



St. Mary
Magdalene, Le
Louvre, 2010

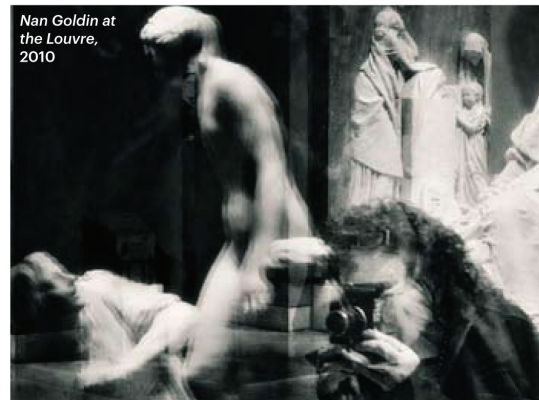


Tilda with the
Leopards,
Paris, 2008

HOT
LIST

NAN GOLDIN: *IN THE FRAME*

*In a rare interview, the controversial artist
opens up to GLENN O'BRIEN
about the art world, her transgressive
work, and why she's a survivor*



Nan Goldin at
the Louvre,
2010

I've known Nan Goldin for about 33 years, mostly from across the room. In the '80s, that room might have been in New York at the Mudd Club or at a party at Cookie Mueller's apartment or at a crazy little house where Nan's friend Bruce Balboni lived in Little Italy. I still think about that enchanted/disenchanted nighttime world every time I walk down Elizabeth Street. It was really another world, but maybe it was more real than this one. It still flickers in my memory, and it exists in Nan's work, the best history of life at a certain time and place, a history that now seems crucial.

Cookie, a hard-boiled but unspoiled glamour-girl actress, writer, and amateur doctor, was Nan's best friend back then and a tight friend of mine too. Cookie and I had the same birthday, same sense of humor, and same taste in bad habits. Oddly, I was wary of Nan for some reason, and maybe she was

wary of me. I knew she was okay because Cookie loved her, but we were still always across the room—the wariness of watchers watching each other.

But I knew Nan from her art and always loved seeing exactly what she saw—on a wall or in slide shows, at the

*“ART DEALERS
might as well be
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OR WEAPONS
DEALERS,” Nan says*

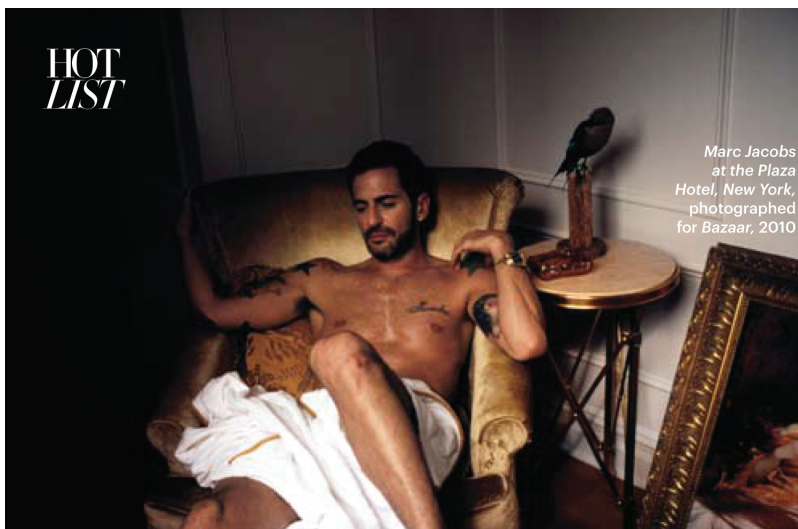
Mudd Club or wherever. She captured this strange world we occupied from the inside, in all its awkward grace and wounded beauty. She was more than a fly on the wall; she was the wall and the light too. Maybe I was just saving Nan for later.

Now it's much later and I find her not across the room but across the

table, and I can't help but love her. She's a radiant soul.

I visited her in a quiet part of West Berlin, where she lives on and off. (She also spends time in New York and Paris.) Nan's life has had big ups and downs, and I didn't know what to expect when I saw her, so I was pleased to find her, at 58, seeming together, if a little cranky and jittery around the edges. We finally hooked up after a lot of texting back and forth. (At one point, she texted me, “I have a terrible relationship with time.”)

When I picked her up from the big old apartment where she was staying, she was smoking cigarettes (her only current vice) and fussing over a computer and an espresso machine (neither of which she's mastered), preparing for her newest slide show, *Scopophilia*, to open at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York (October 29) and a film festival she's curating in Denmark. We found an outdoor ►



Marc Jacobs
at the Plaza
Hotel, New York,
photographed
for Bazaar, 2010

café where she could smoke and we could watch the passing parade. Nan is a wanderer and the closest thing we have now to the classic expatriate of the 19th century. She has mostly been away from New York for years, living in Paris or London and now Berlin. Her absence from the United States is on principle: "I decided if Bush stole the election, I'd leave, so I left," Nan says, adding with a laugh, "but it didn't seem to have any effect on politics."

Everybody has been saying that Berlin now is like bygone New York, a place where life comes ahead of business; it is cheap, energetic, full of artists, and open all night, and that was how I found it. I was staying in a house near Bertolt Brecht's theater, and the title of Nan's famous slide show and first book, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, was taken from a song in Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*.

