“On Books,” Essay, New Art Examiner, May, 1997 (E.J. Bellocq, Nobuyoshi Araki, Nan Goldin, and Aura Rosenberg)

Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville, the Red Light District of New Orleans; reproduced from prints made by Lee Friedlander, Introduction by Susan Sontag, interview by Lee Friedlander of Bellocq’s acquaintances with commentary by John Szarkowski; Random House, Inc., NY , 1996
The Works of Nobuyoshi Araki - 3: Yoko; Photographs by Nobuyoshi Araki; texts by Nobuyoshi Araki, Yoko Araki, Kyoko Okazaki, Akihito Yasumi, Heigonsha Limited, Tokyo, 1996.

The Ballad of Sexual Dependency; Photographs by Nan Goldin, Aperture Foundation, 1986
I’ll Be Your Mirror; Photographs by Nan Goldin, 1996

Head Shots; Photographs by Aura Rosenberg, text by Gary Indiana, Lynne Tillman, 1996

“A hydrocephalic semi-dwarf, a good subject for a caricaturist, who cultivated the company of prostitutes.”
“ Bellocq’s prostitutes are beautiful. It is true, they are all beautiful. Beautiful innocently or tenderly or wickedly or joyfully or obscenely, but all beautiful.”

Fascination with Bellocq’s photographs has inspired diverse versions of “Bellocq”, including the sly, suave, baby seducer (David Carradine in the film, Pretty Baby), and the beholder on the edges (Michael Ondaatje’s novel, Coming Through the Slaughter). In this monograph the Bellocq story is that of a Toulouse-Lautrec-like recluse only posthumously elevated to genius with his 1920’s photographs of New Orleans prostitutes. Perhaps, as John Szarkowski comments, the many descriptions are, “in any case of marginal relevance. One does not become an artist by cutting off an ear or by having a misshapen head.” Yet, Szarkowski himself disregards his own disclaimer, gushing about Bellocq, “an artist: a man who saw more clearly than we do, and who discovered secrets.” Thus a Bellocq is created who despite his affliction, managed to fulfill the paradigmatic modernist vision of artistic genius. His handicap is transmuted into a incisive, all-observant appendage, the (male) artistic insight that penetrates the (female) receptive subject.

We are confronted once again with the familiar question of why the status of the artist is important, and in this case, whether we need this myth of otherness to insure the artistic status of the work itself. However, such questions become more acute when crossed with another question: how is our response to these pictures as art a reflex that both engenders and conditions our response to their intimacy and sexuality? Taking these questions into the contemporary photography scene, I will also examine here some more recent work by Nobuyoshi Araki, Nan Goldin, and Aura Rosenberg. Have new possibilities been devised for photographically exploring issues of sex and intimacy, and to what extent are the artistic and gender stereotypes we see applied retroactively to Bellocq still in effect?

The eighty-nine photographic glass plate negatives were discovered by Lee Friedlander in the early 1960’s. Fascinated by the images, he purchased and printed them, using “Printing

Out Paper", a technique popular in the twenties. They were shown in 1970 at the Museum of Modern Art. In this second monograph of Bellocq's work, fifty-two from a total of eighty-nine photographs are sumptuously and exquisitely reproduced to the full eight-by-ten inch plate size.

This one body of work is the only evidence we have of Bellocq's creative aspirations. Friedlander writes in the preface that he hopes that he has not "perverted Bellocq's intentions." The last photograph printed in the book may give a sense of what those intentions were. On a parlor desk against a wall we see framed photographs, two of which we recognize as Bellocq's own, also reproduced in this book. In these photographs within the photograph, however, the images are closely cropped to show only the female figure; the backgrounds are blacked out. Bellocq focuses only on the women themselves and edits out both the immediate image context and the social milieu. Thus we may well ask what is really more "perverse," Bellocq's originally intended croppings or Friedlander's baring all?

