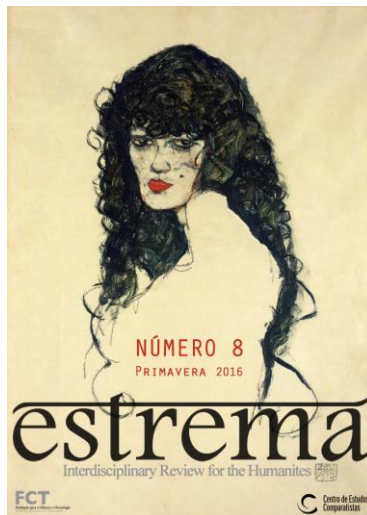


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Nan Goldin's *The Other Side*: Creating A Gender-Free Space for a Queer Futurity

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Abstract: For almost five decades Nan Goldin has consistently created very intimate narratives through snapshot photography and has been able to not only question conventional formal notions of fine art, but at the same time managed to challenge seemingly fixed traditions of gender perception. Thus, Goldin has been a pioneer spokesperson for the queer community and particularly for the trans and drag movements, in a time in which gender-crossers were completely ostracized, even within the gay community. The following paper will take a closer look at the art of drag and its relevance to the deconstruction of gender norms and the building of queer memory – two ideas present throughout Nan Goldin's entire photographic catalogue and especially in her 1993 album *The Other Side*. Although *The Other Side* features various forms of gender-crossing individuals, I will primarily focus on photographs depicting drag performers, due to the fact that they constitute gender subversion in its most parodic form. It will be argued that Goldin has been able to humanize the queer community and to construct a space for gender nonconformists through the creation of a visual discourse of counter-memory that bears a strong subversive power.

Keywords: Drag, Queer, Counter-Memory, Photography

Introductory Note

When talking about feminist and queer art, or more specifically the art of photography, one of the most renowned and praised names that comes

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into mind is the one of American photographer Nan Goldin. For almost five decades Goldin has consistently created very intimate narratives through snapshot photography and has been able to not only destroy conventional formal notions of fine art, but at the same time managed to challenge seemingly fixed traditions of gender perception. Thus, Goldin has been a pioneer for the queer movement and particularly for the trans and drag movements, in a time in which gender-crossers were completely ostracized, even within the gay community.

The following paper will begin with a brief discussion of the formative chapters of Nan Goldin's personal as well as professional life, in order to build a background that will facilitate the understanding of her 1993 album *The Other Side*. Moreover, engaging with queer theory, this paper will as well take a closer look at the art of drag and its relevance to the deconstruction of gender norms and the building of queer memory – two ideas present throughout Nan Goldin's entire photographic catalogue and especially in the work discussed. Although *The Other Side* features various forms of gender-crossing individuals, the following chapters will primarily focus on photographs depicting drag performers, due to the fact that they constitute gender subversion in its most parodic form, as will be further debated in chapter 2.1.

In order to offer an in-depth analysis of the above-mentioned subject matter, only a selection of photographs from the third of seven sub-sections will be considered (see chapter 1 for further details). This choice allows building a greater connection between the chosen pictures, since this section presents a

narrative in itself by depicting a particular group of friends during a specific timespan.

1) Nan Goldin's *The Other Side*: An Obsession Becomes Art

Nancy Goldin was born on September 12, 1953, as the youngest of four children of Jewish middle-class parents. When she was eleven years old, her older sister Barbara committed suicide; an incident that would influence her later work to a great extent. Essentially, the young Nan Goldin was perplexed by her parent's denial when dealing with this tragic event. As a result, she decided to become a teller of the uncompromising truth (Skodbo 2007, 8). With the help of the camera she would prevent future losses and "keep" those close to her heart that might one day leave. Goldin's first encounter with photography was in the late 1960s, at the age of sixteen in high school, where she "immediately became obsessed with taking pictures, so [she] became pretty much the school photographer" (Krief, 2000). The artist began to incessantly take Polaroid pictures of her friends, almost on a daily basis. Henceforth, photography would become her personal way of keeping a diary.

