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## **“I Never Want to Avoid Pain”: The Hurt Body and the Construction of Pain in Nan Goldin’s Photography**

### Abstract

In this article I will analyse the ways in which American photographer Nan Goldin deals with the representation of pain in her work. Using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, I will dissect some of her photographs to illustrate how the visual rendering of hurt bodies can be used to reveal the constructed nature of pain: how pain is sublimated by means of aesthetics and narration, and how Goldin can be identified as both a suffering individual and a watcher of other people’s pain.

### Keywords

Nan Goldin, Photography, Pain, Violence

I never want to avoid pain. And the only way I’ve gotten through my life is to walk through the most scary, and the most painful, events.

Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*

Physical pain may not only “resist language but actively destroy it”, as Elaine Scarry has observed (1985, 4), yet throughout art history there have been many examples of artists struggling to capture and narrate that ineffable instant when the body is hurt and the awareness of pain on the part of the

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suffering subject is revealed. Beheadings, acts of torture, mutilations, killings, as well as bodies injured, hurt, ill, emaciated, deteriorated, consumed and ultimately annihilated... these have all had some representation or other in the history of western art. All are, however, representations, constructions that resonate within a conventional idea of pain but do not come close to the actual experience of pain. The fact that, in most cases, these renderings of pain and suffering are paintings, drawings or sculptures also contributes to increasing the distance between the representation and the viewer. The emergence of photography in the twentieth century questioned this distance and, at the same time, stressed the artificial quality of pictorial representation. Photography, as Roland Barthes argued (1981, 76–77), references reality instead of feigning it (as a painting does). This simple fact turns the representation of pain (both as an event and as a situation, as we shall see) into an altogether different phenomenon: we are no longer watching the (re)creation of a given reality, but rather a residue of that reality itself, as encapsulated in the imprint that a given “real” situation has left on the photographic support.

The fact that photography has become one of the most prominent media in contemporary art, and is used profusely with diverse goals and intentions, however, problematises its status as a tool to register unmediated reality. The feeling of suspicion and disbelief with regard to the photographic image grows exponentially in the case of digital photography: can we really be sure that what we see is what actually happened, or has the image been manipulated to the extent of purposefully deleting a part of that reality or, conversely, adding something that was not originally there? The more a photograph is manipulated, edited and transformed, the more it becomes akin to painting, thus increasing the distance between image and viewer.

What I would like to focus on in this essay is the different ways in which pain appears in Nan Goldin’s photography. The main fields I intend to discuss are the representation of pain and violence, the representation of pain and ritual, and the representation of pain and illness/death. In order to do so, I will analyse a number of significant works from Goldin’s artistic career, mostly (but not exclusively) taken from some of her best known collections, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1996), *The Devil’s Playground* (2003), and *The Beautiful Smile* (2007). My analysis seeks to provide insight into the artist’s handling of pain within the photographic image, as well as into the power of photography as a tool to communicate with the portrayed person’s suffering.

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## The Aesthetics of Pain and Its Construction

Nan Goldin is best known for the snapshot aesthetics of her photos, as well as for portraying her "family" of friends and lovers over the years in countless daily situations (including sexual acts, taking drugs, suffering from acute physical and emotional pain, or being ill). She started taking shots of the drag community in Boston, in 1972–73, and a few years later she moved to the East Village community of underground artists in New York, where she still lives, though she also frequently travels around the world and stays with friends in places as diverse as Berlin, Tokyo, London, Venice, Bangkok, and Egypt. Taking photographs became, from her early experiences in Boston, a vital activity, to the extent of her considering the camera to be an extension of her arm: "The camera is as much a part of my everyday life as talking or eating or sex" (Goldin 1996a, 6).

