

## **Dial 'P' for Panties: Narrative Photography in the 1990s**

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*This essay was originally published in 1999, at the height of the art world's interest in photographs of adolescent girls. In it, Soutter provides one of the few accounts that took this work seriously, offering conceptual frameworks within the history of art photography as well as attempting to understand its seductive quality via the context of fashion and pornographic photography. Soutter argues for the importance of understanding the narrative ambiguity of these staged photographs, and traces the possible routes for reading these images of girls as critical of or complicit with the sexualised imagery of girlhood found in popular culture. Whilst Soutter concludes that these practices manipulated an appearance of criticality, she presciently points to many of the routes that have since been pursued in other essays in this collection, which situate representations of girlhood within a more complex critical framework. Her comments on nudity and the parthenogenic nature of celebrity indicate some of the ways in which these photographs of girls can be read as delicately balanced postfeminist representations, a possibility which Soutter more fully acknowledges in her afterword, written a decade after this article was first published.*

As a photographer, an art historian and a feminist, I have been bothered for some time by a particular strand of contemporary photography. It started as a joke: I had seen so many quasi-narrative art photographs of half-dressed young women that I began referring to them as their own genre, 'panty photography'. As with many inside jokes, once I had coined the term, I began to find validation for it everywhere. Panties seemed to be proliferating in art galleries and magazines. The *New York Times* ran an article about the current cross-over between art, fashion and pornography, and shortly thereafter an article about hot young female artists and their hot new work.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon came to a well-publicised head in a spring 1999 exhibition at Lawrence Rubin - Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art in New York City. *Another Girl, Another Planet*, curated by Gregory Crewdson and Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, included images by thirteen photographers, twelve of them women. The work was mostly colour and primarily figurative and the majority of the photographs depicted women or girls caught in evocative,

ambiguous scenarios. And yes, many were in their underwear. This article is not intended as a review of the show, except insofar as to confirm *Time Out* critic Bill Arning's assessment of its timeliness.<sup>2</sup> I am interested in *Another Girl* because it offers an opportunity to examine several significant trends in photography at the turn of the century.

The images in the exhibition were united by a narrative tendency that has been prevalent in the photography of the 1990s, but has not received adequate critical analysis. I would like to make clear from the outset that I am not referring to multi-image serial narratives (such as Tracey Moffatt's 1998 *Laudanum* series), nor to narratives in which photographs are grounded with text (as in Duane Michals' staged sequences from the 1960s or Carrie Mae Weems' early-1990s *Kitchen Table Series*). Instead, these images present frozen suggestive moments, commonly likened to film stills drawn from movies that do not exist, or to documentary photographs separated from their real world sources and stripped of a typical documentary agenda. If these pieces come with titles, they usually serve to reinforce the ambiguity of the scene. Many of the works are officially *Untitled*, using the non-title to mark their place in a modernist tradition of free-standing, anti-functional art photography. In order to pinpoint and analyse these images, I will adapt a descriptive model from the literary study of narrative discourse to explain the way in which these pictures present and sustain semiotic and political ambiguity.

As the title suggested, the narratives in *Another Girl, Another Planet* were overwhelmingly female, and focused attention on the bodies of young women and girls. Many emerging photographers have been accused of using flesh – sometimes their own – to attract both media attention and the jaded gaze of connoisseurs. Yet a number of arguments can be used to defend narrative photographs with potentially sensationalistic subject matter against their attackers. Some of these arguments are important and valid for protecting ambitious contemporary art as a whole from philistines and iconophobes. On the other hand, I believe it is important to

investigate this particular strand of contemporary practice closely in order to confirm that art photography has not become merely a satellite of the fashion or pornography industries.

As critics did not fail to note, *Another Girl, Another Planet* had an incestuous flavour, due to the fact that six of the artists graduated in the past three years from Yale University's Master of Fine Art programme (MFA) in photography, where they studied with co-curator Crewdson.<sup>3</sup> The curators tempered the Yale factor by drawing the rest of the artists from far afield, including Sarah Dobai and Sarah Jones from London; Jitka Hanzlová, Liza May Post and Vibeke Tandberg from other cities in Europe; and Dayanita Singh from New Delhi. Reinforcing the thesis that Yale graduates play an important role in the international photography scene, the catalogue includes one image each of three emerging photographers whose work has begun to attract critical and market attention: Anna Gaskell (Yale MFA, 1995), Annika von Hausswolff and Rineke Dijkstra. These three pictures provide a frame of reference for the newer works in the exhibition, but one that is loosely associative, rather than clearly articulated. In order to draw out the relationship between the *Another Girl* pictures and their recent precedents, it is necessary to analyse one of these earlier images more closely.

In von Hausswolff's 1993 colour photograph, *Back to Nature*, a naked woman lies face down in a shallow marsh, her pale, splayed limbs half-submerged. She is placed just right of centre of the horizontal rectangular frame. Her body marks a break between thick reeds in the upper left corner of the picture and reflective ripples of water in the bottom right. The body is pointed away from the viewer, so that the soles of the feet are closest to the picture plane, and the torso and head are foreshortened. This angle emphasises the figure's dark crotch and the crack between her buttocks. While the wetland setting of the picture is a familiar part of photography's longstanding love affair with uncultivated landscapes and reflected light, the staged crime scene pose of the figure reflects particularly contemporary concerns.