When moving to Boston in 1972, Nan Goldin eventually met her first drag friends - Ivy, Naomi, and Colette - who made a great impression on her: "They were the most gorgeous creatures I'd ever seen, I was immediately infatuated" (Goldin 1993, 5). This infatuation would turn into an "obsession" (5) that made her move in with the drag queens and turn

their daily-shared lives into the focus of her photography. Together, this unconventional clique spent six days a week going out to the drag queen bar "The Other Side," which would become the name given to her future eponymous slide installation and book, which Goldin published twenty years later.

The Other Side might be best described as a tribute Nan Goldin is paying to the variety of gender-crossing friends she encountered during her life. Goldin has always "wanted to pay homage, to show them how beautiful they were" (Goldin 1993, 5) and consequently has turned her daily-taken photographs of her trans and drag friends into a collection, which was first presented as a slide show and later published as an art book, in 1993. This collection of snapshots does not only concern itself with the above-mentioned encounter with her drag clique in the 1970s, but in fact encapsulates the long timespan of twenty years. As it happens, Nan Goldin lost touch with her Boston friends when she enrolled in the School of The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, from where she graduated in 1977. Nevertheless, the resulting photos of her friendship that roughly lasted from 1972-1974 would make up the first of seven sub-sections of *The Other Side*, bearing the same name as the book collection.

In 1978 Goldin moved to New York, where she continued to produce photographs of the intimate live she shared with her friends. A selection of 700 of these photos were first presented as the underground slide show *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* and were later published under the same name in book format. *The Ballad* is considered Nan Goldin's

artistic breakthrough, having been awarded various prizes over the years (Skodbo 2007, 9). The years to follow Goldin kept up different friendships with gender-crossers that would each form the remaining sections of *The Other Side*: “Greer” (1981-87), starring Goldin’s transgender friend Greer; “Hi Girl!,” (1990-91), which includes photos of her circle of drag queen friends taken in New York, Paris and Berlin; “Kim” (1991-92), featuring her eponymous friend in Paris; “The Queen and I,” a collection of photos taken in Manila in 1992; “Second Tip” (1992), showing life in a gay Bangkok Bar; and finally “Joey,” displaying another transgender friend of Goldin, who lived in New York City between 1991 and 1992. What unifies the different sections of the book, which were taken at different times, decades and places in the world, is the fact that the portrayed subjects were all born as biological males and found themselves in different stages of transition to a more feminized self. Hence, we find a whole spectrum of gender-bending persons present in the photographs:

Some of my friends shift gender daily – from boy to girl and back again. Some are transsexual before and after surgery, and among them some live entirely as women while others openly identify themselves as transsexuals. Others dress up only for stage performances and live as gay boys by day. And still others make no attempt at all to fit in anywhere, but live in a gender-free zone, flaunting their third sex status. (Goldin 1993, 7)

As observable from this quote, the questions of the crossing of gender boundaries and what Goldin calls the “third sex” seem to be of fundamental importance to the understanding of her artistic expression and therefore are in need of a closer examination.

2) The Art of Drag

In order to get a deeper insight into *The Other Side*, it is crucial to define the art of drag and to understand the social context in which Goldin's pictures were taken.

If we look back in time, cross-dressing has played a longer culturally significant role than one might assume at first. Men who dress up in clothes traditionally connected to the female gender have been part of the performing arts of several cultures worldwide for centuries. In ancient Greek theater, for instance, men wearing female attire performed the roles of women. The same applies to Shakespearean actors as well as performers of Japanese Noh drama and Kabuki (Holmberg 169). It is quite important to note that in these cases cross-dressing was not a personal choice, but rather an adjustment according to circumstances, since women were not allowed to perform on stage. Only in the 20th century did the self-expressive cross-dressing emerge in the form of drag queens and kings (Holmberg 1998, 169). Drag, in contrast to cross-dressing, goes beyond female impersonation:

Drag is about many things. It is about clothes and sex. It subverts the dress codes that tell us what men and women should look like in our organized society. It creates tension and releases tension, confronts and appeases. It is about role-playing and questions the meaning of both gender and sexual identity. (Baker 1994, 18)