From the aesthetic point of view, therefore, Goldin's *oeuvre* bears a strong resemblance to the kind of family snapshots any amateur photographer may have taken of any private celebration, special event or holiday. The artist herself has noted the similarity with the snapshot aesthetics: "Snapshots are taken out of love and to remember people, places, and shared times. They are about creating a history by recording a history" (Goldin 1998, 19). However, this resemblance is only at a superficial level, because a careful analysis of her photos will reveal that the clumsiness or sloppiness so typical of snapshot photography is intentional rather than accidental in many of Goldin's works; in short, it is a means to create (or otherwise strengthen) emotional impact, and not a result of technical incompetence. Her lack of inhibition in the portrayal of the dark, dirty, or abject side of the human condition seems to be at odds with the celebratory/festive quality that usually permeates amateur photography.

Another significant difference to "real" snapshot photography is the way Goldin's authorial presence vanishes from her photographs—even when she herself is portrayed in them. The often relaxed, inadvertent or occasionally knowing demeanour her subjects display suggests that there is no intrusion in the world she is capturing (Prosser 2002, 345). In snapshot photography, on the other hand, the subject is usually aware of the photographer's presence: he/she *poses* intentionally and specifically before the camera, and in an attempt to look his/her best, because the photograph is intended to become a memorable recording of his/her best self. Goldin, however, never tries to show her subjects' (or her own) best self, although in many cases they are aware of her camera and look right into the lens. In this respect,

we can claim that their pain does not seem to be constructed through a conscious staging but through a collective narrative: by sequencing images in order to create a storyline of both joy and suffering, a celebration of a life rooted in extreme sensations. As Goldin herself has often remarked, her images constitute a “visual diary” (1996a, 6), and writers of diaries usually strive to describe life as they experienced it, often providing minute details, rather than as they wanted it to be. If an event is acutely painful a person writing a diary always has the choice of either confronting that event in their narration or suppressing it. However, if they choose to confront it they will most likely try to describe it as faithfully as possible—even though, as Prosser indicates, it is one thing to write about trauma, and something very different to publish or exhibit such writing (2002, 345).

In one of her most renowned images, *Nan after being battered, 1984* (1996a, 83), Goldin captures her self-portrait after her then-boyfriend, Brian, beat her up to the extent of nearly blinding her. This is a prime example of the aesthetics of pain in relation to violence. Here we witness Goldin building up the aftermath of violence, and focusing on the results and effects of violence on the body. We see Goldin’s hurt body, but the body in pain must be constructed (i.e. imagined and interpreted) by confronting the bruises, the cuts, the blood-shot eye. The representation of pain is, therefore, validated only by assumptions and preconceptions arising from our personal experience of pain, and what pain “should feel like”. An altogether different question is whether we understand a photograph as a sample of truth or as artifice, a product of human art and creation. For Goldin, photography is all about recording truth, not faking it, and she has expressed her regret that this status may be progressively waning in our contemporary world: “The belief that a photograph can be true has become almost obsolete” (1996a, 146). In relation to this reflection—and because of the complex status of photography as regards truth and artifice—we may question the “real” status of pain in her photographs; in other words, whether the representation of pain reflects a genuine sensation or a construction. Again, the artist has shown surprise and shock at the fact that her traumatic experience might even be questioned: “There are people who have said that I pretended to be battered for the photograph. Some of my friends heard the beating and ignored it while others, all men, subsequently told me it was a sign of his love” (1996a, 146).

At this point, we can introduce a difference between pain and violence. As Ariel Glucklich has observed, “violence is a semiotic event, while pain is a subjective sensation” (2001, 133). In this respect, the violent act, inflicted

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upon the body by means of aggression, torture, or simply accident, has a cultural meaning that is hard to find in pain alone—understood as a physical sensation. Here I think it may be useful to remember Scarry's observation that physical pain does not have "an object in the external world" (161). Pain is a perception that only requires a subject, and, precisely because it cannot be objectified, it is difficult to effectively express in language (162). If we move on to visual representation, the situation changes slightly, but the "objectlessness" of pain remains. Indeed, the image—the photographic image in particular—is more direct and immediate than any product of verbal language, yet the visual experience of contemplating a painful event communicates not pain, but the effects of pain on the body. In other words, we may understand the meaning of violence by contemplating an image where a person is being tortured, but in terms of visual experience all we can grasp is the injured body and its symbolism, which compels us to fill in the gaps regarding the actual understanding of pain with our own experience of painful events.

