. Using an 8 by 10 camera, Mann took images of her children against the landscapes Virginia where she, and her children grew up. Mann captures a mixture of images, ranging from realistic and true to life and some staged and fantasy.

"He is Very sick" – Sally mann.  
"Candy cigarette"  
Klare and Edda belly-dancing -Nan Goldin

There are extremely strong links between the content of Mann’s works, like Goldin as many images have been labelled as indecent and something the viewer would rather ignore. Both produce art photography which violates perceived boundaries.

It was in 2007 Elton John, who is a large collector of the works by Goldin’ defended a photograph he owns after it was seized from an art gallery amid claims it could breach laws. It had been on display in the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead. The picture is titled Klare and Edda belly-dancing, which is part of a 139-image collection.

The reaction received from the public exercises the power of the photographer and their aims to explore realms of life which have been unseen, over looked or ignored by Society. Referring back to Nan Goldin childhood in the 60’s, when culture was ‘not to let the neighbours know’ it is clear that throughout the history of art, and within contemporary art today, the viewer still remains uncomfortable with the real ‘murky’ truth of life being documented publically, which is more about the socio-political climate rather than the image itself.

As seen in the work titled ‘Candy Cigarette' you see a young girl standing in an adult fashion holding a cigarette. Her face glares back at the camera, imposing a sense of concern. I argue, that this sense of ‘feeling’ in encouraged by the staged image. Are we, as the viewer assuming the feelings of the child, linking to the cigarette and the reasons an adult might smoke, while standing in such a way. This is an example of the viewers assumption of an image in relation to the real reasons behind Mann, the mother of the child.

" These girls still exist in an innocent world in which a pose is only a post – what adults make of that pose is their issue” Novelist, Ann Beattie. 19.

Like within Goldins’ photography, there is a shock element attached to the photography works of James Ostrer. The viewer is faced openly with background information that the subjects used are close friends or family members. There is a shock factor and sense of unease, which is attached to the images titled ‘family portrait' In contrast to Goldin’ the settings and sequences are staged and pre conceived. Goldin captures her friends in real life situations which someone would feel uncomfortable putting themselves in, Ostrer takes his middle class family and asks them to pose in situations which are equally as discomforting.
Subjects of Violence.

After finding out her boyfriend had read through some of her diaries and burnt some of them, an argument found Goldin as a victim of domestic abuse. Turning on herself she said 'My long-term friendships with women have bonds that have the intensity of a marriage... But part of me is stimulated by the conflict inherent in relationships between men and women.'

One of America’s most recognized photojournalists put herself in front of her camera, making herself the subject of discriminative gaze of the viewer. She portrays herself, rarely kindly. 'Confronting my normal ambivalence had betrayed his absolute concept of romance,' she has said. The self-portrait that resulted, showing her battered face, has become one of her most widely reproduced images. Within this image, I question if she is making a stand for women, raising the viewers eyes to the wronged wife, starting into a reality as the reality stared back out at the camera. Goldin is seen as a lower class, victim of abuse, yet there were women who could relate to her works because, although they might have lived in houses in urban America, domestic violence was and is widely happening. Goldin drew back on her pride with red lipstick and mascara and opened the worlds eyes.

'A real artist doesn’t do themselves. I don’t do Nan Goldin.’

Goldin’s work is most often presented in the form of a slideshow, and has been shown at film festivals; her most famous being a 45 minute show in which 800 pictures are displayed. Goldin has one main meaning to this work and that is addiction.

“the major meaning of the slideshow is how you can become sexually addicted to somebody and that has absolutely nothing in common with love. It is about violence, about being in a category of men and women”

"It is constructed so that you see all different roles of women, the way children are brought up, men and a lot of violence. That kind of violence the men play with"
Powerful images highlighting the extreme cases faced living along side those of the unseen world seen within the works of Nan Goldin is echoed throughout contemporary art today. Her ability to capture a life beyond the net curtains of upper and middle class worlds and project the realities though her photography directed to those who are unable to associate to particular ways of life is a subject which is saturated in emotion, meaning and defence. By capturing nothing else but life outside of its own boundaries and the effect mentally, emotionally and physically is not so something which should be stereotypically frowned upon, but hailed as genius and a subject which will continue to cause opinions within the Art world.

"I think the work has always been about the condition of being human and the pain, the ability to survive, and how difficult that is." Nan Goldin 24

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