We can interpret the figure literally – as an artist’s model posing or posed – or we can consider the image a constructed narrative and imagine the figure as a suicide or a murder victim. On an art historical plane, we could connect the image to Ana Mendieta’s 1970s images of her own body interpolated with nature. Reaching further back, we might connect the image to Gustave Courbet’s *Origin of the World* (1866), a painting of a woman’s crotch in which the subject matter of pornography and the flatness of popular art forms came together in a transgressive new modernism. Von Hausswolff turns this motif over – perhaps to say that such strategies are dead in the water. The title of the photograph, *Back to Nature*, neither supports nor contradicts any of these possibilities. The fact that the image has been made by a woman might seem to point away from the idea that it is contrived to create voyeuristic sexual pleasure or horror. On the other hand, the prone passive body has little in common with Mendieta’s celebratory feminist unifications of body and earth.

As with most contemporary art, layers of context provide information that cannot be gleaned from the image alone. This photograph is one of a series of four, each depicting a pale female body, lying naked or partially naked in the Norwegian landscape. Knowledge of von Hausswolff’s more recent work, including a photograph of nude tights floating in a sink (*Everything is Connected, He, He, He* [1999]), or of a back-to-back acrobatic couple forming a letter ‘x’ with their legs (*Mom and Dad are Making Out* [1999]), might give us a sense of the photographer’s ongoing interest in the ambiguous, the comic and the absurd. A recent reviewer made the following assertion about the *Back to Nature* series: “These are, however, ultimately parodic images, black-humoured jibes at the notion of woman as nature, instantiations of early feminist ideology of the Laura Mulvey sort.”<sup>4</sup> I do not feel that the image, even when framed by the rest of von Hausswolff’s work, is clearly parody or an embodiment of feminist theory. To begin to understand this image and images like it, I would like to consider what purpose is served by their quasi-narrative status.

What is a narrative photograph? Given the fact that photography has been used to tell stories off and on since its invention, there is surprisingly little written about the way photographic narratives function. Literary theory supplies useful basic terminology. Gérard Genette defines narrative at its most fundamental as the extension of a verb.<sup>5</sup> By this definition photography is always and never a narrative form: always in that it contains the permanent record of the act of photographing and of any actions that were in progress at the moment of exposure, never in that it remains forever static. Unless arranged in a sequence or accompanied by supplementary text, a photograph cannot extend a verb except through implication. This formulation helps us to understand why photographic narratives are so slippery and fraught. Caught in a state of permanent suspense vis à vis events that have just happened or are about to take place, photographs contain essential seeds of narratives that can never come to fruition except in the imagination.

In literature, the term 'narrative' applies not only to the story told, but also to the act of telling. Even when the content of a narrative is drawn from the world, the mode of presentation must differ perceptibly, if only slightly, from a pure imitation of real world events. Roland Barthes provides specific terminology for applying this distinction in photography. While Barthes insists on the mechanical objectivity of photographs, seeing them as a 'message without a code', he also admits that in practice it is almost impossible to separate the literal denotative meaning of the image from its cultural connotations.<sup>6</sup> Even though a photograph is a direct copy of patterns of light and shadow in the world, it is also inflected by layers of convention and association. These codes constitute the style or 'rhetoric' of the image, and give us a set of clues as to how to understand and classify it.<sup>7</sup> In Barthes' terms, the coding of a photograph enables it to tell a story, rather than merely record whatever lay in front of the camera at the moment of exposure. Thus just as a verbal statement might be read as a narrative if it began with the coded phrase, 'Once upon a time', a Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Still* might function as a narrative image if

we recognize its visual codes as belonging to B-movies, or even if we read it more vaguely as seeming stagy and deliberately artificial. Style, particularly when it is borrowed from a form dominated by narrative such as cinema, theatre or history painting, is one of the most common tools used by photographers to generate a sense of narration in a still image.

According to Barthes, 'Narration can only receive its meaning from the world which makes use of it.'<sup>8</sup> Typically, those writing or speaking make their narrative intentions clear by presenting their statements in a particular constructed subjectivity or voice. The viewer's ability to comprehend photographic narratives depends largely on the photographer's ability to translate the concept of voice into visual terms. Photographers have some standard techniques for doing so. They can present a particular point of view (through distance from the subject, camera angle, type of film, lens, etc.) or a particular mood (via reference to a broad range of conventions of lighting, framing, gesture, etc.). But while writers have access to various kinds of narrator – omniscient or limited, singular or plural – and can create a clear distance between themselves and the character they have constructed to speak for them, photographers have a much harder task of demonstrating the separation between themselves and the enunciating subject of their image. This is one reason why photographs are so often prey to censorship – a novel narrated by a serial killer does not incriminate its author, but a staged photograph of violent or sexual acts is often seen as implicating the photographer. Without the subtle clues of linguistic positioning and distancing, we can only differentiate between the photographer and the narrator of a photograph by making a conscious decision to do so.

