

The DIY Body: A Consideration of Nan Goldin and Lydia Lunch
Stephanie Hart, PhD Candidate
York University
Toronto, ON

Biographical note:

Stephanie Hart is a PhD Candidate in the Department of English at York University, Toronto.

In Lisa Crystal Carver's *Drugs Are Nice: A Post-Punk Memoir*, she characterizes American post-punk as "a promiscuous generation—with ideas as well as with the flesh" (Carver, 2005: 80). I see Carver's words as a useful space to consider embodied representation in this period (which is generally regarded as beginning in 1978) as she points to a dualistic conception of mind/body, the oppositional logic that demarcates subject and object; normative and deviant; and to the idea that, for many artists of this moment, expression is located from and lived through the body. Carver's use of "promiscuous," a highly suggestive term which can signal a variety of intrusions to and refusals of the rational subject, speaks to a discomfort with display. In this sense, I wish to flesh out what these "promiscuities" refuse by referring to Hebdige's notion of subculture as "neither simply and affirmation or a refusal, neither simply resistance against symbolic order nor straightforward conformity with the parent culture. It is both a declaration of independence, of Otherness, of alien intent, a refusal of anonymity, of subordinate status" (Hebdige, 1997: 404).

By focusing on photographer Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* and multimedia artist/ No Waver Lydia Lunch's *Paradoxia: A Predator's Diary*, I will suggest that the cultural backdrop of post-punk works to

destabilize an active/passive formulation of identity and experience, resulting in works that Rebecca Schneider defines as “binary terror,” or acts which point to the “strategic implosion of binaried distinctions” (Schneider, 1997: 14, 18). As such, these works, and their larger cultural locations, offer rich sites to explore embodied art and practice: where theory offers a complicated state of affairs, the politics and aesthetics of New York’s Downtown scene enable and activate the body.

Before discussing the specifics of Lunch and Goldin, I will briefly back up and consider Jock Young’s assertion that, “we must relate subcultures to total society: for they do not exist in a vacuum, they are a product of or a reaction to social forces existing in the world outside” (Young, 1997: 71). From the crumbling tenements below 14th Street in a pre-gentrified lower Manhattan, a disparate group of artists forge a moment in subcultural history, one led by a “mutually defining symbiosis of its social marginality.... a politics not of engagement but of estrangement” (McCormick, 2006: 78). This bond, firmly situating itself within the avant-garde tradition of anti-art, is clearly evidenced in Lunch’s contribution to Marvin J. Taylor’s *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984*:

Insanity. Anger. Isolation. Poverty. Soul murder. The connective tissue where the cultural division of art, film, music, and literature was cauterized, creating a vast insane asylum, part Theater of Cruelty, part Grand Guignol. All Dada, all the time...giving birth to a radical fringe whose assaultive battle cries, thinly disguised in song, spoken word, film, the visual arts, and an ungodly commingling of all the above, they created a seething necropolis, polluted by and overpopulated with art school dropouts, rural refugees, Midwestern bible burners, Southern white-trash rejects, and just about every other ‘outsider’ who has been too frickin intense to really ever fit in anywhere else (Lunch, 2006: 95).

An “ungodly commingling” indeed: while the locations and figures are now the stuff of documentary, anthology, and tourist destination, what remains is a palpable shift in the intelligibility of signifying practices: while Carolee Schneemann (whose influence is solidified by being mentioned in the Le Tigre song “Hot Topic”) was dismissed a decade earlier as the exhibitionist “cunt mascot in the Art Stud Club,” post-punk’s oppositional politics carves out a larger space in which to counter the notion that a woman who employs her body in artistic practice invariably does so from a space of lack, and further, that the body is only ever a commodity intended for male consumption (Personal interview, 21 March 2007).

The willfully unruly body existing in a willfully unruly place speaks to Mary Douglas’ assertion: “Where there is dirt, there is a system” (Douglas, 2002: 35). Dirt, as a category and value, affirms the logic which demarcates pure from impure; rational from hysteric; the daylight world from the subterranean realm, all metaphors which have been used to describe the pathogenic threat of female flesh. This body, when deployed as locus of resistance or as parody of residual Cartesianism, becomes a messy obstacle or “blind spot of an old dream of symmetry” (Irigaray, 1985: 11). Its presence isolates and destabilizes repressive systems of feminine propriety on experiential and epistemological levels, thus suggesting that “the contemporary explicit body performer consciously and explicitly stands beside herself in that she grapples overtly with the history of her body’s explication, wrestling with the ghosts of that explication” (Schneider, 1997: 52).

