

An Interview with Leigh Ledare David Joselit

David Joselit: So many theories of subjectivity that have structured art practice since the feminist interventions of the 1970s have focused on duality: self vs. other. But, in your work, there are often three (or more) present in the photographic transaction; that's the case, for instance, in such works as *Double Bind*, *A Modest Exchange* and *An Invitation*. Is this one of your strategies for bringing the social into work that appears to be resolutely, even excruciatingly intimate?

Leigh Ledare: I see the image simply as the surface level of the work. I really like your suggestion that it's a transaction. This seems important: there's a kind of economy that underwrites the photograph. I've been interested in looking at this comparatively, particularly through ways that relationships triangulate—between participants within the situations around my work, as you point out, but also psychologically, socially, and culturally. It goes back to this idea that we're constructed as subjects through a dialogical process. We're both staged by the social, and at the same time the social responds to us. By playing images against each other, I've tried to look at how image relations double and correspond to human relations.

A lot of my work stems from issues that came up in the project I made with my mother. What I found interesting there was that she could simultaneously perform all these different roles—mother, daughter, pornographic actress, prodigy ballerina—but where they came together at the site of her as a subject they were completely irreconcilable. While this reflected her own internal conflicts, it was also complicated through how she was being affirmed by the outside world. In part, I see the project as an investigation into how she was using intimacy as a tool to invest in, but also to deny a connection with, these broader social relations: family, peers, gender, class. It's become clear to me that as subjects we're formed not simply through identity but at the levels of desire and motivation, and that we're often shaped by many contradictory influences. I'm interested in those moments when identity becomes unmanageable and when our ideas of ourselves are thrown into crisis. I don't see this as a failure, but as a gap that's opened up where something new is possible. I've come to premise my work on this kind of destabilization.

After the photographs with my mother, I've continued to implicate myself within new projects as a way, beyond simply recording the affects around these situations, to diagram the power relations that underwrite these situations.

DJ: What I really like about your method, as you have just described it, is that you succeed in placing the *dialogic* (which is very intimate and concentrated) in a broader social network, where the laser-like focus of a photographic interaction between two people is stained (or drenched) in all kinds of other relationships and roles that may remain in the background but nonetheless greatly effect posturing before the camera. Would you say that your recent work, *An Invitation*, exemplifies this method of situating the dialogic in a broader and more diffuse social network?

LL: Well, *An Invitation* started out with the feeling that the subject, the woman who commissioned me to make the original photographs, was situating me. In that sense, it wasn't unlike the project with my mother. At that time I had been working in Europe, and on a day off I was casually introduced to the couple, both very prominent and powerful individuals with highly public lives. A few weeks later the wife contacted me, wanting me to accept a commission to make a series of erotic photographs of her. She said she was up for anything, which of course made the situation with their marriage sound unclear. At first I was hesitant to get involved, but I also intuited that there was something interesting there. After taking time to think it over I told her that I'd agree, but only under the condition that I'd be able to use the images of her for my own work. She said this would be far too compromising and wasn't possible. In turn I explained to her that it wasn't possible for me to spend my time making a series of photographs for her alone, and so she finally consented, with the stipulation that I couldn't disclose the identities of her and her husband. This is how I came to the proposal of the contract and the redaction of her face within the photographs.

It's fairly easy to tell when someone is trying to use you to articulate something sideways to another person, in this case her husband. And it was obvious to me that I was walking into what was a very manipulative situation. On one hand she was objectifying me through making herself into an object, but at the same time there was this odd effect of her mapping herself over the figure of my mother, and maybe even trying to replace her. As a response, one of the texts I wrote for the piece reads: "*Things I want—not to do mother again. Things she wants—to do mother again...*" The project attempts to trace out our competing intentions, not to mention how my presence plays out within their marriage. I found myself staying with them for seven days, only to discover that as a photographer I was being placed into a totally ambiguous role, one that overlapped with the roles of confidant, therapist, scapegoat, and, obviously, the younger eroticized man.

She seemed to have this expectation that art could give her back an aspect of herself that she'd been forced to repress. Even if my aim had been to provide this for her, the fantasy is impossible, something she herself also quickly came to realize. I'm fascinated by these misunderstandings. At the same moment that the project records her negotiation of her private desires, set against her public obligations, it's clear that she's completely invested in the life she's attempting to transgress. In that sense, the project reaffirms a boundary that can't be crossed. Like many of my other projects, the situation is ambivalent. But I'd suggest also that these projects serve to create a very nuanced space for experimentation and investigation, one that aims to reveal what roles we ask images to play in our lives.