Whether or not it was Bellocq's "intention", the pictures are remarkable to us. As a contemporary viewer, I revel in the makeshift backdrops, discombobulating patterned draperies and carpets, and door and window frames within frames, all colluding in a complex formal fragility of two-dimensional space. Yet the very stuff in the pictures (a sheet hanging from the clothesline as backdrop, only partially covering the area of the picture; fancy dresses that seem inconsistent with the tawdry surroundings) points to their theatricality. The women are presented--or rather present themselves--as subjects in their world. The almost visceral immediacy of these women's self-presentation, and the sense of familiarity between the women and Bellocq, belies our expectations for erotic images from that period. These are not simply bare-skin smiles meant to please. The women show themselves to Bellocq's camera (and thus to me) with a degree of unmistakable candor and openness.

Does Friedlander's presentation of the entire image point to a disjuncture, perhaps inevitable, between the intentions of Bellocq the man (or myth) and Bellocq the photographer/artist? This was not a studio--i.e. replete with backdrops, large-format cameras and light-accentuating architecture--where in those days one had one's image recorded for posterity. Granted, the connotation of portraiture has always been that to be looked at means being important enough to garner attention but this does not explain why these pictures are more than a run-of-the-mill portrait. It is--or we assume it should be--an uncomfortable site. And into this space of the bordello, their home, they welcome Bellocq and camera.

Szarkowski writes: "Photographers must photograph what they love...and Bellocq apparently loved women, with the undiscriminating constancy of a genius. If he was in conventional terms impotent, he was in his eyes and spirit an indefatigable lover...in his own way, in these pictures, Bellocq consummates many love affairs...each of these pictures is the product of a successful alliance."

While the "alliance" between Bellocq and these women does (sometimes) seem sexually charged, I disagree with the explicit notion here that (as Patrick Roegiers formulates) "the photographic act is an evident substitute for the sexual act." Such a photo-sexual configuration remains inextricable from the hetero-ideology of the gaze, with its male artist/genius/camera/lover and the female in every case as passive recipient. In this scenario, the sexual and artistic exchange are equally, crudely simplified: the photographer is the ultimate john, and his subjects remain the whores of his genius vision.

It cannot be denied that these images manifest attention to a love object. But if these photographs are read as an intimate site, then they also force us to reconstruct our concept of photographic "lovemaking". These pictures represent a more improbable collaboration: the women, adorned in various states of dress and undress, express alternately, haughty repose, melancholic stares, and wry, sometimes seductive half-smiles. In one photograph a woman apparently draws butterflies on the wall. With impeccable detail Bellocq describes their make-believe elegance, naughty frills, and forever-young skin--recording for posterity their projections into an image-ideal.

Bellocq's photographs are thus artifacts of a most liminal intimacy. The plates themselves seem to bear witness to this. Humidity and dirt, frenzied scratchings, delicate markings, white ghosts caused by light-leak, and rotten infections creep in along borders and corners of the plates. Marred surfaces and exquisite reproductions beget a fetishistic and tactile presence, a privacy we are simultaneously invited to violate.

Perhaps our experience and understanding of these images too is inherently "perverted," just as our ability to share Bellocq's escapade in the bordello is inescapably gendered. In her introduction to this work, Susan Sontag reflects: "The only pictures that do seem salacious--or convey something of the meanness and abjection of a prostitute's life--are those...on which the faces have been scratched out... These pictures are actually painful to look at, at least for this viewer. But then I am a woman and, unlike many men who look at these pictures, find nothing romantic about prostitution." Must we as spectators choose, then, either to metamorphasize these faceless women, as it were, into the butterflies drawn on the wall, or else to indulge a Byronic celebration of lechery and subjugation?

Janet Malcom (New York Review of Books, January 9, 1997) reported in her review of this same book that Ernest J. Bellocq may have been more normal than we would like to reckon with. Rex Rose (the son of Al Rose, one of the musicians interviewed in the monographs), and Steven Maklansky (curator of Photography, New Orleans Museum of Art) have compiled information on Bellocq that describes an average, even at times, dapper man, with no indications of deformity. So, why the story? If Bellocq was an ordinary guy who aspired to make pretty pictures akin to others of his day, then these pictures might be for visual titillation (little more than "take-your-clothes-off-I-want-to-take-your-picture" pictures) and therefore unpermittable into the Art realm. But, as evidence of a physically handicapped artist able to transcend his limitations, photographically consummating his loves, these pictures are granted Art legitimacy, and it all makes good poetic sense.