Schneider's reference to the subject who is beside herself is a good place to begin a consideration of Lunch and Goldin, as their creative lives start with an expulsion of the "clean and proper body" (Kristeva, 1982: 78):

I can't forget. I remember too much. Remember every detail, nuance, am forced to repeat even the most repellent occurrence. My sanity insists upon it insists upon expulsion. Purgation. Insists I wring from every cell, the poisoned thoughts, polluted deeds, malicious intentions that would, if not puked forth, riddle me with disease. Sickness. Death. (Lunch, 1997: 150)

Agitated by prescribed social roles, Lunch and Goldin leave the daylight world for New York's underground, where family is chosen and domesticity is ironically performative. The subject who is beside herself, who destabilizes her gender role by explicitly gesturing to its expulsion, is an abject subject, and as Kristeva reminds us, abjection has no tuck with the seamless, sanitized surface: it is the jagged edge, the sore that will not heal, which propels (Kristeva, 1982: 27). In Lunch's embodied description of her inability to forget, she continually faces her expelled other, refusing a notion of healing that is synonymous with accepting one's station; this also points to a cultural movement which agitates and contaminates the normalizing impetus of dominant 'daylight' culture. To return to Kristeva: "Purification is something only Logos is capable of" (Kristeva, 1982: 27).

Goldin began *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* in 1978 and first showed it at a bar on the Bowery, where many of the subjects, usually Goldin's friends or lovers, would have congregated.¹ While the images may now read as a guidebook to the Downtown scene, Goldin is careful to point out that she was not

¹ While New York is a central location, the text includes images from other cities.

a voyeuristic party-crasher, seeking out characters based on their subcultural currency: “This is my family, my history” (Goldin, 1986: 6). The series, which has been expanded over the course of many years, consists of groupings (image and music) which are arranged along a very specific narrative progression (it goes without saying that viewing it in its slide show form is a powerful, almost uncomfortably scopophilic experience). Goldin states that the work is intended to display the acute and often imperceptible oscillation between “autonomy and dependency” (Goldin, 1986: 7).

It begins with photographs of seemingly functional couples, and then moves on to portraits of solitary women and men. At the approximate middle-point (in the 1986 printed version), the focus is turned on to capturing moments of homosocial bonding: the images in this section include tattooing and gun-handling. This montage, while clearly exploring the complex terrain of how the masculine subject performs his alienation/abjection, is followed by one of Goldin’s better-known photographs.

The next section begins with “Nan after being battered, 1984,” (http://www.tate.org.uk/collection/P/P78/P78045_9.jpg) which shows a bruised, bloated, yet well-groomed Goldin after a violent encounter with a lover (Goldin, 1986: 83).² One immediately notices that most of the bruising is localized on her eyes, suggesting the attempt to castrate her interpretive (fleshed) lens. In this image, the marked face functions as a palimpsest: as her aggressor’s desire to overwrite her capacity to project a reading of the event back onto him. In this

² Copyright Nan Goldin. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

reversal of the gaze, Goldin asks us to consider Peggy Phelan's assertion that, "The formation of the 'I' cannot be witnessed by the 'eye'" (Phelan, 1993: 5).

This is further complicated in the narrative's final section, where we see "Nan and Brian in bed, New York City 1983" (Goldin, 1986: 137).

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/images/h2/h2_2001.627.jpg³

Other images in this section include an empty, rumped bed; the signifiers of a Valentine's Day celebration; and twin graves. In this image, Goldin's longing (she is curled up on her side, staring intently at him) and Brian's indifference (he is sitting at the foot of the bed, with an expression that suggests he would rather look at anything *but* her) gives flesh to the assertion that "Sex becomes the microcosm of the relationship, the battleground, an exorcism" (Goldin, 1986: 8).

Goldin's ability to capture the subject in multiple and conflicting states in one image (here, the space between pleasure and its termination) propels the spectator further into the narrative's complex relations. Moreover, the chronology of events is irrelevant, as Goldin's arrangement forces a confrontation with the liminal space of abuse and desire: "She [Goldin] hunts out the transcendent in the ordinary parts of life: a touch, the crumpled sheets of an abandoned bed, a kiss, a fuck, a blurred horizon, a grin, or a scar, the traces of living hard and living now" (Reid, 2004: 62).

Like *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, *Paradoxia: A Predator's Diary* is predominantly situated in New York's Downtown scene; it also graphically and unapologetically addresses the question of power in libidinal economies and works to destabilize the social codes which give these acts meaning. To anyone

³ Copyright Nan Goldin

remotely familiar with Lurch's work, it goes without saying that she steadfastly refuses the label of victim; moreover, she is fully aware that this refusal causes great discomfort. "I considered every relationship from the time I was 11 as a *psychological* test of strength, will, power, control, and pain" (Vale and Juno, 1991: 107). Lurch's exodus to New York is followed by her involvement in the No Wave music and film scene. Her filmic work includes collaborations with Richard Kern and Vivienne Dick (with whom she also collaborated musically). Her band, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, is described by Simon Reynolds as an act of "cultural patricide," conjuring a disruptive howl that facilitates a purgation of childhood sexual abuse: "I developed my own style, which suited the primal urgency I needed to evacuate from my system before I exploded like a miniature power plant" (Reynolds, 2005: 148).