DJ: In this work, you “insert” or “frame” these complex erotic enactments/reenactments within greatly enlarged lithographs reproducing the front page of the *New York Times* published on the day the photo was shot. As I understand it, the scale of this projection required four sheets, but the page looks seamless. In this way, you use a very public form—a daily periodical—as the time code for the complex bilateral power dynamic set up with your model in *An Invitation*. I'm intrigued by how you frame photographs of different genres as a formal analogue to the back and forth of psychosexual control that occurs in the actual making of your photographs. Are you submitting photographs to the same kind of erotic/traumatic trials that you submit your human subjects?

LL: Your question implies that, as subjects, we've started functioning much more like images, which I believe is true. In certain ways perhaps images also behave in an analogous manner to thinking, responding subjects, resisting and subverting the uses they're put to as functionaries. Specific genres certainly reflect very distinct patterns of thinking. In *An Invitation*, for instance, the notions of ethics, rational responsibility, and transparency permeate the structure, and the image, of the *New York Times*—as opposed to desire, eroticism and the irrational within the nude photographs. It's not uncommon for tabloids to juxtapose images of scantily clad women alongside photos of murder and atrocities on their front covers; however, *The Times*, in its claim to objectivity, implicitly refuses the juxtaposition of this iconography. I wanted to put it there anyway in order to suggest that it's actually always present within the structure of the image. Similarly to the way subjects are constructed, this process of differentiation lies at the core of what the image is. By placing discordant genres against each other, I'm also trying to reveal how the images, as articulations of difference, threaten and inform one another.

As you suggest, I'm certainly trying to submit the images to this stress, but also the viewer, and through this submit them to the role of active interpretation. But first, in order for the situations in my work to exist, as a subject/artist I need to submit myself to something: my mother, my ex-wife, a commission, the media, the viewer, etc. The projects themselves are defined intersubjectively.

DJ: Well, I do think that images have their own ways of behaving and that you explicitly demonstrate how the dialogic encounter of photographer/subject, which ostensibly occurs in privacy, is in fact saturated with the millions of readymade, media-generated images that everyone carries around in their heads. You put these two kinds of “dialogism” into communication formally.

LL: Each of the seven days that I stayed with the couple I made a nude photograph of the woman, which I placed against an enlarged image of that day's newspaper. Of course I had no control over what appeared on the front page, which became a very significant aspect of the project, juxtaposing by chance the private photographs with the events making headlines that week: the death of Lucian Freud, the Murdoch scandal, the Norway massacre, the Strauss-Kahn sex scandal. In one of the works, *Saturday, July 23, 2011*, there's an inverted nude photograph I took of the subject laying on her bed with her arms open. She's drenched in this beautiful light, but her face is redacted with a large black bar in accordance with the contract. She's formally linked to a press image in that day's paper that depicts a young man lying on a sheet, a victim from the Utøya massacre in Norway. Placed together, the images attempt to diagram the complicated visual structure internal to these representational situations, a visual structure that also speaks to the viewer's complicity in consuming these images.

As a photographer, I implicitly represent the male gaze; while the woman's role is connected with that of the victim depicted in the newspaper image. I was trying to elaborate on this problematic, as the work develops out of a feminist position. Specific types of images—the traumatic and the erotic in particular—impose strict responses on the viewer. In terms of the traumatic, we're really only allowed to understand these images in a way that distances us from the disturbing events either by positioning us as sympathetic and innocent citizens, or by justifying our roles as actors responding to a potential threat. We are shielded from trauma in either case. This is also true of the erotic. These images can unexpectedly draw out desires we might not want to acknowledge in ourselves, the underside or repressed sides that we protect from public view and that we may feel guilt or shame over revealing. Things get much more difficult when a circumstance makes one look critically at one's self, and that's one reason why images such as these can elicit unease. Through this they can also act as catalysts that force us to reflect on all sorts of political and ethical concerns that aren't initially or obviously apparent in the

image. But I also want to point to this correlation between public identity and the formation of morals, as distinct from desire and fantasies, which are private but which, in the case of *An Invitation*, my work also makes public.

