

**When Contemporary Art Educates:  
Reading Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.**

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Between June and October 2017, the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) Dublin staged Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Prior to that, it was shown at the Museum of Modern Art New York where I viewed it. A well-known work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (hereafter referred to as *The Ballad*) has been presented as a slide show ever since it was first shown at the Mudd Club in Lower Manhattan in 1979. Since then, it has been edited and updated on several occasions. *The Ballad* comprises a collection of more than 700 photographs, made over a fifteen-year period. The collection offers a glimpse into Goldin's world: her world during the late 1970s, the 1980s and into the early 1990s. It offers a glimpse into the relations that Goldin established and that established her as a particular kind of subject during that time. *The Ballad* includes photographs of Goldin, her friends, her friends' children, and her acquaintances pictured in such places as the park; the beach; by the sea; in a hotel bedroom; at a restaurant; on the bed; beside the window; in the living room; on the sofa; at the table; in the bathroom; on the train; on a Bowery rooftop; standing in the shower; reclining in the bathtub; sitting on the toilet; laid out in a coffin; at a tattoo parlour; on the phone; on stage; on the street; at breakfast; attending a wedding; and doing such things as blowing out candles on a birthday cake; staring directly at the camera with a cigarette dangling from his mouth; playing monopoly; getting high; dancing; fighting; shaving; drinking; crying; fucking; hugging; staring; sitting; sleeping; smiling; masturbating; twisting at her birthday party in New York City. Accompanying the slide show is a soundtrack curated by Goldin. Each showing of the work lasts for 45 minutes. At its end, the work begins again.

The world that Goldin depicts is one that appears intense, varied, loving, possessive, forgiving, and embracing; a world of close friendships and intimacy, of sex and drug use, of dance clubs and domestic life, of interiors and exteriors, of violent as well as loving encounters, of death and loss. Her photographs are intimate in nature and align closely with the style of intimacy that photographers of the 1960s and 1970s embraced. Further, the composition of

many of the images suggests Goldin's closeness to the situations she pictured as well as the intimacies that she shared with those who were the subjects of her photographs. She was there. She was present. She was an actor in that world as well as its chronicler. She witnessed what she captured while participating in the events that she pictured. Each photograph suggests that she was attuned to aesthetic qualities in human experience, or at least sought them out. And yet she removes herself in part from these scenes that she captures in order to record them, fix them, and give them an image. But she is always within them. "I want to show exactly what my world looks like, without glamorization, without glorification" (Goldin 1986/2012, p. 6), she tells us in a book which she produced with Marvin Heiferman, Mark Holborn and Suzanne Fletcher (1986/2012); a book that shares the same name as the artwork and includes a selection of photographs from it. *The Ballad*, she explains, "[was] always about reality, the hard truth, and there was never any artifice. I have always believed that my photographs capture a moment that is real" (p. 145).

While these are some of the reasons that Goldin has shared for producing this work — her intention as an artist, we might say, which might never materialize in the work itself— *The Ballad*, however, continues to function and reveal itself in ways that Goldin can neither control nor fully anticipate. It reveals itself in the contexts in which it is shown and the manner in which it is framed, interpreted and written about. Although that being said, *The Ballad* outruns any single attempt to contain it within a given meaning structure. As Henri Focillon (1989) puts it, "a work of art rises proudly above any interpretation we may see fit to give it" (p. 32). These observations, then, bring me to the purpose of this short essay that takes as its subject art and the concept of education.