This evacuation is most poignantly realized in *Paradoxia: A Predator's Diary*, an extended verbal assault which is both memoir and manifesto (the epigraph reads "No names have been changed to protect the innocent. They're all fucking guilty.") Taking its title from a chapter in Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, *paradoxia* refers to sexual attraction that occurs at the "wrong" stage in life, thus suggesting that the work is not only a critique of heteronormative categories of gender and sexual power, but demonstrates their fiction through the creation of a "deviant" sexual identity: woman as sexual aggressor.

Paradoxia's prose, like Lurch, is equally seductive and completely impenetrable, signaling the codification of the female body as symbolic of both attraction and repulsion; as available and potentially dangerous:

Basement bathrooms in shitty Bowery bars. Favourite stomping ground. Alcohol lubricates the libido. Wears down their resistance. Right, like they had any resistance. Order a double vodka. Scan the room. Pick a target. Zero in. Lead them by their dicks downstairs. Shove them into a cubicle. Lock the door. Bark out orders (Lunch, 1997: 59).

In this passage, the reversal of subject/object relations is not merely superficial, nor is it a gesture to restore autonomy by the inversion of prescribed gender roles. Predator/prey is clearly presented as a problematic framework which speaks to the text's larger issue: that the concept of power itself, and how it is continually naturalized into binary logic, needs to be obliterated.

There are multiple sites of resistance in *Paradoxia*: perhaps the most powerful is its destabilization of the relationship between a woman's personal testimony and the inferred availability of her body. Where "traditional" confessional literature (such as the work of Plath or Sexton) may have been consumed as a voyeuristic glimpse into the so-called white middle-class hysteric, *Paradoxia* forecloses any such speculation. One cannot read the text outside of the context of Lunch's oeuvre, where the body actively derails the gaze and refracts it back into a splintering, combative refusal, all the while contesting capitalism, militarism, and the closer-than-comfortable relationship between subculture and mass culture. By challenging the sum of taking personal experience as medium and locating it on and through the body equaling familiarity or passivity, Lunch comments on the structures that have made this relation appear natural:

Obliterate the safety net that separates the spectator from the exhibitionist. The doctor from the patient. Play wet-nurse to nightsickness. Detail every form of madness, hysteria, torture, obsession. An unholy

vortex of verbal abuse. A hideous din. Revered. Reviled. Feared. A classic nihilist's philosophy only the dogma: 'That which does not kill me, makes me stronger' (Lunch, 1997: 61).

Nietzsche's oft-quoted sentiment, channeled through Lunch, is a good place to offer some final thoughts. Goldin's sensuous, experiential photographs, with their simultaneous refusal of the gaze and immeasurable narrative speculation, vivify Lunch's spare, almost implosive prose: a cadence which works to unhinge gendered notions of seduction, attraction, and repulsion. Perhaps, most importantly, the works suggest the impossibility of the seamless subject: as Bataille reminds us, "A being that isn't cracked isn't possible" (Bataille, 1988: 23).

References

- Bataille, G. (1988) *Guilty*, Boone, B. (trans.) San Francisco: Lapis Press.
- Carver, L. (2005) *Drugs are Nice: A Post-Punk Memoir*, New York: Soft Skull Press.
- Douglas, M. (2002) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge.
- Goldin, N. (1986) *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Heiferman, M., Holborn, M. and Fletcher, S. (eds.) New York: Aperture Foundation.
- Hebdige, D. (1997) 'Posing...Threats, Striking...Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display', in Gelder, K. and Thornton, S. (eds.) *The Subcultures Reader*, London: Routledge.

- Irigaray, L. (1985) *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Gill, G. (trans.) Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Juno, A., and Vale, V. (eds.) (1991) *Angry Women*, San Francisco: RE/SEARCH.
- Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lunch, L. (1997) *Paradoxia: A Predator's Diary*, Washington: Creation Books.
- McCormick, C. (2006) 'A Crack in Time', in Taylor, M. (ed.) *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974- 1984*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Phelan, P. (1993) *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London: Routledge.
- Reid, P. (2004) 'Nan Goldin- Dark Diary', *Aperture* 177, pp. 62-75.
- Reynolds, S. (2005) *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*, New York: Penguin Books.
- Schneemann, C. (21 March 2007) *Personal interview*.
- Schneider, R. (1997) *The Explicit Body in Performance*, London: Routledge.
- Young, J. (1997) 'The Subterranean World of Play', in Gelder, K. and Thornton, S. (eds.) *The Subcultures Reader*, London: Routledge.