But that was just a title. Nan's pictures were never really about sex but about need, people's need to merge, to be close. The people she photographed were those she felt were extraordinarily beautiful, extraordinarily brave, or both. She felt a particular affinity for drag queens and bodybuilders because of their determination to transform themselves. At the very beginning, in the late '60s and '70s, she was recording her memories for later use. "I used to think that I couldn't lose anyone if I photographed them enough," she wrote in her 1998 book, *Couples and Loneliness*.

I just missed Nan in New York when she was there this past summer show-

*"I used to think that I
couldn't LOSE ANYONE
if I photographed
them enough"*



Hermaphrodite Asleep,
Le Louvre, 2010

ing a slide show, the way she has for more than three decades, color photo after color photo tuned to a perfect soundtrack (from James Brown to the Velvet Underground). But I didn't really miss the show; my friend Michael Zilkha, another survivor of those times, showed a few of the photos to me—*The Ballad*, *The Other Side* (which begins during her days in Boston), and the self-portrait *All By Myself*. I knew much of her cast of subjects, but I saw the pictures differently now and was quite astonished by the beauty of the images, the perfect pitch of the framing, the sublimity of the light.

I always knew that what Nan does is extraordinary, but suddenly it seemed more important, even more urgent than ever. And casually talking to Nan in Berlin, I knew why. I was in Berlin on a trip through the art world, and I hadn't seen much in it that moved me. What people talk about as art now is

often about elaborately conceived, industrially fabricated, and obscenely priced publicity-stunt totems—trophies of hog-wild consumption.

Don't get her started: "For me, the '80s and '90s have been all about cynical joke art. I mean, there are still a few great painters out there, but the YBAs [Young British Artists] and a few New Yorkers and a few Japanese certainly brought in joke art. I'm still stuck in [Mark] Rothko and Otto Dix," she says. "And from doing that work at the Louvre [for *Scopophilia*], I have much less patience for contemporary art. Why bother? Can't anyone paint anymore? It fits into my theories about artists. My work might not look like that, but it's still my belief system. Art dealers might as well be drug dealers or weapons dealers. There's not much difference anymore. There's not any difference between the art world and the fashion world, that's for sure."

Nan doesn't mind working around the fashion world, and many people from that world appreciate what she does, including Marc Jacobs (whom she shot for *Bazaar* last year). But some get it wrong. "It's really hard for me to do commercial work," she says, "because people kind of want me to do a 'Nan Goldin.' They don't understand that it's not about a style or a look or a setup. It's about emotional obsession and empathy." And it can even be disturbing. "I shot one of the top models in Paris," she recalls. "She didn't know what the word *ballet* meant."

I have long been aware of a sort of blight on the art world, but seeing Nan brought it into sharper focus. Art has gotten into a habit of ignoring humanity and what comes with it: beauty, desire, and love. "[My] work has always been misunderstood as being about a certain milieu of drugs and parties and the underground. And although I'd say that my family still is marginal and that we don't want to be part of normal society, I don't think the work was ever about that," Nan said in Jean-Pierre ►

Krief's 2000 documentary short *Contacts*. "I think the work has always been about the condition of being human and the pain, the ability to survive, and how difficult that is."

Survival is hard, especially when you're sensitive and want to survive with your sensibility intact. Nan has that double

Gone are the slide projectors, and sometimes they even feature specially commissioned music. She seems to be evolving the slide-show concept toward film or perhaps opera. I think her disenchantment with what she sees spurs her to keep pushing herself. Of her early naivete she says, "We didn't know



curse and gift of sensitivity, as it seems most great artists do. I can see how much effort she puts into her own survival by channeling her spirit into her work.

Nan has been making extraordinary photos since her days at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in the '70s, where she was introduced to the sexual underground by her friend and classmate (and great photographer) David Armstrong. Eventually, she began exhibiting her work as slide shows, for which she's now renowned.

"I think the first slide show I did was with my friend Bruce Balboni, whom I've known since '72. We did it to entice Cookie and Sharon [Niesp, Cookie's girlfriend at the time] over to our house," Nan remembers. "Since I took a lot more pictures than Bruce did, I started doing them when I was living in Provincetown and had to get credit at art school. I wasn't printing anything, so that's where I got the idea to do slide shows. At first they were just boom, boom, boom. But then Bobby Swope, who was my boyfriend, started deejaying for the slide show in 1980."

Today, the slide shows, like *Scophilia*, which was commissioned by the Louvre, are more technically perfect.

anything about the art market. I never heard about it until '79, when [artist] Donald Baechler told me about it. I remember the night. We didn't read art magazines; we didn't know they existed. We sat in the parking lot with the teachers and drank. Basically, I learned to drink really well in art school.

"We believed that most artists ended up starving and that you had to give up your whole life to be an artist," she continues, "and that only 5 percent of the people who went to art school became artists. Now there are more people applying to art school than business school."

"A lot of them wind up in business anyway," I noted.

"In those days, they'd end up as morticians," Nan glibed, "or in other interesting jobs. We were taught that being an artist was really a spiritual calling, and I never got over that. I can't believe in the market. I have a naive belief system that makes the world difficult to live in—unless I stay at home. I'm most connected to the world, most alive, when I'm shooting or making my slide shows. I find it hard to be alive, especially in this period."

But doing the hard thing never scared Nan. And this transitional period in art desperately requires what she possesses in her eye and in her heart. She's a survivor because she's a witness for beauty and a treasurer of endangered truth. ■