Katy Grannan's *Untitled* (1998), a mural-sized (100 x 125 cm) colour photograph, depicts a larger-than life teenage girl kneeling on a bed wearing a white underwire bra and barely visible leopard print underpants. While the young woman is clearly posed on the bed, with her long curly hair fluffed out over her shoulders, her pose is not quite resolved; her dark eyes stare above and past the camera, her weight is slumped forward so that her belly folds forward onto her

thighs and her breasts hang over her stomach. Her right hand is held above her knee as if she were in the middle of raising or lowering it. This awkward gesture shows off short dirty fingernails with chipped pink polish. The setting of the photograph also seems awkward or unfinished: the wall behind the figure, for instance, is composed of bare boards. Behind the girl's left shoulder a figurine of a horse sits on the window sill. Out of focus and silhouetted by the outdoor light, the horse hints at the girlhood that preceded the voluptuous body.

As with von Hausswolff's photograph, Grannan's *Untitled* may benefit from contextual framing: for a series entitled the *Poughkeepsie Journal*, Grannan ran newspaper adverts inviting girls to pose for her in their own homes in outfits of their choosing. This tidbit of information, however, is only available anecdotally. It is not exhibited with the photograph, nor was it included in the press release for the show. With or without the knowledge that the project has this kind of consensual docu-conceptual framework, our appreciation of Grannan's work relies on our recognition and acceptance of cultural codes. We must be willing to read visual cues to know that the large format and claustrophobic intensity of the photograph link it to Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Nan Goldin (both visiting critics at Yale, Grannan's MFA programme), rather than to the magazine *Barely Legal*'s style of soft porn. We will probably feel most sympathetic to Grannan's project if we place it in an art photography tradition of explorations of adolescent female sexuality ranging from Sally Mann's *At Twelve*, *Portraits of Young Girls*, to Jock Sturges' beach portraits, to Gary Gross' 1970s child portraits of actress Brooke Shields. To return to the issue of narrative and narration, a hypothetically savvy viewer might see Grannan's photographs as being narrated by Grannan the self-conscious artist, or by the Poughkeepsie teenagers themselves as self-conscious performers. A contrary stance might include insistence that the images were narrated by Grannan the exploitative bad girl or, even worse, that the images were not narrated at all, but that they floated free of narrative framework, waiting to be misused by the first pervert to come along. It should be noted that the photographs

themselves provide no proof for one of these interpretations over another. We might choose to agree that the 'savvy' interpretations are more sophisticated or more interesting, but we cannot argue that they are categorically more valid.

Like all contemporary art, the 1990s wave of narrative photography is given its meaning by the institutions and rhetorical framework in which it appears. This context is in turn shaped by decades of artistic activity and critical debate. In the current eclecticism, contemporary photographers can, to a certain extent, choose their own genealogy. For the most part, they draw from three different strands of post-war photographic practice: first, the subjectivised approach to documentary tradition championed by New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) under John Szarkowski and embodied in the 1967 *New Documents* show of work by Diane Arbus, Gary Winogrand and Lee Friedlander; second, the conceptual photographic activities of artists such as Eleanor Antin, Robert Barry and Ed Ruscha; and third, the postmodern appropriation and staging of artists including Richard Prince, Sherman and Jeff Wall. While these references may seem readily apparent, I think it worthwhile to pursue the ways they overlap and interact in recent photography, particularly since these different strands of work are of dissimilar aesthetic and political agendas.

Coming to the fore at the same time as realist narratives in painting and literature, the documentary photography of the 1930s used carefully measured fictions in order to forward a highly politicised version of Truth.<sup>9</sup> Documentary photographers in this tradition use stylistic elements to code their images as factual, so that even if they present a static view of a landscape or interior, rather than a figure in motion, the image can be read as a narrative of the way things were. Walker Evans put his finger on the artifice involved in this project. He used the term 'documentary style', to describe the visual codes (which in his own case included sharp focus, even lighting and a head-on camera angle) for indicating that an image was to be read as immediate, straightforward and unbiased.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Evans was aware of the temptation to



view documentary photographs as mimetic (i.e. imitating the world perfectly), but knew that they were in fact diegetic, telling a story in a particular way. Nonetheless, the credibility of documentary photography at mid-century relied on a rhetoric of objectivity in order to put the image at the service of particular political agendas.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, MoMA curator Szarkowski developed a sophisticated formalist rhetoric, based on the ideas of modernist critic Clement Greenberg, in order to promote a new brand of documentary photography, embodied in the *New Documents* exhibition. In the work of the featured photographers (Arbus, Friedlander and Winogrand) narrative was always present but fragmented. If the most praised documentary photographs had distilled a complex situation into a single frame, as in Henri Cartier-Bresson's notion of the 'decisive moment', or into a timeless icon like Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936), the new documentarians worked against this kind of completeness. Emphasis was thrown onto their stylistic and compositional elements by the fracturing of their subject matter – often a quirky gesture in Winogrand, a fleeting shadow or reflection in Friedlander, or an unexpected, deliberately unexplained scenario in Arbus. This kind of work substituted a subjective, idiosyncratic and fallible visual 'voice' for the all-seeing, seemingly disinterested documentary eye.