Why is the representation of sexual pleasure connotatively bad by moral standards (and misogynist by a feminist psychoanalytic understanding that must consider the dominant hegemony, and thus who is in control of who is being pleasured), and aesthetically questionable, in need of substantiation along "higher" abstract ideals of form and narrative? That these pictures lend themselves so well to formal and narrative substantiation does not make them less filled with desire; nor would the context of prurience reduce these formally marvelous photographs.

In the same essay Sontag favorably contrasts Bellocq's work with photographic work by the contemporary Japanese artist Nobuyoshi Araki. Sontag objects to Araki's images of elaborately bound and gagged mostly naked women as precisely the sort of glorification of sexual/sexist violence in patriarchal visual discourse that Bellocq somehow transcends. Meanwhile, Nan Goldin comments in an interview (Artforum, January 1995) with Araki, that his work is "love, and meant as homage--to women, to beauty and to his own desires." In support of this, Araki himself asserts that he regularly has sex with those he photographs.

Does Araki's sexually explicit celebrations of his own promiscuity merely reaffirm the resilience of the photographic sex-act paradigm (with the man always behind the camera, and thus on top)? Araki claims a pedagogical motive for these images: to teach people that genitalia (in this case all female--very few men have been explored as subjects) "are not obscene in themselves; it's the act of hiding them that's obscene." Responding to restrictions in Japanese culture against displaying sex organs, Araki did a series of works in which he scratched out the offending portions. One is reminded of Bellocq's likewise defiled images, but then Araki takes the scratching to an almost ridiculous yet formally striking level: not only cunts but faces, fire hydrants, and clouds.

A different body of Araki's work carries on the exhibitionism of this work, only this time in a far more personal, or even hyper-personal mode. First published in 1991 as <u>Sentimental na Tabi/Tuyo no Tabi (Sentimental journey/winter journey)</u> , <u>The Works of Nobuyoshi Araki - 3: Yoko</u>, features hundreds of photographs (read: snapshots) of Araki's wife, Yoko. The book is constructed as a narrative, a love story that begins with their marriage in 1971 and continues to her death from cancer in 1990.

Where Bellocq's photographs resonate with bittersweet poignancy, Araki's "Sentimental Journey" is scented with ominous frailty. Like the ironic travelogue from which it borrows its title, Araki's narrative confronts us with a paradox of fiction and authenticity. A visual diary of sorts, it utilizes an array of picture-making strategies to divulge a plenitude of mundane and intimate moments: Yoko proudly presenting a meal, Yoko's cat napping in her lap, Yoko giving a blow-job, Yoko splayed out in the sun. Drawn in by these photographs' obsessive emotional engagement, I believe the story. The images flirt with me, sharing with me brief bits of private pleasure.

Yet underlying the intimacy Araki constructs and exhibits for us here is an even more intimate coupling (theorized eloquently by Roland Barthes in <u>Camera Lucida</u>): namely, of photography and death. Innumerable little moments and scenes bring us closer to "Yoko," but all our knowledge is her absence. She is taken away. We see Araki in a surgical mask; we see a hospital bed with a man's and a woman's clasped hands; a backlit empty Ferris wheel; a close-up of white flowers; Yoko's cat alone in the yard; and white flowers circling Yoko's face in her casket.

However, unlike Harry Callahan's Eleanor and Steiglitz's Georgia, Araki's Yoko--like Bellocq' unnamed prostitutes--finally eludes the formal mastery we expect from the modernist constellation of artist/lover/camera. Why does it feel like we get a more real sense of Yoko or the Storyville women, so much that questions of the "true" story becomes superfluous? And how does this, on the other hand, still relate to the fact that the "woman" remains in this work the willing subject while the "man" remains hidden--Bellocq behind the myth of his handicap, Araki behind the mask of his obsession? Can the intimacy of the gaze ever enable it to transcend the gendered spectator position, and thus an aesthetic ideology in which the very receptivity of film is a sign of the eternal feminine?

