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Intervention: Nan Goldin, AIDS, and the Opioid Crisis

The subject of Nan Goldin's nearly fifty-year practice is intimacy. Photographs of friends, lovers, and family are activated with a fierce familiarity—Goldin has said that she feels photography is the only way to truly know a person. Her practice extends beyond the lens, however. At critical junctures in her life she has punctured the veneer of “art for arts sake” to reveal relationships between the art world and its political and capitalist context. Two of those instances arose during moments of political upheaval that intersected with her life: in 1989, at the heart of the AIDS crisis, and in 2018, during the present opioid epidemic. By reminding audiences that art is framed by the world itself, she merges public and private under one roof, calling attention to the need to attend to a human body that longs for support. Goldin began her recent public campaign with the line “I survived the opioid crisis.”¹



Protest against Sackler Family, Purdue Pharmaceuticals in the Sackler Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), March 2018.
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Much of her message has been delivered in the first person: an attention to the “I,” the artist’s own body, as well as to the larger “we”—the community linked by the opioids that pass(ed) through their blood. Goldin’s language was formed in support groups and intimate gatherings in the artist’s living room; she resists using the term “addict,” “junkie” or “abuser,” preferring the term “substance use disorder.”²

Purdue Pharma’s drug OxyContin was approved by the FDA in 1996. As the *New Yorker* reported, “The Company funded research and paid doctors to make the case in which concerns about opioid addiction were overblown... Sales representatives marketed OxyContin as a product ‘to start and stay with.’”³ Disordered relationships with this drug grew over the twenty plus years since its launch. It has been credited as a path toward heroin, Fentanyl and Carfentanyl, and serves as a crutch for those that deem OxyContin a doctor-certified alternative for opiate highs.

Following a several-years-long, crescendoing relationship with OxyContin, Goldin states in interviews that she was “unable to leave my bed, my room» and for long stints “didn’t have contact with the world.”⁴ After time in rehab, Goldin emerged ready to fight. “I knew of no political movements on the ground like ACT UP. Most of my community was lost to AIDS. I can’t stand by and watch another generation disappear.”⁵ Her campaign, under the title P.A.I.N., seeks to bring visibility to this illness and to the fact that the Sackler family, an art world philanthropic giant, is a capital instigator. “To get their ear we will target their philanthropy,” she has written.⁶ “I decided to go through the museum. That’s where they live, that’s where they’ll hear us.”⁷

On March 10, 2018, Nan Goldin and a group of approximately 100 demonstrators staged an action in the Sackler Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Until expelled by security, the group chanted “Two hundred thousand people dead/ Sacklers lie/ People die.” At the time of this writing, other protests will have taken place at the Smithsonian’s Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C. and at New York City Hall. Thus far the Sackler family (via Purdue Pharma) has responded by stating they are “deeply concerned” about

“prescription and illicit opioid abuse” and are contributing to educational, health, and law enforcement initiatives.⁸ They have not stopped distributing opioids, however. With the influx of backlash in North America, they are now pouring energy into their international extension, Mundipharma, in order to promote pain medication in Asia, Europe, and Latin America.⁹ Goldin’s current protests tongue-tie a major philanthropic family. How can one be a true benefactor to the arts if one’s actions are in direct violation of an arts community?

The legalized drug trade occupies a unique stratum of society—government, bolstered by capital, serves at once as gatekeeper and dealer. Large pharmaceutical companies, whose conduct federal authorities deem legal, deploy enormous quantities of money to control their message, making dangerous, addictive substances easily accessible. Nan Goldin’s recent stint in rehab was not her first encounter with substance abuse treatment—she was also admitted in 1988. When she emerged then, she felt the need to face the AIDS crisis that had crept through communities and struck out lives for years, and she ultimately curated *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. It ran from November 16, 1989 through January 16, 1990 at Artists Space in New York. All the artists who showed work in *Witnesses* were affected by AIDS and HIV, either infected themselves or had lost friends and family to the disease.¹⁰ The emphasis on “witnesses” was woven throughout the show: a community directly affected by the disease spoke out through work, a collective voice responding to crisis. “My work has always started from the personal;” writes Goldin. “The same is true for my advocacy.”¹¹

Artists Space has long been a non-profit venue dependent on outside sponsorship. With a budget of \$30,000, Artist Space director Susan Wyatt applied for a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the United States’ governmental arts fund, to finance Goldin’s show. When information spread that a catalogue essay by American artist and activist David Wojnarowicz vocally condemned religious leaders and the US government’s handling of the AIDS crisis, NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer withdrew funding. The essay in question referred to those in power working against AIDS healthcare as “putrid” people he wished to push off the Empire State Building. Frohnmayer



Protest against Sackler Family, Purdue Pharmaceuticals in the Sackler Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), March 2018.
Photo : Andrew Russeth / ARTNEWS. Copyright © Art Media Holdings, LLC.

deemed this was violence against the government, and remembers that the only edit Wojnarowicz made to accommodate pushback was to change “fat fucking cannibal cardinal O’Connor” to “fat cannibal cardinal O’Connor.”¹² After much debate the grant was partially restored, but only to fund the exhibition and not the catalogue, which few read as a victory.