It is, therefore, the violent act—or, rather, the violent content coating the representation of a painful situation—that provokes a reaction in the viewer, a response to imagine pain and build it up from the image, the viewer's personal experience, and culturally acquired meanings in relation to pain. Similarly, we may differentiate between pain as a fact and pain as experience: the former refers to a phenomenon taking place at a given time, while the latter refers to knowledge of pain (Schleifer 2014, 5). This difference can be rephrased in terms of a division between *pain*, a physiological condition, and *suffering*, a psychological condition that, as Schleifer points out, "is the meaning and significance of the experience of pain as it affects the individual" (3–4). It should nevertheless be noted that pain does not exist outside of the individual's brain processes, and as such always retains a subjective quality.

Two other shots from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, *Heart-shaped bruise, NYC 1984* and *Ectopic pregnancy scar, NYC 1980* (1996a, 85 and 86), also establish a direct dialogue with pain, violence and its representation. Both images show the hurt body—in the first case, as a symbol which integrates love and violence,<sup>1</sup> and in the second, as a symbol of medical intrusion and intervention upon the female body. Here Scarry's assertion that pain

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<sup>1</sup> According to Louis Kaplan, we may interpret the bruise as an "uncanny marker on the surface of her body that symbolises these matters of the heart [...] somewhere in the vicinity between touch and wound" (2001, 10–11).

destroys language seems to be at once both confirmed and refuted. The titles themselves are self-explanatory; without the help of the images, the text, on its own, forces us not only to visualise the injured body but also to recreate the feeling of pain deriving from the injury. We may describe the experience of looking at these scarred/bruised bodies (as well as the feelings such contemplation stirs), but do the images really transmit the pain the individuals felt at the time of the aggression, or even at the time the photographs were taken? We may presume that the woman with the scar probably was anaesthetised, which means she felt no pain during the surgery; and as we will see in a moment, pain must be recalled in order to exist. We can only imagine pain: even though the images may reflect an unmediated painful situation it is our perception (and imagination) of the hurt body that completes their meaning.

Another couple of images, this time taken from *The Devil's Playground* (Goldin 2003), can illustrate how Goldin's aesthetics contribute to the imagining of pain in the hurt body. In *My wrist after accident, Zurich 2000*, and *Stigmata wound, Zurich 2000* (2003, 216–217 and 219) we confront close-ups of Goldin's arm. The arm is broken at the level of the wrist, in such a severe way that the flesh has been cut open and a white section of bone can be seen protruding out of the injury. Even though the first image, which was taken shortly after the accident, may be (perhaps intentionally) blurry and unfocused, we see enough to recreate the meaning of pain in our imagination, as well as the experience of the suffering Goldin must have gone through, for it is her suffering, not her physical pain, that the images compel us to imagine. Once more, the difference between pain as a physical state and as a psychological condition (suffering) becomes crucial if we want to fully understand the reaction Goldin's images provoke in us. This difference can also be envisioned as the artist's strategy to engender empathy as regards the suffering subject, in a way other depictions of extreme painful states or severely hurt bodies cannot attain (for instance, Caravaggio's or Gentileschi's paintings of beheadings). Not only can we "read" the meaning of pain in Goldin's images, but we also become attached to the portrayed subjects' suffering (even if we do not identify ourselves with their lifestyles).

It has been claimed that Goldin's photographic activity is rooted in an intimate conversation between photographer and subject, a "caress" or an act of love (Kaplan 2001, 11), and is thus, in this sense, very much the opposite of a painful experience. From my point of view, this idea of photography as a way of communing with the portrayed subject betrays a willingness to sublimate the pain and/or the violence the artist experienced on her own

body or saw inflicted upon other bodies. Goldin has declared that her use of photography is a "soothing" or "survival" mechanism when confronting fear (1996b, 451). Viewed under this light, we might even claim that her images contain a direct representation of painful experiences while at the same time providing the aesthetics to reduce the emotional upheaval caused by the confrontation of such experiences. Additionally, we might glimpse a sign of bravery in Goldin, confronting her abuser and portraying him repeatedly, in a variety of contexts. By means of recreating a narrative of her relationship with Brian and the eventual violent episode, she seems to present him as a menace—a potential source of pain and abuse. *Nan after being battered*, thus, becomes the climax and sad corollary of her narration. In these images of hurt and beaten bodies—as in many other photographs Goldin has captured over the years—it would seem that she wants to protect herself from the memory of pain by trapping or imprisoning it within the confines of the image. Or, as Ruddy suggests, by giving "image to loss while acting as a prophylactic against that loss" (2009, 354).