Is there a kind or degree of personal intimacy--the domestic triviality of sex, aging, and death--that lacerates the resilience of this ideology to assert a more authentic experience of sexuality and looking? Or does our pleasure in exploring these intimate secrets always need to be figured as transgressing (and thus tacitly upholding) the traditional social-aesthetic gender constructs?

One example of celebrated transgression and the sheer--and at times morbid--pleasure of exhibitionist intimacy is Nan Goldin's first published work, The Ballad of Sexual Dependency. Her sequence of diaristic color photographs describe the late 70's, early 80's Lower East-Side scene, both in public and in private. First presented as slide shows with synchronized music, the format and the images were incredibly liberating, breaking the boundaries of gendered authorship, the sanctity of the sumptuous silver print, and, showing things like they really are--or at least, were. Goldin's sincerity and relish in documenting this sordid, marginal scene seemed to take us on a raw adventure, full of delight, disappointment, and urgency.

Like Bellocq's work, Goldin's intimate narrative has also suffered from a different but equal ravage of time. For precisely if we believe the sincerity of her storytelling in the Ballad, the recent retrospective book, I'll Be Your Mirror, 1996/7, of that (and other recent) work leads one to feel that the sentiment, if ever it was sincere, is exhausted through stilted familiarity. Indeed, now that her status has been repeatedly confirmed through mainstream publications and exhibitions, the more recent work feels disingenuous. Is it possible that regardless of place, year, and level of artistic success Goldin could continue to make the same ol' picture of the same ol' people--is this to become a cool alternative "Family of Man?" Is it that, as her titles suggest, the balladeer has since become a mere image tool, an objective non-participant? One is led to wonder (albeit unwillingly, regretfully) whether, given the social linkage of the marginal and the feminine, was the inclusion of her work within the Art-realm allowed precisely because it gave a vicarious pleasure that was finally much less threatening and transgressive than it appeared? Goldin's use of visual conventions affirm a narrative pleasure that allows us foray, but it is her technical erratic-ness, and the alterity of the subjects that insists upon a compelling and contradictory preciousness of this particular story.

A related but very different example of infraction within the intimate sphere is Aura Rosenberg's, Head Shots. This book is a series of black and white close-ups of men's faces in orgasm. The ecstatic array of grins and grimaces ironically reverses Bellocq's gaze. Now we see the "johns," as it were, pictured in their moment of genius. Photographed by their lovers, themselves, and Rosenberg, the images are a cross between religious ecstatic portraiture and torture scenes. This work smarts with ironic commentary on our expectations of sexual bliss.

The pictures were produced at least in part as a response to the remarkable infrequency of images of men in sexual ecstasy. So why is it that work by female artist about love and sex is just not nearly as widely recognized, artistically, as similar work done by men?

Rosenberg performs a gender-reversal on the standard figuration of the pleasured-party that demands acknowledgment of this discrepancy. Yet, while the seriality of the lover's "heads" implicitly mimics the numbers of loved bodies in Bellocq and Araki, it is the more explicit mockery of social-sexual mores regarding a woman's capacity for promiscuity and salaciousness that gives this work its transgressive kick. Rosenberg's gaze marks her--and with her, me, as the engaged (and not necessarily hetero-) female viewer potentially on the giving end of this gift--as a bad girl, an artistic sex worker in the cultural bordello.

Looking at this work we encounter some possibilities for re-figuring sexual and intimate desires including love, lust and afterglow. Rather than giving in though to some gender-essentialist notion of what/how she/he really sees, or trying to find a radical or democratic utopian--but impossible--deconstruction of difference, there is an acknowledgment of limitations, barriers and boundaries (perhaps the better to break them, or at least make them messy). These challenges to our preconceptions of desire are possibly counter-hegemonic and non-oppressive--or maybe just even a different formulation. Full of all kinds of pleasures, these pictures make compelling interrogations into the standard sights of sexual intimacy.