DJ: How do you position yourself in the situation?

LL: In *An Invitation* this is done through the handwritten texts. This is the one aspect of the piece that's removed from being a kind of technical image, inset at the bottom of each of the seven works. In the case of the work I just described, the text reads: "I reminded Mrs. ██████ again that I would approach the project as a newspaper photographer, conveying information that pertained to the assignment she'd given me" In writing this, I wanted to strain the notion of the photograph as an objective document, while also complicating the reading of authorship behind the image. The woman I was photographing was quite literally writing herself in as my muse, authoring the situation, and through this authoring the photograph, as well as my desire. Of course, there is never simply one author or one protagonist. My work always functions to frame the back-and-forth negotiation around these multiple levels of agency within the situation.

DJ: And yet, in this work, the third person remains anonymous—by contract!

LL: Yes, but so does the subject, and that's true of many other "authors" within the situation. The lawyers come to mind, but the newspaper is also chock-full of examples. And this anonymity often reflects some relationship the subject has to power, to how they can manage to emphasize or deny the circulation of information, something that is in itself incongruent with the logic of transparency in the paper. That said, the point of the work is not to disclose the identities of the subjects. Ultimately, what matters is not their identities, but the way that each of these different types of language within the piece—as a distinct apparatus—positions us as subjects in specific ways. The texts addressed this by articulating my own subjectivity as the precondition for instrumentalization within the situation. They delineated a boundary between my self and the outside that enabled me to comment on the structures and roles that were emerging. This minor, subjective register causes one to consider the constructed/fictional basis of all the other—supposedly objective—frameworks within the piece.

There was also a kind of erotic paranoia circulating around the contract, and that says a lot about the risks that underlie, and in a way fuel, eroticism. This became quite pronounced when I submitted the contract to the couple for approval. All of a sudden, it felt quite clear that they were getting worked up over the legal power they held over me, and that this too became a kind of erotic game. So, it wasn't the paradox around her exposure alone that held the appeal, but the way that risk within the situation empowered her.

DJ: Many theories of subjectivity, ranging from Sigmund Freud's to Judith Butler's, posit repetition as the foundation for how a person persists in their identity. Your photographic method includes repetitions of many sorts—including returns to a past relationship, as well as the kind of instances we've already discussed, of how individual behavior impersonates media "icons," ranging from stereotypical pornographic behaviors to advertisements for commodities.

LL: Well, I've tried to distance the work from being read merely as catharsis. I agree with Butler that, as subjects, we're constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. Also important for me is the way that Michel Foucault discusses the development of conscience and confession, and how these are a result of disciplinary pressures imposed on, and internalized by, the subject.

The project *Double Bind* started with my convincing my recently remarried ex-wife to go alone with me to a remote cabin where I'd photograph her over the course of three nights. Two months later she repeated the trip, this time alone with her current husband, who also photographed her, agreeing that afterwards he would give me his unprocessed film. This resulted in two separate sets of photographs, variations of the same subject, roughly 1,000 images, which I printed and presented in their entirety within the show. As a visual record these trace the boundaries and emotional climate of the two relationships: theirs, the newlywed with limitless potential; and ours, the exhausted marriage. Again, this triangulated conversation involves two individuals who are always articulating something to a third party: husband/wife, wife/ex-husband, ex-husband/husband.

This doubling of the trip is one comparative structure. I then presented these images against an archive of ephemera and magazine pages I'd been saving: this collection contained a wide range of images related to lifestyle, relationships, advertizing, luxury services, hetero- and homosexual erotic and pornographic materials, historical reportage, travel brochures, cultural reviews, and so on. These materials use desire as a means to enforce the articulation of difference along the lines of class affiliation, gender, and culture. I wanted to look not only at how these media images, as "models," precede the photographic situation, but also at how we use them associatively to interpret our experience. I achieved the second comparative structure by montaging the private photographs against this collection of media images, and through this created

a series of diptychs which, attributed to the two relationships, are posed in conversation with one another. Through questioning my own intentions, and my assumption of the intentions of my ex-wife and her husband, the diptychs attempt to assert a number of speculations on the meaning of the relationships inside the photographed situation. Presenting these variations, I wanted to complicate the act of speculation, and ultimately destabilize any fixed interpretation.