In his recent book, *Teaching Objects: Studies in Art Based Learning*, Jeroen Lutters (2015) writes about how works of art have functioned for him as teaching objects; objects that have introduced him to elements, aspects and qualities of the world that would otherwise remain hidden or unavailable to him if it was not for those works of art that he encountered. Reading Lutters' account it becomes obvious that artworks, for him, have the capacity to address us and orientate us to the world in particular and distinctive ways. Going with this idea that artworks potentially have educative qualities, in the pages that follow I wish to explore, albeit briefly and provisionally, the idea that contemporary works of art can perhaps, under particular circumstances, have educative potential, might present as pedagogical in nature, or establish an

educative relation (for a fuller discussion of this idea see O'Donoghue 2016, 2017 and Garoian and O'Donoghue 2017). That is to say, we might learn something about ourselves or the world in which we live by spending time with artworks and by being open to what they might be suggesting to us, or to thing that they re calling us to pay attention. It is also to say that the educative possibility of an artwork lies not necessarily in its content, but rather in the nature of relations that it activates when one takes an interest in it and tries to figure out what it is doing, or seeking to achieve. The educative possibility of an artwork might lie in the thought spaces into which its viewer is invited.

For Jiddu Krishnamurti (1953/1981), education is a practice that seeks to develop in the learner a deeper understanding of the learner's relation to the world. That is, the learner's relation to people, things, ideas, events, and occurrences that show up for her when she interacts with the world and its operations. Krishnamurti also views education as a process that encourages the learner to identify his implicatedness in aspects of the world that shows up for him in his pursuit of it. In this respect, one is always in the world even as one attempts to make sense of it, which is an idea that *The Ballad* reveals in a compelling manner. Krishnamurti (1953/1981) tells us that there are two core purposes of education. One is to cultivate "an integrated outlook on life" where thoughts and feelings are brought together and one's ability to be self-aware is awakened and cultivated. The second purpose, which is not entirely unrelated to the first, is to bring one to understand "the inherited tendencies and environmental influences which condition the mind and heart and sustain fear" (p. 11-15). In this vein, one might suggest that the photographs Goldin made and selected for inclusion in *The Ballad* reflect her concern with her relationships with herself and others — relationships that are revealed as intimate, intimidating, fearful if not painful, life-giving and life-taking. Perhaps the process of photographing her world enables her to reflect on her position in it, especially in relation to others. Perhaps the process of photographing her world enables her to reflect on way in which she and others embrace what life offers in good times and in bad. It was fear, says Goldin, which motivated her to make the images that she did during this time period, and to make such large quantities of images. She feared that she would forget the people who meant so much to her. So she photographed them. Reflecting on the collection of photographs that she made of her close friend Cookie Mueller (who appears in *The Ballad* on several occasions), Goldin explains, "I had always thought that if I photographed someone enough, I could never lose them. Putting

the pictures together had made me realize how much I'd lost". Mueller would die from complications arising from HIV AIDS before Goldin would put together the Mueller collection. Making photograph of friends, she writes "[was] about trying to hold onto people, making sure they didn't disappear without a trace." <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2012/04/theory-nan-goldin-on-cookie-mueller.html>).

As *The Ballad* reveals, and as Sontag (1977) has remarked, photography is commonly used to promote and maintain the idea of the family by giving it an image. Images of the family doing things together are not hard to find, be they images of the family taking road trips, spending time on vacation, or celebrating and marking various achievements from births to marriages to deaths. *The Ballad* visually documents Goldin's family and in doing so discloses that Goldin, too, belonged to a family, although not a nuclear family, but a family nonetheless. A family of others. A family of friends, as she would describe it. In revealing the complicated nature of living in the world with her family of friends who defined, in part, who Goldin was and who she could be, it might be suggested that *The Ballad* leads one to consider if not encourage one to think about how affects such as love, adoration, disappointment, jealousy, loss and fulfillment are aroused, conveyed or achieved, and how they are read off and onto the bodies and actions of others. *The Ballad* reveals that the act of photographing enables one to seek out, notice, reflect, invent or convey such affects and ultimately move others to thought in ways suggested.

