

Between the Snapshot and Staged Photography

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The word “narrative” can be used as both adjective and noun. This is a happy accident for those making and thinking about photography, and it offers an entry point into some of the most profound and widely used aspects of the medium. A single photograph might be described as *narrative* if it suggests a situation or scene that extends beyond its spatial and temporal frame. An organized sequence of photographs might be described as *a narrative* if it encourages connections and associations among the individual parts. And the two are not mutually exclusive, as an orchestrated grouping may contain photographs that are narrative in character.

The question of whether or how photography can narrate has been a source of fascination from the beginning, but there is no definitive answer. The demands on narrative are never stable: our individual needs and expectations of it morph across our lifetimes, while the modern era that gave birth to photography is itself as changeable and precarious. In all the arts, narrative protocols are subject to mutation and rupture.

The stillness and muteness of the single photograph may well reduce its narrative potential to allusion and suggestion, but a sequence or grouping never fully overcomes this condition either, even with the accompaniment of words. When photographs are put together, the spaces between—the jumps in time, place, angle, or motif—can be as significant as what is pictured. The intense and fragmentary character of photography places it closer to poetry than prose.

To these factors we might add the narrative, or narratives, of photography’s own history. If any medium complicates the unified story of art, it is photography, which has spread into every corner of culture and comprehensively transformed it. Over the course of photography’s first century, there was little interest in looking back—only forward—but today its rich and varied past is being comprehensively unearthed. Photography is now as historically conscious as painting

or sculpture. And while there is no single history, photographic artists carry their own narratives of key forebears, as do viewers.

Nearly all photographic art, whether it emerges from Conceptualism, reportage, or the genres of still life, landscape, and portraiture, is made as a *body* of work: a set, suite, series, collage, montage, diptych, triptych, sequence, photo essay, project, slide show, album, archive, or typology. Nobuyoshi Araki’s series Sentimental Journey (plate 94), published as a book in 1971, is a visual diary of the photographer’s honeymoon with his wife, Yōko, and it intersperses travel snapshots with tender pictures of Yōko in landscapes and naked in bed. The sequence is episodic but intense (as honeymoons often are), and each frame seems intended to feel like a freshly minted memory of a fleeting moment. In the book Araki describes his approach as a *Shi-shōsetsu*, or “I-novel,” a literary genre well established in Japan, which he considers “the closest thing there is to photography.”¹ In the same text he voices his anger with mainstream media, particularly style culture: “Sometimes I am flooded by fashion photographs but it’s nothing more than that, this kind of face, this nudity, this private life, this landscape, are total lies; I can’t take it.” Against the unified voice of mass culture, Araki proposes a fitful and open-ended narrative of a relationship in the delicate process of becoming.

Family albums are always acts of narration, whether through captions, selective editing, or the informal oral histories that surround them. In principle, at least, domestic life should be the realm in which photographic expression is most free. It is, however, often hemmed in by the dominant media narrative, concocted in the years following World War II, of the consumerist nuclear family, which shaped everything from advertisements and real estate brochures to Kodak posters and television sitcoms. Politicians and newspapers upheld the nuclear family as universal, but by the 1960s the strain was visible to the observant and honest. Projects as diverse as Robert Frank’s phototextual accounts of family life (begun in the 1970s, plate 96), Anna and Bernhard Blume’s domestic slapstick sequences (plate 114), Larry Sultan’s series Pictures from Home (plate 103), Richard Billingham’s series Ray’s a Laugh (plate 102),

Gillian Wearing’s Album series (plate 117), and Tina Barney’s ongoing photography of bourgeois family scenes (plates 104, 105) have all attempted to find new artistic forms to express the “pleasures and terrors of domestic comfort,” so named by the title of a photography exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1991.²

Family roles can be stifling, not least because the sexuality and subjectivity of individuals is more varied and fluid than the norms allow. This can be troubling but thrillingly cathartic, and it has given rise to some of the boldest photographic narratives of the last few decades. Nan Goldin’s *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1979–2004, plate 92) has become emblematic among diaristic projects, and many of its individual photographs are masterpieces of compressed first-person storytelling. *Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City* (1983) shows Goldin in the seedy-romantic orange light of a bare room, lying on a bed and looking toward Brian, who is holding a cigarette and is undressed and absorbed in thought. A photograph is pinned to the wall above the bed; taken in the same room, it, too, shows Brian with a cigarette. The intimacy of the scene is made self-conscious, relayed through gentle allusions to cinema and past photography. Meanwhile, the narrative fragments we put together are filtered through the knowledge that the scene is a self-portrait, and that from the enigmatic situation in which she appears to be immersed, Goldin has had the wherewithal to conjure a commentary on it. With photography, the distance required for great art need only be small and fleeting. It is the “I-novel” quality of the visual diary that allows reaction and contemplation, fact and wish, exhibitionism and voyeurism to so easily fold and overlap. *Nan and Brian in Bed* became the cover of the book version of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, published in 1986, but it is one of nearly seven hundred images that Goldin would reshuffle and present as slideshows, accompanied by pop music, in small clubs over many years.