In *The Burden of Representation*, art historian John Tagg deplores the attempt on the part of art institutions, led by MoMA in the 1960s, to sublimate photography into a 'Fine Art' mode by borrowing elements of documentary practice. As he sees it, the instability of the new hybrid images was their undoing:

The unlikely and paradoxical mixture of social and psychological 'truths', exotic voyeurism, fetishised artistic subjectivity, and formalist claims to universality, which may once have appeared mutually enhancing, was contradictory and inherently unstable. For all the critical élan with which a modish tradition was constructed that could appear, by turns, modernist and realist, universal and American, objectively

true and subjectively expressive, profoundly human and obsessively privatistic, its effectivity was short lived.<sup>11</sup>

Tagg is certainly justified in stating that Szarkowski's curatorial efforts led to an increased elitism in photography and commodification of photographs. But what is most striking about Tagg's discussion of the 'modish' tradition of the 1960s, is that it provides a trenchant description of contemporary work by emerging photographers such as von Hausswolff and Grannan. Their work too is suspended somewhere between a social, realist approach, and an expressive, individualised vision. Their subject matter is simultaneously sensationalistic, alluding to sex and violence, and also banal and familiar. Rather than being an aesthetic dead end, it appears that the ambiguity introduced by Arbus et al. continues to serve as a driving force in the photography market and in photographic criticism. Certainly the critical vocabulary developed by Szarkowski creates space for complex ambiguities which, given the growing popularity of art photography in the years since, seem to be something that late twentieth-century audiences crave.

A particular twist on the idea of the 'New Documents' has had particular resonance for the current crop of young photographers. At the beginning of the 1990s, curator Peter Galassi took over Szarkowski's reins in the photography department, and attempted to reiterate MoMA's role as arbiter of photographic aesthetics. His first exhibition, *The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, retooled the notion of 'New Documents' for a younger generation. In his catalogue essay, Galassi argues that in its golden age photography had conquered the world and the street, and that in the era of postmodern uncertainty, photographers were turning to the final frontier: the home. The photographers in the show, including Crewdson, Goldin, diCorcia, Doug DuBois and Tina Barney, focused their cameras on domestic environments and subcultures from their personal lives or imaginations. Stylistically, the works were split between a wistful sincerity (borrowing the tropes of snapshots or 1960s documentary) and an ironic detachment (often

signalled via gigantic glossy colour prints or fancy strobe lighting). *Pleasures and Terrors* was at once a retrenchment for art photography, and a renewed assertion of relevance. By choosing to focus their gaze close to home, the photographers in the show were avoiding claims to universal humanist truth, while at the same time arguing for the validity of their subjective experience. *Pleasures and Terrors* made reference to the postmodern idea that the self is culturally constructed through representations, but also indicated that traces of authenticity may still be found at home, in the significant details, in the eyes and in the body.

Working in the same time period as the New Documentarians, conceptual artists used photography in new and unexpected ways. They found new subject matter for photography and also radically broadened the scope of allowable photographic forms.<sup>12</sup> Of particular relevance to the current discussion, conceptualists rejected the idea that narrative was inherent to the medium of photography. The majority of photographs made for conceptual projects have the deadpan appearance of scientific or commercial documentation; they are instrumental images that present information without claiming to possess any special truth-telling status. Instead of being a story distilled into a picture, these conceptual photographs often became an illustration for a story about something the artist had done. There had been an element of repressed biography in the work of photographers like Arbus (a certain image, for example, tells us that the photographer spent time in a hotel room with a half-naked midget). The stories told in conceptual works were much more mundane and thus, in art terms, more shockingly new. We learn, for example, that Ruscha spent an entire day photographing every single building on the Sunset Strip; Barry took pictures of an invisible gas being released in Beverly Hills; and Antin went on a diet and photographed her body every day for a month. In many cases, the presence or voice of the artist in the work was disguised not only behind banal photographic imagery, but also behind impersonal-sounding language: a descriptive title, like *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, or a pseudo-scientific statement of operations, such as *Inert Gas Series: Krypton, from a measured*

*volume to indefinite expansion. On March 3, 1969 in Beverly Hills California one liter of Krypton was returned to the atmosphere.* In conceptual works such as these, artists took away one kind of presence or fullness – the formal or material satisfactions of traditional painting, sculpture or fine art photography – and allowed an anecdote about the making of the work to provide a kind of alternate pleasure. Confirmation of this theory lies in the way conceptual art has been written about. Books and articles on conceptualism rarely include formal readings of specific pieces. Instead, writers recount the supplemental narratives, the activities by the artist that constituted the idea of the piece.