In that sense, while *The Ballad* gives an image to relations lived out between men and women, men and men, women and women, and men, women and children in the privacy of their homes, their cars or in public places such as bars, beaches, trains, and washrooms that stretch across the East Coast of the US to Europe and all the way down south to Mexico, it does more than this. Sitting with *The Ballad* as it performs itself, one is confronted with emotionally charged images that have the capacity to arouse affective responses. "I don't remember when I first saw Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, writes Christian Viveros-Fauné (2016), "but I recall exactly what it felt like: It was as intense as an earthquake, as personal as a starter tattoo, as wrenching as a childhood bellyache." Similarly, Mark Hoborn describes his encounter with *The Ballad* as "among the most powerful visual experiences he'd ever had" (Als, 2016). It brings us in contact with how we feel (even makes us feel) as we respond to images that seek to capture feelings. In this sense, one might suggest that the work functions to create

an aesthetic experience (deBolla, 2001). What Goldin's making practice in *The Ballad* suggests is that the photographer has the capacity to see things that are not shown to her. It seems that she saw qualities such as hope, love, joy, despair, and hopelessness in the world in which she lived. And so, one might say, her work has the potential to reveal the intimacies, fears, doubts, hopes, promises of living and existing in the world with others.

*The Ballad* reminds us that making photographs is a way of spending time in the world, as much as it is a way of orientating oneself to the world. That it is a way of noticing and not noticing, of committing something to eternity and thus preserving it, as Goldin wished to do, or simply seeking to forget it altogether. *The Ballad* suggests perhaps that the camera becomes a way of making contact with the world and experiencing it as much as it acts as an instrument for recording it. The camera functions as a way of witnessing the world or giving it a form in the ways in which it records it. And yet the camera pays equal attention to all that it has been pointed toward. It captures indiscriminately. It captures all that is present to it; all that is in front of its lens. Perhaps it functions as a way of creating a parallel world. Regardless, taking photographs is a way of acting in the world. Taking photographs can serve as a way of seeking out and responding to the unfamiliar aspects of the world, or of registering the familiar, which is oftentimes overlooked because of its familiarity. In such circumstances, the camera can become the object that grants permission to look with and without consequence.

You might have seen Dan Gilroy's film *Nightcrawler* (2014) in which its main character Louis Bloom (played by Jake Gyllenhal), a videographer/cameraman/photographer, would spend his nights driving frantically through the streets of Los Angeles seeking out the most gruesome and visually disturbing events to film. Later, he would sell his videos and images to a local news station and the more gruesome his images the greater interest shown in them by the news station, which, in turn, encouraged Bloom to seek out and hunt for the most visually disturbing images of events. When found, then he would shoot them with little regard for the dignity of the subject being imaged. There is, says Sontag (1977), "something predatory in the act of taking a picture" (p. 14). And, she continues, "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (p.14). The camera also grants permission of another kind. It offers permission to go places where one might not go normally. Citing the words of Diane Arbus, "Photography was a license to go wherever I wanted and to do

what I wanted to do”, Sontag writes, “The camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibition, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed” (p.41). Like Bloom in the *Nightcrawler*, we learn from studying *The Ballad* that image-making is a complex event in itself. One might say that Goldin needed to establish relations of a certain kind with her subjects in order to produce the types of photographs that she did. She needed the trust of the people who she photographed. She needed to tap into their desire; their desire perhaps to be objects of speculation, contemplation, objects to be desired, despised or loved.

Interestingly, in *The Ballad* the movement of each image projected through the carousel projector onto a screen in a dark room with each image given to the viewer only for a short time corresponds in part with the movement in the lives of those who are photographed by Goldin. In the conceptualization and presentation of the form of *The Ballad*, Goldin perhaps mimics, in some ways, the conditions through which she saw these moments that she captured with her camera. Allowing viewers of *The Ballad* only a few seconds to observe each photograph, to take it in, before the next one arrives and replaces the one that has just passed, does not give viewers an opportunity to linger over each image for very long. Goldin dictates the time that the viewer has for viewing each photograph just as the movement of life dictated how much she saw and was able to capture through her lens the lives of her subjects, as they moved on constantly. What one learns perhaps is that unlike the still photograph (even though this slide show is made up of still photographs), *The Ballad* requires a certain type of looking; one that goes along with and follows the rhythm established in part by Goldin.