The notion of the body of work made up of many images has its origins in the printed page. It was via photographic books, avant-garde journals, and mass media in the 1920s and ’30s that photography asserted its modernity and artistic relevance. Exhibitions were comparatively rare. In 1938 Walker Evans became the first photographer to have a solo show at The Museum of Modern Art,

and to ensure that the sequence along the walls was as he intended it to be, he locked himself in the gallery the night before the opening. It wasn’t enough simply to make great pictures: one had to take care of the relationships between them. *American Photographs*, the book published to accompany the show, remains one of the most ambitious and intelligent examples of photographic sequencing.

Over subsequent decades, the various modes of assembly and narration that photographers and editors developed for the page have been adapted to exhibition spaces. Wolfgang Tillmans’s installations have included digital images and photocopies pinned to the wall, framed darkroom prints, and spreads from books and magazines (plate 101). He takes his motifs from everyday life, but he has also included purely abstract work and prints folded or creased to give them sculptural presence. Tillmans remains resolutely committed to photography but keeps open his sense of what the medium is or could be and where its cultural significance lies. His shifts in scale and presentation allow the gallery setting to become a space for reflection on all the places of photography in contemporary life, be they walls, pages, or screens, in high culture or low.

Although anyone who takes a photograph is a photographer, many artists resist the label, perhaps because to imply affection for or loyalty to a medium feels unnecessary or misleading. Gabriel Orozco’s documents of his sculptural activity (plates 126–29) and Matthew Barney’s gothic-surreal stagings (plate 119) are certainly photographic works in their own right, but they also constitute parts of broader, mixed-medium œuvres; in a similar fashion, Robert Gober’s pictures (plate 120) distill the melodrama of the camera-friendly installations for which he is better known. Although contemporary art culture is frequently described as “postmedium,” it is notable how much of it takes photographic form. Photography is flexible and adaptable enough to be a generalized medium while remaining a particular one, too.

There remains something intrinsically singular about most photographs, even when they belong to larger bodies of work. The click of the shutter and finite framing of a part of the world create an unrepeatable occurrence. Aside from practices such as collage and montage, the intentions that bind a single image to a greater whole are never entirely fixed, and this is part of the nature and

¹ Nobuyoshi Araki, *Senchimentaru na tabi* (1971). Translated by Haruko Kohno and quoted in Doryun Chong et al. *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan, 1945–1989* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012).

² See Peter Galassi, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991).

pleasure of the photographic ensemble. In the 1980s and ’90s, however, as the medium began to establish itself as a practice that could belong specifically to the museum and gallery (without apology or yearning for the page), the single image became much more significant. As the art market ballooned, large-scale individual works were propelled to the forefront of photographic art.

The Canadian artist Jeff Wall is an exemplary figure in this shift from printed matter to gallery, from the scale of the page to the scale of the exhibition space, and from the many to the one. Having been involved in the serial practices of Conceptual art, Wall began to explore the depiction of social drama via large-scale tableaux photographs, sometimes staged and sometimes not, that are rich in narrative suggestion. He has worked this way ever since. Photographs arouse curiosities they cannot contain and ask questions they cannot answer. Wall accepts this, playing the formal unity of his compositions against the fragmented stories they suggest. *After “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (1999–2000, plate 110) is Wall’s response to an encounter he has called an “accident of reading.”³ Ellison’s episodic first-person novel, published in 1952, about what it was to be African American at midcentury is peppered with descriptions that have the arresting force of snapshots. The prologue describes how the narrator fell down a garbage chute into a basement, where he set up his home and wrote the novel you are about to read. The narrator notes that the room has 1,369 light bulbs, but otherwise his description of his surroundings is not very long. The whole novel took Ellison seven years to complete, while Wall’s photograph took about a year to realize. It shows what the writer might have accumulated in that space. It is not a snapshot but a carefully worked out picture. Are we in the register of realism or hallucination or somewhere in between? Is this literature, photography, cinema, theater, or all of them?

Preparation for and collaboration on a narrative photograph can be as complex as building a set or as informal as asking someone on the street to briefly pose. In the work of Philip-Lorca diCorcia, the melodrama of a natural pool of light or an unexpected burst of electronic flash is enough to lift a situation out of the ordinary, turning a pole dancer into a fashion model (or even a sculpture) and giving a street scene the feeling of a film still or a nineteenth-century plein air painting, full

of overt symbolism (plates 106, 108). For one series, diCorcia paid hustlers not for sexual acts but to appear before his camera at preselected locations. In *Eddie Anderson; 21 Years Old; Houston, Texas; \$20* (1990–92, plate 107), in spite of the artist’s contrivance, it is the young man’s genuine vulnerability that compels; all that is needed to set the enigmatic narrative in motion is the title.