Art writing has always included scraps of mythology of the way artists' actions, intentions or experience can add nuance to the meaning of the work. In conceptualism, these biographical narratives, tightly connected to both the text and image components, became an explicit part of the work's content. Artists in the 1990s have drawn on these precedents to produce work in which supplemental facts become a kind of stealth content. As in Grannan's *Poughkeepsie Journal* project, it is now common for the conceptual link between the work and its anecdotal apparatus to be much looser. In theory, it doesn't matter whether or not we know how Grannan went about making her images, nor if the story of how she did so is actually true. The floating external narrative offers an optional bonus to the visual information that is provided in the picture.

The idea that a photographic work could be driven by a conceptual narrative rather than by formal elements or subject matter found within the frame was essential to the development of photographic postmodernism. Works by appropriationists such as Prince and Sherrie Levine certainly have striking formal characteristics. Prince's *Marlboro Men*, for example, enlarged from cigarette advertisements, have a sensuous overblown colour grain that evokes pointillism, and Levine's versions of canonical black and white photographs are gritty, degraded by the levels of reproduction separating them from the original fine art prints. Part of the critical impact

of such works comes from the transgression of photographic norms. But while the deviation from the standards of fine art photography connoisseurship could itself be viewed as politicised, the other half of the work's impact comes in the form of a critical metanarrative. In the criticism of the moment, appropriation and fragmentation were seen as strategies to empty the image and point beyond it.

Critics such as Craig Owens described this doubling in terms of allegory: works could have an ostensible subject matter (e.g. a cowboy stolen from a magazine advert), and an implicit commentary on representation more broadly (e.g. the 'Death of the Author', the manipulative force of advertising, the cultural construction of masculinity, etc.).<sup>13</sup> The idea that pictorial works could function as allegory was extremely compelling; linking contemporary photography to the privileged discourses of literature and narrative history painting, the allegorical interpretation of works allowed them a satisfying complexity and multivalence and also created a new kind of viewer. Unlike the audience of modernist art photography who expected to see a self-sufficient autonomous image, the postmodern viewer could be relied upon to recognise oblique critical allusions without introductory explanation. In allegory, the speaker trusts the audience to make the metaphorical connection and to sustain it throughout the discourse. In essence, this metacritical mode allowed artists to maintain links with old-fashioned art values, while at the same time maintaining a critical distance from them.

Allegorical readings often drew attention away from the formal aspects of the work, from its explicit subject matter, and from its presentation. Thus critics tended to overlook the fact that postmodern photography was more expensively produced and packaged than any previously existing manifestation of the medium and also that much of it had a tremendous libidinal charge. In part, the current group of young photographers can be seen as toying with the sex and violence that was so often repressed in postmodern criticism and as using ambiguous, disturbing images to resist any particular politicised reading.

A potential problem with postmodern meta-narrative – unless grounded with pointed text as in the work of Martha Rosler or Victor Burgin – is that it takes a trained eye to determine whether the art really is critical, rather than celebratory, of the status quo it represents. Owens recognizes allegory in subtle stylistic fissures. As he says of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, 'the uncanny precision with which Sherman represents these tropes, the very perfection of her impersonations, leaves an unresolved margin of incongruity in which the image, freed from the constraints of referential and symbolic meaning, can accomplish its "work".'<sup>14</sup> On the flip side of Owens' model lies the possibility that unscrupulous artists might play in the 'unresolved margin of incongruity' without necessarily doing any 'work'. The politics of the art world have changed in the 1990s; 'critique' is often assumed, but is no longer in fashion as the dominant mode. As a result, many art writers assume offhandedly that if a photograph appears to show fantasy, obsession, voyeurism, masochism, sadism or misogyny, it is in fact a critical commentary. At the same time, in the current mode of media-age detachment and sophistication it is also acceptable for works to posit a transgressive affirmation of politically incorrect tendencies. Like the metanarrative about the making of the work, the critical metanarrative is optional.

The work of Jeff Wall provides a particularly important precedent for 1990s photographers working in a directorial mode. Unlike many artists in the generation of 'simulationists', Wall's large backlit transparencies could not be described as fragmented or formally vacated. On the contrary, their overdetermined, highly composed surfaces are overwrought with significant details. Wall's pictures inspire a range of allegorical readings, in his case fuelled by his own sophisticated writings. Wall describes his photographs as 'cinematographic', meaning not that they look like scenes from a film, but rather that they take advantage of cinematic codes of composition and stagecraft.<sup>15</sup> In each work, Wall creates an enclosed world using compositions which draw on the history of painting from Nicolas Poussin to Paul Cézanne and involving his figures in absorbing interpersonal activities such as looking, speaking and listening. These

closed worlds, rife with erudite allusions, invite the production of sustained parallel discourse about ambitious politicised themes such as the role of marginalised peoples in post-industrial society and the violence lurking just under the surface of life under capitalism. As well as pointing to broader social issues, Wall's pictures are fraught with banal contemporary details. Wall intends for his 'manneristically normalised surface' to push the boundaries of classical codes of representation, indicating his own subjective role as director. Many young narrative photographers emulate the mannerism of Wall's style to very different effect.