There is occasionally a link between pain and ritual in Goldin's works, especially in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, but also in later works such as *The Other Side* (1993), *Couples and Loneliness* (1998), and *The Devil's Playground* (2003). Her pictures of transgender people and of "queer", marginalised or non-normative individuals communicate a sense of underlying suffering, a subdued pain that lurks beneath the apparently liberated gender/lifestyle choices. The rites of passage these people go through in order to become what they want to be are, in many cases, of a predominantly visual nature, which somehow reveals a trivialisation or even emptiness of identity. Goldin shows us the results of the ritual, just as she showed us the cut and the bruise on her hurt body after the violent event: the tattoos, the piercing of the flesh, the mutilation/addition that allows the individual to model his/her body in order to accept him/herself. However, for all the endurance, and all the painful experiences we presume they must have gone through, the feeling of emptiness and disconnection from consciousness remains. This loss of identity often appears in scenes of intense emotional pain in Goldin's *oeuvre*. For instance, the number of shots that depict people (usually women) crying or going through emotional distress is striking. *Amanda crying on my bed, Berlin 1992* (Goldin 2007, 15), *Suzanne crying, NYC 1985*, *David with Butch crying at Tin Pan Alley, NYC 1981*, and *April crying at 7<sup>th</sup> and B, NYC 1985* (Goldin 1996a, 87, 124, and 84) are but a few examples. These photographs reveal, as I have already mentioned, how far Goldin is from the trivialisation of pain (or from indifference to other

people's pain). The individual may show an empty or conflicted identity, but the artist is never indifferent to pain: she cares for the hurt body in a way many other photographers do not. Diane Arbus' depiction of queer/non-normative individuals, for example, reveals a distance, an alienation that contaminates the viewer's perception of that reality. This is never the case in Goldin's works. She manages to capture emotional pain as a "single complex state" involving many different physiological and psychological processes (Glücklich 2001, 137), but her images always transmit strong caring—never distance or alienation—for the human reality she captures.

The difference between emotional pain and physical pain can indeed be useful to better assess the complexity of Goldin's representations of pain. Emotional pain may be understood as a type of pain coming from non-physical and psychological painful experiences—such as the loss of a loved person (Smith 2006, 225). It is usually easier to represent emotional pain than physical pain, mainly because in the former the source of pain can be specified and imagined: there is an external object towards which the feeling of pain is addressed. Pain as a sensation or physiological phenomenon, however, starts and ends within the subject; thus, it is difficult to commune with the pain that a given subject is experiencing, though it may be easier to commune with his/her suffering (through our own acquired knowledge of what that person might be feeling).

In a similar way, Nan Goldin forces us to imagine the experience of pain, and in the process a visceral response is awakened, albeit that in her photography a sense of closeness as regards the person who is suffering is also aroused. Whereas in Caravaggio's painting the visceral response, at least in the first instance, overpowers almost any other reaction in the viewer, Goldin's photographs also prompt empathy with the portrayed person's suffering. One might be tempted to assert, in line with Susan Sontag's reasoning, that we relish "the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching" (2003, 41). This sense of empathy may also be found in other photographic depictions of hurt and/or tortured bodies, but the fact that Goldin was, herself, a member of the community she photographed (living, experiencing, and sharing not only pain but other intense sensations and emotions) makes her work unique.