The project touches on a number of problematic issues. The exchange of women between men, for example, is brought to attention through reference to figures such as Lévi-Strauss, or advertisements that allude to exchange, as well as through pornographic imagery that invokes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of the homosocial. I wanted to look at how we construct meaning through images in complex and often indirect ways, even going so far as to displace their messages from one object to another in order to conceal "inappropriate" interests that might underlie the social relations they reference. By laying the narrative structure of the repeated trips over this archive of cultural materials, both aspects of *Double Bind* reveal themselves to be stuck in a kind of stalemate. Premised on the failure of my marriage, the narrative of the project discloses an impasse within the conflicting messages of the media. I then set the projects's presentation and framing against this troubling content. This creates a surplus tension between form and content, and also control and irresolvability, that is key to how the work operates on the viewer.

I've tried to use a strategy of mimesis in order to confront viewers with situations they might be reluctant to identify with, but with which they remain undeniably complicit. The ambiguity this creates directs itself at the viewers as a provocation: it positions them to think about these issues that, while in full view, constitute a kind of cultural blind spot. In making *Double Bind*, for instance, it started to become clear to me that dealing with the representation of heterosexual orientation in the art world might in fact be more culturally taboo than representing homosexual orientation. Of course there are good reasons for this, but there are also adverse effects to not being able to face these things. I think there's a kind of cultural guilt that prohibits us from admitting the extent to which we identify with images that are socially coded in very complicated or "incorrect" ways. This certainly doesn't mean that they stop existing or stop acting on us. Through allowing myself to occupy inherently problematic positions, and admitting to a perverse pleasure in identifying with these ambivalent "icons," I've tried to complicate a reading of my own intentionality within the work. In this way, my work is meant to contain an implicit critique. My identity within the work and my identity as an artist are performed. They're two separate things, set side by side, and the meaning created through this discrepancy is thrown back on the viewer. Through implicating myself, by using the subjective "I," there's a responsibility: the situations are concrete. This forces the viewer to contend with the content differently than if it had only been presented in a theoretically distanced way. The work relies on a negative identification rather than on a positive one. It's not about depicting the "authenticity" or "dignity" of the subject as such, but rather about how our dignity is compromised by the world that we all, as subjects, are necessarily submitted to.

DJ: In many of your works, including *Double Bind*, which you've just described, as well as *Pretend You're Actually Alive*, the work with your mother for which you're best known, and the *Personal Commissions* in which you are posed and photographed by women whose erotic personal ads you've responded to, you occupy the position of the desired object, or object once desired or about to be desired: son, ex-husband, potential-trick. This kind of erotic self-objectification is not usually associated with men and particularly not straight men. Lucas Samaras is one of the few examples I can think of. How does it feel to be the model as well as the photographer, with all that that position entails in terms of power and desire?

LL: Well, I see an inherent masochism in this doubling of subject and object. It's present as a dynamic within much of my work, but it unfolds out of the relationship with my mother. While the project with my mother wasn't staged, in a very real sense my mother was also authoring the circumstances, and placing me within the central role of her drama. I see her performance of sexuality as having a number of functions: to challenge the atmosphere of moralism and conformism surrounding her; to shield herself from her aging; to find a benefactor; to enact an intimacy with me and my brother through various surrogate figures. And, perhaps most importantly, I see her using a masochistic model as a negation: by submitting herself to a trauma as a means of transgressing a normative logic, it paradoxically became possible for her to overwrite the power dynamics within our family. It was a form of emotional hijacking. She was actively stigmatizing herself as an indirect means of stigmatizing and disempowering her father. Because of my specific relationship as her son, with its associated taboo, she was employing me as a kind of weapon.

She had this insistence on being the object of desire. That was always the locus of her power. And while I know that she did desire me sexually, I think she also understood me as being complicit and saw me as a tool with a role to play. Because the project unfolded over the course of eight years, there are all these back and forth shifts between conflicting intentions, emotions, and understandings of the situation. This is complicated further by enacting the work publicly, which inverts the entire power structure and dynamic of her masochism. What might have been mistaken for a passive role, ultimately becomes a space of active reflection. I placed a framework over the framework my mother placed over me. This

proposes a dilemma, in that the project's enactment is both an act of survival and subversion, but one that also makes me ultimately responsible for an ethical transgression.