Justine Kurland's *Bathers* (1998), one of the most reproduced images from *Another Girl*, *Another Planet*, is reminiscent of Wall's work in its painterly composition, enclosed world and dramatic effect. Kurland's 75 x 100 cm image immediately evokes landscape painting in which the state of the natural space itself stands in for a human condition. Like many landscapes (and many of Wall's photographs) the image is composed around a hidden vanishing point, drawing the viewer in while disguising the artificiality of its monocular perspective. The lower half of the picture shows the murky olive-coloured water of a river, which disappears around a bend to the left. The upper half of the frame is filled with glowing sunlit branches: vertical bands of vines and leaves on the left and right and a double arch of curved branches hanging like a rainbow over the middle of the composition. Within this idyllic pastoral setting three female figure groups occupy themselves with various activities: on the left a girl bends over and wrings out her hair into the water like an Edgar Degas bather while another girl leans towards her from a rock as if about to dive in; on the right a girl sits on a rock, seeming engaged in conversation with a girl who leans on the rock like a Jean Renoir nymph, the lower half of her body submerged in the river; and in the foreground, a single swimmer moves away from the others, directing her eyes into the dark lower right-hand corner of the frame.

If Wall's images are, as Thierry de Duve asserts, allegories of modern classical humanism read through Walter Benjamin and T.J. Clark, then what are Kurland's?<sup>16</sup> The mannerism of *Bathers*

points away from pure prurience, yet the image is very seductive. The photograph is part of a series of images that has been called ‘a utopian vision of a girls-only society’.<sup>17</sup> If we see Kurland as the creator of this world or as a privileged guest, the image becomes a glimpse into the secret world of adolescent girls. Yet the work has been constructed for a broader audience than just the photographer and models, leading us to ask: if a girl swims in the forest unobserved by men, can her image escape objectification? Is not caring whether one is being watched a kind of power? Would the photograph represent a different kind of utopia if it had been made by a man? The image raises these questions while allowing us to enjoy the sight of girls in their underwear at play.

The figures in *Bathers* are not naked; they sport various combinations of underpants, undershirts and bras. Nonetheless, they evoke the nude, a motif used throughout the art of the modern era to evoke and transgress traditional rules. For Kurland, as for her peers, nudity, in tension with its twin term ‘nakedness’, has become one of the key signifiers of modernity and hipness. I would argue that in photography, the body with few or no clothes has taken on a role similar to that played by flatness in modern painting.

In his writings on modernism, Greenberg argued that flatness was important primarily as a formal engagement with medium, drawing attention away from illusion and towards the surface of the paint. In counterpoint, Clark’s writings offer a more politicised interpretation of flatness in painting as a symbol of resistance. According to Clark, flatness was not a value in and of itself, but was important because it stood for the ‘popular’ (something plain, workmanlike and emphatic) and also for ‘modernity’ itself (as exemplified in contemporary popular culture by modern posters, labels, photographs, etc.).<sup>18</sup> A bourgeois audience longed for an art that would let it slip into a mindless comforting reverie. The jolt of flatness was a persistent outrage to this desire, a negation of the assimilating, equalising forces of capital.



In the current art world, photographers working with the naked human body seem to be hoping that it can sustain a similar affect. The nude, wrapped in bourgeois codes of tasteful artiness, has very little transgressive charge. The naked body, on the other hand, endlessly evokes pornography, the popular ‘other’ of the respectable photograph since the medium’s invention. No matter how much nakedness we see in photography, it seems to retain some trace of cultural taboo. Advertising plays on this endlessly to sell us products. Yet many of us maintain the illusion that somewhere, under our clothes, each of us has a body that remains our site of resistance to capital – my flesh, my senses, different from everyone else’s. Naked bodies also work to play up an essential tension within the photographic medium. Can it tell a story? Undermining the narrative photograph’s capacity to tell, nakedness is a thing shown. The skin of the human body disrupts the depth of the photographic illusion, recalling us to the glossy surface of the print.

In one of Malerie Marder’s untitled 1998 photographs, a naked woman and man stand facing each other in a window. The camera, and by association the viewer, is located in the darkness beneath and to the right of the window, looking in at the illuminated bodies. The details of the setting are sparse and modern: a square recessed lighting fixture outside the window, pleated unpatterned curtains and a dark framed painting indoors. The female figure stands to the left of the frame, her brightly illuminated front turned in three-quarter view toward the picture plane. The male figure faces her on the right-hand side of the frame, his shadowed back, shoulder and buttocks turned towards the viewer. The bottom of the window frame cuts off our view of their bodies at crotch level. Even without clothes, the youthful couple is stylish in terms of urban America in the late 1990s. The woman has long, wavy fair hair and sports a small pendant on a chain. The man has sideburns, and a head of full dark hair pushed back from his face. While the couple’s bodies do not seem as tall and elongated as runway models, their slim slouching torsos fit the body ideal of contemporary advertising campaigns.