This controversy represents the clash between a government that prioritized law over the fragility and pain of a community they viewed as “deliberate, disgusting, revolting.”¹³ Crucially, this government also controlled access to life-saving drugs and treatment for those suffering from AIDS and HIV. As Wojnarowicz wrote, “it’s on the shoulders of a bunch of bigoted creeps who ... are in the positions of power that determine where and when and for whom government funds are spent for research and medical care.”

The AIDS crisis and today’s opioid crisis mark two moments in which death, often that of disenfranchised bodies, made invisible, is ignored in favour of profit. Making the private sphere public is a means to intervene in these exchanges, whether person-to-person, person-to-corporation, or person-to-government. “There are ways of framing that will bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness,” writes Judith Butler, “that will allow us to stand for the value and dignity of human life, to react with outrage when lives are degraded and eviscerated without regard for their value as lives.”¹⁴ “To make the *private* into something *public* is an action that has terrific repercussions,” wrote Wojnarowicz. “Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference.”¹⁵

Goldin’s backdrop has consistently strayed from the studio: it takes place in the home, or in a space where a magnetic, active relationship takes place between setting and subject. During the ‘70s and ‘80s, she expressed discomfort with natural light, preferring to photograph in dimly lit homes, clubs or bedrooms—spaces that have been designated and shaped by the people who enter in and out of them.

Her photograph *Cookie on my bed, Bowery, NYC, 1988*, takes place in Goldin’s bedroom. Cookie Mueller, seated on Goldin’s bed, is opening a beer. She would succumb to the effects of AIDS a year later, but here she is surrounded by the ephemera of Goldin’s bedroom; details from Hieronymus Bosch, sketches, notes scrawled by friends, masks, cigarettes. Her surroundings speak to shared identity and comfort, of the images that make up a bulk of an existence.

In *David Wojnarowicz laughing, NYC, 1991*, the artist leans into his elbow, smiling with a cigarette in his hand. He describes the same space two years earlier in his *Witnesses* essay: “The table is filled with piles of paper and objects; a boom-box, a bottle of AZT, a jar of Advil (remember, you can’t take aspirin or Tylenol while on AZT). There’s an old smiley face mug with pens and scissors and a bottle of Xanax for when the brain goes loopy.”¹⁶ This personal tableau has its own sense of coding and visibility, both in what can be seen and for those who are familiar with it.

Fifteen years later, *Dope on my rug, New York, 2016* similarly takes place in the personal space. Spread out over Goldin’s rug is an arrangement of cigarettes, heroin, OxyContin, Adderall, and Tums—drugs of various levels of legality. These objects are on equal footing with a sleeping mask, a cell phone and a camera. In an interview she has laughed wryly at the Tums, remarking that so many don’t realize that OxyContin and Tums go hand-in-hand.

These personal effects continue to resonate, especially in their relationship with larger frameworks of power. Goldin’s depiction of drugs critiques the institutions that regulate them. What is the “law,” so carefully invoked by the NEA in 1989 and by Purdue Pharma in 2018? The law lays out, with totalizing effect, what one can and cannot do in a system. Diana Fuss’s interpretation of law as a form of hysteria can be illuminating to this point—Sigmund Freud characterized group hysteria as a message that infects a group to the point where the source is forgotten and all that is left is the message, accepted as a truth that does not require evidence.¹⁷ Why can’t we park there? Why can’t we live there? Why can’t we cross that border? The rule of law follows

the logic of hysteria, a set of codes put in place (seemingly authorless, residing in moral and common sense) to become the belief of communities.

An image is imbued with all one's experiences, a viewer never meets an image with a pristine, unencumbered gaze. "The image is a holding place of meaning, already structured by psychological processes," writes art historian and psychoanalyst Griselda Pollock. The image is "the carrier of affects, phantasies, and displaced meanings."¹⁸ To carry those beliefs to a new, perhaps unexpected, place can put injustice directly in dialogue with sources of power.

Therein lies the strength that Nan Goldin's diaristic, self- and community- motivated model harnesses. A face is put in opposition to the supposed logic of the law. As poet and theorist Fred Moten asserts, an image can resist—it can make noise, it can scream, it can move against the tide of "good" taste.¹⁹ Goldin's practice, when encountered in spaces beyond the white cube—in the pages of an arts magazine, in popular news articles, or by a spectator who passes by a protest, can do something. It absorbs viewers' opinions and gives them new meaning.

Goldin's images bring the human being into view in all its frailty and strength. Cookie Mueller and David Wojnarowicz are not obituaries or points to make about AIDS deaths, but rather humans who laugh, move through the world, embody private spaces, smoke cigarettes. Goldin's floor, as a vessel for the objects she encounters in the sanctum of her home, withdraws an opioid user from the space of law-breaker or criminal, and reminds us of the personal, the idiosyncrasy of a soft rug and hard drugs. By channelling the force of intimacy, her practice becomes a means of intervention in a mammoth, complex system of power and control.

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5. Goldin, Op cit. *Artforum*.
6. Ibid.
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12. John Frohnmayer, *Leaving Town Alive: Confessions of an Arts Warrior*. Houghton Mifflin, 1993, 78–80; Wojnarowicz, David. "Post Cards from America: X-Rays From Hell." *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, New York, Artists Space, 1989, 7–10.
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