I think that's one thing that can be so confusing about the work: there aren't clear-cut boundaries, nor are there clear-cut categories of right and wrong. An action might appear cruel, at the same moment that it accepts or even affirms her complexity as a person. This self-exposure may attend to needs she experiences that the outside world fails to understand, or forces her to suppress, or threatens to ostracize her for. I never approach my subjects moralistically. Rather, I try to point to an irreconcilability that lies at the core of relationships and representation. It's difficult to speak about this aspect of the work. Its meaning resides in this surplus of affect and emotion, and in what that activates in the viewer. A whole set of questions open up, not so much about the ways we should live rationally, based on "shared" values, but about the expenditure and the manufacture of meaning and feelings as a resistance to what in many ways is a very alienating and depleting world.

DJ: Your remarks put me in mind of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whom you've already mentioned. She theorized a form of power among men and through women that did not depend upon brute domination but rather on developing forms of intimacy that allowed for more subtle, and perhaps even more efficacious, forms of manipulation. It's very important to remember that power is not equivalent to "force." How did you make the *Personal Commissions*?

LL: At the most basic level the idea was to occupy my mother's logic, inverting the male gaze and, instead of photographing her, have her photograph me. This was enacted through a set of surrogates: women who had an affinity with my mother because of their involvement in this form of soft-prostitution. Through linking them I was attempting not to focus on my mother's eccentricity but to recoup her actions, suggesting that these behaviors were shared by many other women and underwritten by much more pervasive social and gender frameworks.

What I found especially interesting, however, was how, through the gendered, erotic framework of the *Personals*, these women without their knowing had given up their self-representation for an identity that was pre-determined by this economy. They were, after all, looking for customers. When I contacted each of the women, I told her that I didn't want to fuck, that what I wanted instead was to have her to direct a photograph of me, in whatever way she desired to see me: dressed or undressed, posed, doing whatever she wanted me to do. The idea was that the photograph of me would become a kind of indirect portrait of each woman, through her agency in staging the photograph, the documentation of her residence, and the self-description of her personal ad, which was ultimately appropriated as the title of each piece. Rather than photographing the women, I protected the anonymity that the format of the personal ad guaranteed, and asked them instead to photograph me, not in order to express an authentic portrait of me, but rather to undo this notion of authenticity. This was in part a response to my disbelief in these utopian ideas of how self-expression on the Internet operates as democratizing, despite obviously subjecting us to implicit contracts through which we sell and classify ourselves in spite of our better interests. I'm becoming more convinced that privacy as we once knew it has disappeared completely. It seems like something new is emerging, a kind of zeroing out of the private.

The women had wide backgrounds: one was an economics professor, another a psychology Ph.D. student, another was even a former MA student under Rosalind Krauss. I never knew what to anticipate. Before going to the houses I would let someone know where I was going and when to expect a call, in case they didn't hear from me. I remember one woman eyeing me up and down at the door before walking me back to her bedroom, on the way signaling to a table laid out with a huge assortment of fruit juices and cold cuts: "In case we work up an appetite," she said. She requested that I undress and then told me: "Lay like a statue on a table." Assuming the role of model and allowing myself to be directed placed me in a position of vulnerability, and in a decidedly feminized way, one that many men would find humiliating or compromising. But it also made me understand more clearly that there are forms of power that reside within vulnerability.

The nude male in recent history has been the territory of the homosexual gaze. But it's also curious how many straight males seem invested in this project. There's a form of biopolitics at play that is completely related to cultural context. Look at what was happening in the 90s in Moscow. Or with the Vienna Actionists. The question of what the subject is pushing against is key, and the use of the body can be an incredibly effective means of re-appropriating power, undermining propriety, or upending the state's attempts to exercise control over our fantasy lives. Isn't this partially what the culture wars of the 80s came down to?