In 1969 Walker Evans described photography as “the most literary of the graphic arts. It will have—on occasion, and in effect—qualities of eloquence, wit, grace, and economy; style, of course; structure and coherence; paradox, play and oxymoron.”⁴ Later he invoked Henry James, Vladimir Nabokov, and James Joyce, calling them writers with a “photographic eye” who could “create a photograph, almost” with a descriptive passage; “you can get a flash from a line of poetry,” he said, “that really teaches you something about the eye.”⁵ On the same occasion (a rare lecture to students) Evans described Vilmos Zsigmond’s camerawork on Robert Altman’s film *The Long Goodbye* (1973) as “a marvelous bunch of photography.” The line is as startling as it is obvious, pinpointing what movies essentially are: still photographs viewed in a way that gives the illusion of duration or movement. Evans was too wedded to what he called “documentary style” photography to explore the implications of what he was saying. Nevertheless, his insight chimed with an emerging acceptance that the pictorial procedures of the cinema should be at the disposal of the still photographer.

In her recent works Cindy Sherman depicts herself in the trappings of wealthy Western women, replacing the narrative strategies of her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80, plates 180–82) with the rhetoric of the classic bourgeois status portrait. In them, posed figures become sets of deployed signifiers as much as portrayals of individuals. Viewers are encouraged to piece together clues to embellish their first impressions. Take a close look at *Untitled #466* (2008, plate 118): tense toes seen through nude tights in a pink floral shoe; manicured fingernails; ornate, vaguely “Oriental” earrings to complement the pattern of an immaculate caftan in gold and azure; caked makeup and overemphatic lipstick; the lurid colors of the picture itself. Unlike Diane Arbus’s portraits (plates 1–3), in which the subjects’ masks of self-presentation appear to have momentarily slipped, Sherman’s portraits feature

details that have been choreographed by the artist. As they accumulate, the narrative possibilities multiply. Who is she? An archetype of new money? An aspect of Sherman’s own character? And what *is* this picture? An upholding of tradition or a trashing of it? Compassion or cruel satire? To what extent does the photograph belong to the contradictory narratives of contemporary social life?

Like Wall, Sherman began her mature work in the late 1970s, a period in which the rethinking of photography’s artistic identity took place alongside a rethinking of identity in general. How is selfhood formed and maintained? What is its relationship to power, images, and desire? What are its stories? Set against the idea that photography fixes and reveals the self are important strands of more speculative self-imaging, in which the space before the camera is understood as a theater of enactment and proposition. In 1840 Hippolyte Bayard posed as a drowned man when his contribution to the invention of photography was ignored by the French state. In the 1890s F. Holland Day nearly starved himself to portray an emaciated Jesus on the cross. In the 1920s Man Ray photographed his friend Marcel Duchamp as the artist’s female alter ego, Rose Sélavy, and Lucy Schwob shaved her head, renamed herself Claude Cahun, and provocatively played with gender roles and sexuality in front of the camera. Such examples remained somewhat repressed by the stiff histories of photography until they came to be seen as important precedents for new narratives of the self. The portraits made by Peter Hujar (plate 98) and the portraits and self-portraits made by Robert Mapplethorpe (plates 99, 100), from the 1970s and ’80s in particular, pit the codes of classical studio work against new ambiguities of the self.

Moreover, the self need not be the subject depicted. Since the 1980s photographers have given themselves all manner of working guises: the artist as archivist, sociologist, functionary, family snap shooter, spy, and even social worker. In his Disco Angola series (2012, plates 111, 112), Stan Douglas has assumed the persona

of a photojournalist, circa 1974, whose two photographic subjects are New York’s burgeoning underground disco scene and Angola at the time of the coup d’état that ended Portuguese rule. Such a person could reasonably have existed. With these staged, antedated photographs Douglas invites us to consider two concurrent moments of liberation—one sexual, one national—linked by an imaginary photographer and by the African rhythms of early disco music. Within a couple of years disco would go mainstream and lose its edge, and Angola would be destabilized and plunged into twenty-eight years of civil war. Douglas’s series reflects something of the recent turn in historical analysis toward looking across time, and connecting simultaneous events, instead of looking back and forth through it. In a world economy characterized by uneven flows of goods, labor, art, and information, understanding simultaneity becomes key. History cannot be grasped or told without this complex transnational braiding of politics, power, and culture.

We can grasp something of photography’s development through its genres, those mutable categories of the image that have abided over centuries: still life, portrait, landscape, cityscape. The more conscious photographers and viewers are of genre, the more readily images suggest real or imagined lineages of practice. For example, the visual strategies we see in the studio still lifes of Jan Groover (plate 123) and Barbara Kasten (plate 313) from the 1970s and ’80s recall those by interwar modernists such as Edward Weston and Florence Henri. In turn, Groover and Kasten might be seen to have anticipated further expansions of the still life by James Casebere (plate 121), Laurie Simmons (plate 115), Gregory Crewdson (plate 122), and Shannon Ebner (plate 131), who have made and photographed models and artificial environments. And yet this purely art historical way of thinking never seems entirely adequate to photography, because the medium is also in dialogue with the complexities of life and images beyond art. Photography is pervasive and mutable, and the richness of its narratives reflects this.

³ Jeff Wall, “James Rondeau in Dialogue with Jeff Wall,” in Galassi, ed., *Jeff Wall* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), p. 157.

⁴ Walker Evans, “Photography,” in Louis Kronenberger, ed., *Quality: Its Image in the Arts* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 170.

⁵ Evans, lecture to students at Rice University, Houston, 1974. Video recording, private collection.