Using the window like a movie screen or a theatrical proscenium, Marder constructs a scenario familiar from all visual narrative forms: the characters look at each other while we look at them. Their involvement in one another allows us to project ourselves into the scene in whichever role we prefer: him, her or unseen voyeur. Needless to say, this is one of the most common suturing devices of pornography as well as film. More than von Hausswolff's *Back to Nature*, this image seems to illustrate the scopophilic regime described by Laura Mulvey. Following the logic of post-postmodern criticism, we could assume a level of ironic distance. The fact that the image stages Mulvey's scheme in black and white might make it a self-consciously empowering reenactment of corrupt tropes, a deliberate dephallicisation, putting the young woman photographer in the director's chair. Or the image may be a test case of how much art photography can overlap with fashion or pornography while still retaining its identity as art. In February 1990, *Art in America* published a commentary by photographer and critic Allan Sekula, assessing the state of photography in the United States and Britain in relation to enterprise culture entitled 'Some American Notes'.<sup>19</sup> Sekula describes the way art photography has always fought to establish its difference from instrumental applications ('the large field that encompasses everything from fashion to forensics'), a difference that he sees being blurred in postmodern work. I would argue that the current narrative work stakes its importance on just this subtle complicity of its relationship with commercial culture. Its hipness is determined by the narrowness of the margin between art and fashion or between art and pornography; it dances on the razor's edge. In the same way that cutting edge fashion items are barely recognisable as apparel, and cutting edge fashion photography makes it hard to see what is for sale, cutting edge gallery photography is barely distinguishable as art.

As Sekula describes it, the tension between commercial and artistic applications of photography has always created status anxiety in photographers. In the 1980s this anxiety could be seen in the clashing discourses of art and art photography. Sherman and Wall are repeatedly referred to as

‘artists’ rather than as photographers, even though their work takes exclusively photographic form. The current anxiety seems to centre around the fact that the commercial and artistic must coexist. Art photography cannot compete with commercial culture – it simply doesn’t have enough economic clout to do so – but is nonetheless a part of it.<sup>20</sup> It is hardly surprising that many of the panty photographers are themselves young and attractive. As recent MFA graduates with modest financial means, these photographers may be using themselves and their subjects in ways that can be framed as critically productive. A problem I see with photography throwing its hat in the ring with fashion is that it thereby guarantees itself an even shorter shelf life than before – it buys into the built-in obsolescence of fashion collections that must change with every season. Since the interest of *Another Girl, Another Planet* is premised on its youth and newness, it does not promise enduring relevance for the young photographers represented. The work of these photographers may offer a striking example of the parthenogenesis of fame, the birth of modern-day celebrity through photographic rather than sexual reproduction, but it does not offer any clues as to how to keep this interest alive.

At the time that Sekula was writing his ‘American Notes’, photography had only recently become a dominant form in the art world. Sekula expressed disappointment in the loss of photography’s ‘inferiority’. He saw the success of photographic work in the market as a detriment to the medium’s critical capacity. This is perhaps even more the case now that photographers are mimicking commercial culture in making libidinal concerns the overt subject matter of their work. Focusing on unconscious drives, obsessions and fantasies (Sekula notes that Surrealism always was the most comfortable meeting place for commerce and the avant-garde), the work deliberately occupies the same terrain as advertising. Sekula holds the postmodern simulationists to account for holding a position of faux-naïveté or ‘cynical reason’, which he defines as ‘the attitude of knowing-better-but-proceeding-to-do-one’s-business’.<sup>21</sup> As far as I can tell, panty photographers like to keep their politics as ambiguous as their imagery;

the potential that their stance might actually be masochistic, misogynistic or crassly materialistic is another optional overlay, to be retained or discarded by the viewer at whim.

### **Afterword: A Decade Later**

When I wrote ‘Dial “P” for Panties’ in 1999, I worried that in making such seductive consumable fictions, this group of female photographers (mostly young and attractive themselves) were setting themselves up to be used and discarded by the art market like last season’s clothes or accessories. Time has proved me wrong. A decade later, the photographers discussed in the essay are all successful mid-career artists. We know from art history that edgy avant-gardes are inevitably absorbed by the system, and that yesterday’s provocateur is tomorrow’s academician. But it is not just that these photographers have grown up, and their projects have matured and become familiar. The market and audience for art photography have grown enormously in the past few years. Staged photography has become one of the key areas of practice. The way we understand constructed narrative work has changed, in part as the projects of these photographers have evolved and become more complex. More often than not, the constructed photograph is guided by a pre-determined conceptual premise, or is based on something the artist/photographer has seen first-hand in the world. The relationship between the photographer and model may take a variety of different forms, creating hybrids of fiction and document. The photographers discussed in the essay have been pioneers in this area of photographic practice and have become role models for younger photographers.