Contrasting vividly with the empathy that her photographs distil, we can mention a radically different illustration of pain and suffering: the photographs of prisoners taken during the Khmer Rouge Cambodian genocide (1975–1979). These photographs were taken, in almost all cases, by Nhem En, a young photographer employed by Pol Pot's regime to visually docu-

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ment each and every individual that entered the Tuol Sleng school in Phnom Penh—a school which the Khmer Rouge leaders turned into a prison with the code-name "S-21" (Chandler, 1999). Interestingly, part of this execrable visual material—mug shots of about a hundred prisoners—was exhibited decades later, in 1997, at the *Rencontres photographiques d'Arles* photo festival in France. The exhibition was based on a number of negatives restored in 1994 by Chris Riley and Douglas Niven, two American photojournalists, and aimed to show the horrors of the Cambodian genocide.<sup>2</sup>

The re-contextualization of these images of hurt and tortured bodies within a cultural/artistic event brings to the fore an ethical issue. Assigning the status of "artist" to someone who collaborated with a regime that massacred dozens (and occasionally hundreds) of people on a daily basis, and thus contributed to maintaining the regime, may indeed be revolting in moral terms, but the position of the exhibition's curator, Christian Caujolle, may be no less disturbing. He may not have been the "author" of the images himself, but he was responsible for the selection, arrangement and installation of the images, as well as for the meaning deriving from the exhibition (De Duve 2008, 5). Thus, an image that was not originally intended to be a work of art (although it seems undeniable that Nhem En did indeed use some aesthetic parameters as regards composition, lighting, and other technical details in his mug shots) becomes the presumed moral/political evidence of horror within the framework of an artistic event. Here we witness, as I view it, the staging of the photographs of pain and hurt bodies as simulacrum. This staging works on several levels: from the creation of a visual image out of "real" pain (as the result of a merely instrumental function of the camera), to its re-contextualization as the result of an informative function, to an altogether new status for the image, governed by an aesthetic function. In the end, Nhem En's photographs can be reduced to mere images: visual objects that can, in turn, be analysed in purely aesthetic or artistic terms, no matter how abject or revolting the content or the meaning of the image may be. But this loss of original meaning would probably also take place if we saw the images outside of the art event, in a different context (a book, a TV documentary, an installation in an official building, etc.). However, if we were a relative of the person in the photograph, or had ourselves survived the Cambodian genocide, the works would evoke in us a far more accurate sense of pain—at least closer to what the people in the photographs may

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<sup>2</sup> The negatives had been previously published in 1996 in the book *The Killing Fields* (De Duve 2008, 3-4).

have felt. In short, the more direct the personal experience of the viewer as regards the event depicted in the photograph, the closer their imagining of pain in such an event will be.

Goldin's photographs reflect emotional states that resonate with the viewer by means of repetition and sequencing. Through repetition the rite of passage is revealed. Sometimes she shows us the ritual of endurance as it is being performed—for example, in *Mark tattooing Mark, Boston 1978* (1996a, 77)—but more often she captures the results of the process, the aftermath of the ritual, and the moment where the individual belongs effectively to the community. *Mark and Mark, Boston 1978*, and *Kenny with tattoo, NYC 1980* (1996a, 61 and 71) are good examples of members of the community that have endured pain and proudly brandish their tattoos—the symbols of their shallow identity—as symbols of power.

As I mentioned earlier, emotional pain has a meaning (an object) that physical pain lacks. This meaning comes to the fore in the representation of pain in connection with illness and death. The loss of a loved one, a friend, a relative, etc. can, in this way, be expressed (and verbalised) more easily than physical pain (Smith 2006, 225–226). However, Goldin's photographs of her ill friends, as well as her photographs of dead or dying people, seem to be intended as an homage to the decayed body as much as a strategy to sublimate pain. Some of her most iconic images depict terminally ill or dead friends: *Gotscho kissing Gilles, Paris 1993*, *Gilles's arm, Paris 1993*, and *Cookie at Vittorio's casket, Sept. 16, NYC 1989* (Goldin 2007, 142, 143 and 144) are amongst Goldin's most poignant renderings of emotional pain. In all these images, we get not only “someone else's pain” but also the artist's sharing of the subjects' suffering, as well as her realisation that pain and loss are unavoidably intertwined within the photographic image:

Photography doesn't preserve memory as effectively as I had thought it would [...] I always thought that if I photographed anyone or anything long enough, I would never lose the person, I would never lose the memory, I would never lose the place. But the pictures show me how much I have lost (Goldin 1996a, 145).