Throughout most part of the 20th century drag queens were

“stigmatized in the majority society as well as in the gay subculture” (Balzer 2005, 113). Since homosexuality was still illegal and widely regarded as a perversion, drag queens, as openly “professional” gay performers, were considered the outcasts amongst the outcasts. During the 1970s Nan Goldin’s friends had to experience first-hand that “[t]here were no job opportunities in those days for people who lived in drag; they were even ostracized by most of the gay male community” (Goldin 1993, 6). The Stonewall Riots of 1969 were a turning point in drag acceptance and, as an important part of the civil rights movement, can be regarded as the starting point of the modern gay liberation movement. In regards to the drag scene, a main change can be observed after 1969, namely an emerging self-acceptance and sense of community within drag culture (Balzer 2005, 114). Transgender activist Sylvia Rivera, who participated as a leading figure in the Stonewall uprising, commented on the then-arising confidence in drag queen circles: “the drag queen was part of the vanguard of the revolution. We were the front liners. And we didn’t take no shit from nobody back then” (2006, 231). However, neither the gay rights movement nor the feminist movements of the time were keen on including any kind of gender-crossers into their political agenda, be it transgendered individuals or drag queens, as they supposedly only brought further confusion to the matters the groups were fighting for (Skodbo 2007, 25).

Only in the 1980s and 1990s would a new appreciation of gender diversity slowly arise. The turning point came about during the 1960s, and up to the 1980s, when several individuals within the women’s movement, such as black women, lesbians and trans women, did not feel represented by

the “all-white, heterosexual, middle class intellectual elit[ist] [discourse]” (Skodbo 2007, 38). As a result, there arose a questioning of the supposedly universal and all-embracing term “woman.” Eventually, the women’s movement became split into various sub-movements, one of them being the diversity embracing “queer theory” (38). The birth of a respectable academic form speaking for the ones left out of the official historical discourse helped to raise awareness of gender diversity.

2.1) The Subversion of Gender: Creating a Space For Gender-Nonconformists

In the introduction to *The Other Side*, Nan Goldin refers to her gender-bending companions as “a third gender that made more sense than the other two” (1993, 5). What Goldin is referencing when she talks about a “third gender” is a highly debated idea within the academic circles of gender and queer theorists. Let us recall Judith Butler’s theories about gender, and the importance of its subversion in order to reveal its artificiality, best described in *Gender Trouble*. Butler’s main claim is that sex and gender are in no way naturally connected to the physical body, but the notions of gender are social and cultural constructs (Skodbo 2007, 5). This means that genders “can be neither true nor false” (Butler 1999, 174). Thus, gender belongs to the realm of performativity, i.e. the repetition of diverse cultural and social acts and discourses, which reassert the gender identity of individuals in certain social contexts:

In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. (Butler 1999, 173)

Butler also criticizes the unifying of gender into two categories, i.e. male and female, which firstly supports the maintenance of the so-called two-gender system and further serves the perpetuation of the standard “compulsory heterosexuality” (42). In short, the gender system is an excluding one; while promoting heterosexual men and women, all other “deviant” forms of sexuality or gender are rejected. By exposing this unifying of gender as a fantasy and thereby questioning the validity of gender singularity, Butler reveals the ultimate gender queerness. More precisely, she renders visible the plurality of gender while demanding the broadening of tolerance towards the diversity of gender in all its fluent variants.

It is through interpellation, i.e. ongoing reinforcing acts of naming by authorities in order to force upon individuals certain character traits, that the two-gender system has been able to be fostered and moreover has turned into a naturalized self-evidence embedded in our minds (Skodbo 2007, 39-40). However, the system itself is not unchangeable but does leave room for acts of subversion. As interpellation and performativity are never-ending processes and genders are indeed only “produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity,” (Butler 1999, 174) the identity-naming process is open to re-signification and re-contextualization

and thus can be reversed through repetitive counter-acts that broaden the possibilities of embodying gender.

Accordingly, Butler suggests that drag and cross-dressing are means to “fully subvert[] the distinction between inner and outer psychic space,” (174) enabling us to play with and destroy traditional gender identities through parody. Drag works as a deception, as it insinuates a feminine outward appearance (gender) but simultaneously implies a male biological body underneath the mask (sex). Thus, drag functions as “a fantasy of a fantasy” (Butler 1999, 175); in other words it relies on a performative strategy to render the performativity of gender visible to believers in a stable gender binarism. As a result, “[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structures of gender itself – as well as its contingency” and consequently highlights that gendered experience is indeed an act, which has been naturalized.