DJ: Yes, that's true and of course I'm stereotyping by suggesting that heterosexual male artists have not been interested in representing and displaying their bodies. Once one begins to think about it, examples proliferate—Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Paul McCarthy. But I want to pick up on your remarks about the Internet. One of the dimensions of your work that intrigues me is how you develop means of representing the materiality of image circulation. A good example of this is *A Modest Exchange*, where you took an entire run of *Life* magazine during a period of years and both manipulated the pages of individual issues to call attention to a series of unexpected resonances between photographs, and then re-circulated these amended issues as a limited edition to collectors, thus

breaking up the complete set while embedding one form of circulation (the art world) within another (the mass media). I was also struck when you told me that you included all the “outtakes” for *Double Bind* in a vitrine in the gallery. You are very attentive to the material nature of the picture, both in terms of acknowledging the fact that many more photographic shots are exposed than will be ultimately consumed, and that the meaning of a picture changes again and again as it moves from situation to situation. I believe you even used the term “exhausted” to describe a certain subject or photo session, implying that pictures gain or lose energy through their peregrinations.

LL: This issue of materiality in the work is key. As you mentioned, the *Life* magazine piece was one piece that then got fragmented into sixty individual works for the subscription. As a set of sixty fragments, each modified magazine was mounted alongside a document that lists the names of all of the subscribers/collectors who purchased the artwork. By revealing the provenance around the piece, the list becomes a stand-in for the entire work. The idea was to make the gallery act in a duplicitous way, as a corporation might act in the buying and trading of information. The piece functions as a mise-en-abyme of the practice of compiling data for use in securing ongoing consumption patterns. Our demographic information serves as a kind of index for our bodies. In this sense there are ways in which information becomes more valuable than objects exchanged. It's almost pornographic in that, through our information, we're completely depersonalized and circulated as commodities.

In terms of the two smaller vitrines from the *Double Bind* work, I thought of the photographs inside them as remainders. They exist in the vitrines as a kind of non-edit that is organized in opposition to the idea of the overdetermined moment presented in the singular, framed images. These logics of the tableau, versus the table or archive, are pit against each other. As an archive, the images in the vitrines stop being about the loaded referent and speak to a pure excess of material while freezing the images in a space that exists prior to the determination of their meaning. Although their content is still present, their specificity is flattened, stacked. I wanted the work to reflect the saturation of images we face every day, where what is most alarming is that the ability to determine meaning, or to truly see into the image, is exhausted before we even arrive at the image. In the case of *Double Bind*, the experiential dimension of the two trips is completely intimate. But there's another way in which treating the image as non-specific, as just a number, allows anything to be equivalent to anything else. Inside a third, larger vitrine the surplus ephemera and magazine materials from the project are arranged in piles. These three vitrines contain the excess raw materials used to compose the montaged diptychs. For one element of the artist book I made with Michèle Didier I used this material to produce six eighty-page magazines that document a stack of 479 pieces of this ephemera down-shot on a copy stand. The cover of the first magazine is a photograph of the entire stack. As one progresses through the magazines, each image on the surface of the stack is removed, one by one. Finally, working entirely through the pile, the back cover of magazine #6 stands simply as an image of the surface of the copy stand.

In complete opposition to the way images behave in *Double Bind*, an image from *Pretend You're Actually Alive*, such as the *Seventeen Magazine* portrait of my mother, a magazine page my mother has kept since she was sixteen years-old, retains an absolutely fetishized specificity. In that sense, it could be that the way the image is used is ultimately much more important than the referent pictured within the image.

DJ: Your photographic projects have been compared to those of Larry Clark (with whom you lived when you first came to New York) and Nan Goldin. Do you feel an affinity with their work?

LL: Well, I've had incredibly intense relationships with both Larry and Nan, which I'm grateful for. I've learned a lot from my conversations with them and their work, even if these were at times contentious. I remember the first day I arrived in NY. I didn't know Larry but I had his telephone number and called him. I told him I needed a place to stay and asked him if he had any work and he told me I could crash in his son's room. Larry was really in bad shape at that moment, and only later did I learn that his assistant had just walked out. This first day we met Christopher Wool, and then later that night I asked Larry if he had something for me to read and he gave me an old copy of Lenny Bruce's *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*. The summer was an education: John Cassavettes, Deiter Roth, Mike Kelley, Peter Hujar, Allen Ginsberg, Hank Williams, Roger Marris, Martin Kippenberger, Sherrie Levine, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Cady Noland, Paul McCarthy, Jean Genet, Louis-Ferdinand Céline ... I spent the days working for him and then in the evenings we would watch films and he would pull books from his library, things he thought I should know about. He was incredibly generous. The people Larry looked up to were people who had something to say and weren't afraid to go out on a limb to say it. They shared a sense that it was necessary to contribute to culture based on values that attempted to resist the deadening conformist culture that sprung up with television, consumerism and American prosperity. Also important was the idea that he knew when something was good because it was something he felt in his gut: it made him nervous. That departure point of honesty was necessary for making art: honesty, and the feeling that there was a mutual need to address things that weren't being talked about and that this was culturally relevant and even potentially liberating.