While, individually and collectively, Goldin’s photographs convey an image of the world (perhaps not our world, but an aspect of the world nonetheless) seen and experienced from the inside by Goldin herself, who, as noted earlier, was a participant of that world, her photographs present a world that did not quite exist in the manner and sequence that the photographs suggest. Acknowledging this, of course, brings one to say that Goldin not only has recorded fragments of a life lived, but more importantly she has, to a large extent, invented a life from the one given in appearance. In other words, *The Ballad* presents images of people who did exist – people who shared the same space with Goldin at the moment when she pressed the shutter button of her camera. But Goldin isolates aspects of the world she observed, emphasized some of the relations that she witnessed and selects, arranges, orders and sequences the photographs she has made of

that world as she places and positions them within *The Ballad*. In doing so, she creates another world that corresponds to the world pictured but does not reveal it precisely as it transpired for those who lived in it. In doing so, she also produced photographs within which more is to be seen than she saw at the time of making these images. As a result, there is for Goldin a strangeness to all of her images no matter how familiar she was with the scenes and situations from which they were produced. With respect to inventing a world from a world, Goldin's practice aligns with Susan Sontag's (1977) observation that "the photographer is not simply the person who records the past but the one who invents it" (p.67). One might even say that in *The Ballad*, Goldin curates a collection of photographs to advance a particular image of a world that might have a certain appeal to those who seek out other ways of existing in the company of others. And in this regard, the work reminds us that an artwork reveals more than it shows.

While one might say that the photograph does not transform the thing it depicts, one could also say that it represents it differently for it removes it from what it belongs to, without, of course, taking it away physically as one might do when one picks a yellow dandelion from the side of the road. Also, one might further say that the manner in which an object or situation is framed, brought within the frame of the lens, removed from all that surrounds it, and captured from a particular viewing angle causes a transformation of some kind. The transformation might be nothing more than simply repositioning the object slightly differently, but at the same time a transformation has occurred. And yet, by making and exhibiting art photographs, artist-photographers, like Goldin, encourage us to see what we might otherwise miss.

In closing, one could argue that to approach an artwork as potentially educative in nature is perhaps to bring it into presence through a particular set of conditions, which it is. My intention in this essay was not to reduce Goldin's work to those conditions. Rather, it was to explore, albeit provisionally, if such conditions can open a work of art to additional or alternative meanings. The idea that works of art have the potential to teach us something about the world in which we live and have the capacity to offer us opportunities to contemplate the world shapes the teaching practices of many art teachers in Ireland and internationally at the present time. But we need to find a language to articulate artworks' capacities in this regard. It is oftentimes an implied belief, or one that can be deciphered from State-sanctioned curriculum documents with much effort. Introducing students to the work of contemporary artists and including contemporary artworks in the educational experiences of students offers them

opportunities to see other dimensions of their world in ways that other modes of encountering and narrating the world does not enable. While research suggests that many art teachers are reluctant to introduce contemporary artworks to students because of their own discomfort surrounding the content of contemporary works, or because of their own perceived lack of fluency and understanding of how to think and talk about such works (see for example, Lee, 2002; Page et al., 2006; Reid, 2014; Villeneuve & Erickson, 2008), perhaps coming to a contemporary artwork with the intent of exploring its educative potential is one way of engaging with it without feeling that one has to know many things about the work in advance of approaching it. Perhaps this approach is one way to establish a relation with the types of artworks that do not reveal their potential immediately upon encounter. Going along with what these works seem to be suggesting and trying to become attentive and attuned to their demands, one might recognize their potential to reveal aspects of the world in which we live in all its diversity and highly nuanced nature. Approaching artworks as potentially educative in nature is one way of engaging works of art that suspends the need to figure out what they mean once and for all. It is one way of bringing artworks to the attention of oneself and others so that you and those others, too, might come to know aspects of the world with and through art.

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