My original emphasis on underpants was slightly unfair to the photographers (sex was only ever part of the story) but it was not completely off target. Desire lies at the heart of this work. In retrospect, I would like to give these photographers more credit for the complex ways they mobilise desire. The border between staged and documentary work continues to fascinate because it offers a space to explore real-life attitudes, subject positions and relationships with

limited real-life consequences. It is not a coincidence that so many narrative photographers are women; staging provides an ideal opportunity to explore gender roles and power relationships.

Ten years ago, I had difficulty seeing pictures of girls in their underpants as a feminist enterprise. I was resistant to the concept of ‘subjectification,’ in which the female figure is not objectified if she occupies a position of confidence and control.<sup>22</sup> In the era of the Spice Girls (the first time around), ‘Girl Power’ seemed more cynical marketing ploy than reality. Today, while I stand by many of my original concerns about their work, I have come to see this group of female photographers as representatives of an evolving contemporary feminism: one in which women are cultural and sexual creators free to occupy a variety of subject positions. Like most generations of women, these artists rebel against the feminists before them. Visual pleasure, ambiguous narrative and a transgressive relationship to documentary truth have been hallmarks of their rebellion.

<sup>1</sup>This essay was first published in *Afterimage* 27: 4, January/February 2000, 9-12. My warmest thanks to Cynthia Young for commissioning the piece and supporting its development. The afterward is drawn from the essay 'Enigmatic Spectacle: Key Strategies in Contemporary Staged Photography', written for the exhibition catalogue *Role Models: Feminine Identity in Contemporary American Photography*, edited by Susan Fisher Sterling, Washington D.C. and London, National Museum for Women in the Arts and Scala, 2008, 11-21. I am grateful to both *Afterimage* and NMWA for granting their permission to reprint.

See, for example, William L. Hamilton, 'The Mainstream Flirts with Pornography Chic', *The New York Times*, Sunday Styles Section, March 21, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Arning, 'The sisters from another planet: A midtown show of young photographers takes a snapshot of the zeitgeist', *Time Out New York*, Issue 185, April 8-15, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> See Katy Siegel, 'Another Girl, Another Planet', *Artforum* 38:1, September 1999, 161.

<sup>4</sup> Måns Holst-Ekström, 'Annika von Hausswolff: Eyes without a Face', *Art/Text* 66, 1999, 52. The Laura Mulvey reference points toward her canonical essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', first published in *Screen* 16:3, Autumn 1975, 6-18.

<sup>5</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca and New York, Cornell University Press, 1980, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, New York, Noonday Press, 1977, 17. Note that Umberto Eco, another leading semiotician, argues that as human perception is itself coded, no man-made texts can be uncoded. Eco argues that photography draws its 'reality effect' not from any essential claim to truth, but from its use of the codes of photographic realism. See Umberto Eco, 'Critique of the Image', *Thinking Photography*, edited by Victor Burgin, London, Macmillan, 1981, 32-38.

<sup>7</sup> See Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', *Image-Music-Text*, 32-51.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', 115.

<sup>9</sup> To borrow a summary from John Tagg's important book on history and photographic representation, the particular social strategy served by documentary was 'a liberal, corporatist plan to negotiate economic, political and cultural crises through a limited programme of structural reforms, relief measures, and a cultural intervention aimed at restructuring the order of discourse, appropriating dissent, and resecuring the threatened bond of social consent.' John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 8.

<sup>10</sup> As Evans puts it: 'Now, I believe, I want to go back for a minute and say that the word "documentary" is a little misleading. It should be accompanied by the word "style", because a documentary photograph could be a police photograph of an accident, literally; but documentary style is what we're interested in... This style does seem honest. It isn't always so, but it seems so.' See 'Walker Evans, Visiting Artist: A Transcript of his Discussion with the Students of the University of Michigan', (October 29, 1971) in Beaumont Newhall, ed., *Photography: Essays and Images*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1980, 320.

<sup>11</sup> Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> See Lucy Soutter, 'The Photographic Idea: Reconsidering Conceptual Photography', *Afterimage* 26:5, March/April 1999, 8-10.

<sup>13</sup> See Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse', in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, 203-36.

<sup>14</sup> Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse', 233.

<sup>15</sup> Jeff Wall, interview with Arielle Pelenc, *Jeff Wall*, London, Phaidon, 1996, 9.

<sup>16</sup> See Thierry de Duve, 'The Mainstream and the Crooked Path', *Jeff Wall*, London, Phaidon, 1996, 44.

<sup>17</sup> Katy Siegel, 'Another Girl, Another Planet', 161.

<sup>18</sup> Here I paraphrase from Clark's talk, 'More on the Differences Between Comrade Greenberg and Ourselves', published in the proceedings from the Vancouver Conference *Modernism and Modernity*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983, 252.

<sup>19</sup> Allan Sekula, 'Some American Notes', *Art in America*, February 1990, 39-45.

<sup>20</sup> The decade since this essay was first published has seen dramatic change in this regard, with a small number of elite art photographers now aspiring to the production values of commercial cinema and commanding prices in the millions.

<sup>21</sup> Sekula, 'Some American Notes', 40.

<sup>22</sup> For an account of crosscurrents in twenty-first century feminism, see Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.