I see Larry's work as charting the turn inwards to personal complicity from the documentary tradition of the American photo essay, a tradition that can be traced all the way back to Walker Evans. *Teenage Lust* and *Punk Picasso* were ever expanding circles outwards from *Tulsa*, where he first documented his own disenfranchised youth milieu set against the conformity of 1960s Bible Belt America. In these later works he incorporated some of the same autobiographical content, but reflected on it through a maturing set of lenses, trying to understand not only his own drives and subculture, but also his position within broader culture.

At the beginning, I saw myself as a subject of Larry's, and I think I used that as a persona through which to make work. I tried to acknowledge this in my first book by including a picture he took of me. I'm holding a gun and sitting naked on a bed, an obvious reference to *Tulsa*. One night he had asked to photograph me, and I told him sure, but only if he allowed me to photograph him in the same way, a photograph he ultimately included in *Punk Picasso*. Interestingly, the images hinge on this similar reflection and dialogue.

DJ: How did you feel about Nan Goldin?

LL: I think Nan had this idea that she, more than anyone else, could take the pictures she was taking because she was an insider. She claimed the pictures didn't come from a position of authority, manipulation or judgment, but instead from a space of equality and moral complicity. I think this intimate status she had towards her subjects is where she saw the similarities between our works. But the comparison doesn't hold because I underscore that there is no authentic portrait but rather that it is always a performed one, no authorized picture but instead a game of manipulation, coercion, and power relations, even within family structures. I'm trying to impose a different ethical questioning on the viewer.

I remember Nan completely turning on me after seeing a film I made called *Shoulder*. This film literally performs an ambivalence concerning authenticity, and attempts to destabilize any fixed notion of real versus fictionalized lives, emotions, attachments, and roles. The film begins with my mother sitting on a couch in her living room. She speaks about how, in the relationship to the man she's living with, it's impossible for her to access her creative self. After a couple minutes I step into frame and sit facing her, my back to the camera. At that point we begin the agreed upon action: I had asked my mother to cry on my shoulder. As she cries, even while the situation is scripted, her emotion is undeniably real. Over what is a 9-minute single take the emotional atmosphere completely shifts, sliding from clipped sardonic humor, to vulnerability, to my comforting her, to an emotional catharsis. By the end there's this sense of deep melancholy. I stand up and leave her alone in the room, the camera still rolling. You have to wonder what my leaving means to her. Acting is signaled; although a reading of the entire piece as theater is upended. Because of this questioning of authenticity, our two projects—however compared or ostensibly similar on the surface—are fundamentally and conceptually distinct.

DJ: So your work could almost be read as a meta-version of Clark's and Goldin's in the sense that yours, like theirs, proceeds from an intense and even "forbidden" intimacy, but it also self-consciously embraces and exposes the structure of this intimacy within and surrounding the situation. That makes you a different kind of artist, perhaps one who requires less explicit personal flamboyance than either of them.

LL: Perhaps so. There's been a very engrained duality in photography, but also more broadly in art, between the positions of the personal/experiential and the distanced/self-reflexive. I believe that these oppositions can't help but be intertwined and that they need to be complicated and rethought. I've certainly been in dialogue with a number of existing historical lineages. Larry and Nan are two. It also amazes me that at the same moment that Nan is making *The Ballad [of Sexual Dependency]* someone like Sherrie Levine is beginning to re-photograph Walker Evans and Fassbinder is filming *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. All of this history provides a ground to build upon, but also to define one's self against. There are these macro levels of discourse, but it's also important to recognize that as artists we create our own discourses through our work. The concerns we respond to emerge in dialogue, but also out of the specific times we live in. I believe that it's necessary to retain some irreverence, even towards one's own work. Certainly, I hope that artists in the future also work back into my work, challenge it, reassess it, and through this allow it to continue to inform a discussion.