In a similar way, when she photographs her own attempts at detoxing from her drug addiction, she also appears to seek to confront pain by depicting herself at the peak of her suffering, as if this would help her be re-born clean or start anew (Goldin 2003, 440). We find this aesthetics of pain in shots such as *Self-portrait in delirium, The Priory, London 2002*, and *Relapse/Detox Grid #2, 1998–2000/2001*, both published in *The Devil's Play-*

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*ground* (2003, 411 and 82–83). Overcoming pain deriving from addiction had a lot to do with Goldin discovering natural light as a means to capture the world from a different perspective. The shift from the nightlife and artificial light to daylight and natural spaces also provoked “a shift of presence” where before was absence and disappearance, death and decay (Ruddy 2009, 376).

We may infer from our analysis so far that the aesthetics of pain may lead in a relatively easy way to understanding representation as a spectacle. In other words, an image that originally depicted the pain of an individual may turn into a source of pleasure for the viewer. The ease with which the aesthetic dimension overtakes the representation of pain does not escape Goldin. However, as I have already argued, her trivialization of pain, illness or suffering is in fact only on the surface. Any in-depth analysis of her photographs will reveal the layers of affection, closeness and empathy she feels for the individuals portrayed that lie behind the seemingly superficial handling of the visual material<sup>3</sup>. There can be no denying, though, that by making them public Goldin turns both the images and their content (pain-related or otherwise) into some sort of spectacle the viewer ultimately engages with as a pleasurable experience.

One final aspect to mention in helping us understand the aesthetics of pain is the way the objectless quality of pain can spread to other sensations (for example, hunger or pleasure). The less identifiable the object of a state of consciousness is, the closer it gets to pain; and, conversely, the stronger the object is, the further the state is from pain (Scarry 1985, 165–166). Scarry uses as an example how being hungry without a desire for a specific food can turn hunger into an objectless state, thus bringing it closer to the boundaries of pain (the extreme objectless state). Similarly, a lack of definition in feelings of love—the lack of a specific individual to whom to address those feelings—may turn desire into angst and despair, again moving closer to the experience of pain. Precisely to prevent this kind of extreme situations, imagination stands as an emergency measure, providing an object where, in fact, there is none. In this respect, Scarry argues, imagining an object works in the direction of eliminating a given acute state of consciousness; for example, imagining a glass of water in order to eliminate the feeling of thirst (166–167).

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, essays by Louis Kaplan, Jay Prosser, and Sarah Ruddy (all referenced in the bibliography).

While Scarry's explanation seems strong and plausible when applied to certain sensations, it is less convincing when applied to senses like sight (it would be hard to defend the idea that seeing a tortured or hurt body actually "eliminates" our need to watch images of the body in pain). However, we might accept that a similar mechanism, in terms of providing an object in objectless situations, is at work in the world of visual art. If we look at Nhem En's photographs of tortured, hurt or maimed prisoners, or Goldin's photos of herself after being battered or of scarred and injured bodies, we will be in a situation where we must necessarily confront a representation of pain (or suffering). Furthermore, we will also have to face the somatic and occasionally physical responses that such contemplation may provoke in us. Even in such a situation, though, viewers can use the getaway of aesthetics; by turning the image into a purely aesthetic experience, or by focusing on its formal qualities, we might be able to at least diminish the impact of the emotional response that the image might provoke in us. When confronting an extreme depiction of pain, at the very least we can choose "not to see"—by turning our eyes away from the unsettling source, or by closing them—and then allowing our imagination to provide a more pleasurable or satisfying visual object (be it a blank void, the image of a flower, a completely abstract image, etc.). Nevertheless, not even Goldin's hardest images are as extreme as to provoke such a visceral reaction, the more so because what gives meaning to her images is, in most cases, the above-mentioned experience of overcoming pain by sharing the subject's suffering instead of merely registering the painful event.

This reliance on meaning rather than on fact leads back to the division I mentioned earlier: if pain is, essentially, a physical event, suffering is a conglomerate of remembered experiences. This assertion clashes, as Schleifer suggests, with the fact that pain needs to become a remembered experience to be complete (6–7); in other words, there can be no pain (and, consequently, no suffering), without consciousness. Memories of pain—or painful memories—are the raw material of many of Nan Goldin's photographs. The author herself has declared that her photographic activity sprang out of a need to have a vivid and accurate memory of her loved ones: "Memory allows for an endless flow of connections. Stories can be rewritten, memory can't. If each picture is a story, then the accumulation of these pictures comes closer to the experience of memory, a story without end" (Goldin 1996a, 6). The photographic image preserves, therefore, what once was but no longer is. It helps us remember, although, because it is inevitably incomplete, it cannot recreate any experience in its entirety, only a fragment of what hap-

pened. This incompleteness applies to capturing the painful event as well, which is why we have to fill in the gaps in the depiction of pain with our own imagination (and our own memories of the experience of pain), in order to complete its meaning.

Because "by definition pain is conscious" (Schleifer 2014, 10), and because it seems to destroy any possibility of discourse, any account of pain (either verbal or visual) can only take place once pain has subsided, working from the memories of either the physical sensation or the psychological condition it provoked. The immediacy of the photographic medium brings the experience of witnessing pain close to the painful event as it was experienced by the subject, but there always remains a distance between the viewer and the depiction of the subject who suffers, just as there is a separation between the reader and the literary description of pain. It is the dexterity of writers/artists that allows them to develop a description vivid enough for us to be moved or even shocked by the imagined pain.

To wrap up my analysis, I would like to go back to the idea of sequencing and repetition in the creation of a sense of community. Sequencing also contributes to strengthening narration, and it is, ultimately, a narrative of pain that Goldin offers us through her dissolving of the individual's specific pain into a flow of images (either in her published books or, more pervasively, in her early slideshows). Since Goldin envisions both her art and her life as a connected sequence of events, her sense of community as a family—wherein every member plays an instrumental role subjected to the whole—turns the construction of individual pain into a narrative of collective pain. By means of a unique aesthetics and the dexterous sequencing of similar painful events and experiences, Goldin constructs her own narration of pain, one where she does not deny the effects of pain but uses them to overcome loss, sorrow and suffering. In a way, we might see in this manipulation of other people's pain, a selfish act, even though that act might be prompted by genuine love and affection.

## **Conclusions**

As we have seen, several strategies can be used to represent pain. My main concern in this essay has been to reflect upon the ways in which Nan Goldin uses aesthetics and narration to expose the painful event without exploiting or alienating the suffering subject. Sometimes the subject is herself, sometimes it is a member of her community; in either case, she confronts pain and its effects on the hurt body and, eventually, communicates her own reading by creating a meaning where there was emptiness.

While it may be true that in our contemporary western culture both pain and suffering are considered negative or inconvenient aspects of life that should be avoided (Schleifer 2014, 3–4), Nan Goldin’s representations of pain seem to work in the opposite direction. She does not shy away from pain but confronts it, embraces it, and eventually defuses its socially constructed negativity by turning it into an artistic material. We do not get “the real thing” (a raw depiction of pain), but, rather, Goldin’s interpretation of it, a representation coated with love and affection for the suffering subjects. The artist herself is also in pain, very much like the other members of her community; nevertheless, by turning her photographic practice into a sort of addiction/ritual, she manages to escape the doom of the “real” drug addict (death by overdose, or suffering from AIDS).

Narration, in sum, turns pain into something else, and this “something else” instils a feeling of pleasurable melancholy in the viewer (in contrast to what we might experience in the case of Nhem En’s mug shots of Cambodian prisoners), even though the viewer may be distanced from the underground world of bohemian artists, transgender people or drug addicts that is portrayed. Goldin narrates pain as an expression of affection, closeness and compassion for the subject in pain, and in this way she creates beauty where formerly there was only bleakness and suffering.

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