Butler has been theoretically addressing the broadening of gender possibilities, while Nan Goldin has been artistically expressing it ever since the 1970s:

The pictures in this book are not of people suffering gender dysphoria but rather expressing gender euphoria. This book is about new possibilities and transcendence. The people in these pictures are truly revolutionary: they are the real winners of the battle of the sexes because they have stepped out of the ring. (1993, 8)

2.2) The Humanization of the Queer “Other”

Goldin's subversive stance encompasses more than gender politics. A second important nuance of novelty that can be detected in her photographs is the humanization of the abject outcast and the creation of queer memory.

As a matter of fact, the photographer's various circles of friends have mostly consisted of outsiders leading hidden and ostracized lives in the underground. Indeed, Goldin appears to have always identified with the social alienation of groups such as drag queens, transgendered individuals, club kids or drug abusers (Goldin herself has used drugs for several years). Throughout the conservative Reagan Administration and beyond, Goldin has opposed the silencing of these communities and given visibility to the ones ignored by mainstream society. Yet, it should be noted that these silenced communities oftentimes turn out to be as exclusive as the visible ones, therefore contributing to their own segregation and the process of becoming invisible. Furthermore, it needs to be remembered that these subcultures ramify into further fragmented minority groupings. This is to say that Goldin's memory building for a "queer community" should not be perceived as an all-encompassing manifestation recognizing the whole spectrum of difference queerness encompasses. Nonetheless, her photographs give visibility to parts of these groupings that were generally discursively excluded. Her vehicle for creating a shared collective memory was through her collection of personal and intimate photographs.

In this sense photography has various functionalities. Firstly, the depiction of everyday moments with which the viewer may empathize helps to humanize these people. In order to do so, the artist steps away from the

tradition of documentary photography in so far as she only chooses to depict individuals that have a personal relation to her and with whom she shares a life based on intimacy and trust. This fact is essential to Goldin's work as it puts her in the position of a partaker, instead of the position of a distanced voyeuristic observer. It thus gives her subjects freedom to breathe without feeling gazed at. Nan Goldin's view on Diane Arbus, who is also known for having depicted "outsiders", underlines this chain of thought perfectly: "The drag queens hated the work of Arbus. It was not allowed in the house, because they hated the way she photographed drag queens. She tried to strip them of their identity. She did not respect the way they wanted to be" (Goldin 2003, n.p.).

Secondly, photography also has the power of immortalizing its subjects. Here, to some extent, Nan Goldin follows the lineage of family or domestic photography. Just as in these documentary sub-categories, the pictures serve as collectables of different instances of a shared life. Since her slide shows were originally shown within the circle of friends depicted in the pictures, Goldin was able to create a collective communitarian memory that indeed can be described as forming an extended, redefined family for individuals that have been socially and emotionally excluded. As a matter of fact, the need for a reimagined family is very common in drag circles. In the drag community there is an established tradition of so-called "drag houses," consisting of a drag mother (a seasoned queen who serves as a mentor) and her drag daughters. Not only does the drag mother let her children into the secrets of her trade, to improve the skills of her family to compete in the so-called "drag balls" but in many cases drag mothers also

assume educational and maternal functions. It is in these drag families that many abandoned teenagers find refuge and understanding. In a certain way, Nan Goldin herself has found a second family within these circles.

Besides, I want to add that for Goldin photography works as a material (re)collection, for many of those she portrayed died at an early age because of drug abuse or AIDS. In other words, the artist has created a memory for a generation that died too soon to leave a lasting legacy. This is of utmost importance when it comes to queer memory, since it has long been denied by the hegemonic historical narrative. Indeed, until recently queer experiences were silenced and closeted by the mainstream culture, since queer individuals were perceived as the “waste products ... of the society imagined by official history” (Ruddy 2009, 357). Consequently, Goldin was fighting against a double loss. Not only did she mourn the personal loss of her deceased friends, but also she was grieving about the loss of her friends to oblivion, as their lives and tragic deaths were not officially recognized. In order to empower queer experience, one thus needs to create acts that provide visibility and significance. These are so-called acts of “countermemory” (Ruddy 2009, 357), which have been essential in creating a sense of community within queer culture and in building a collective memory. Thus, through her highly-praised photography, Nan Goldin has been able to give queer experience a “voice” that was heard worldwide, while at the same time she managed to assist in the creation of a necessary shared memory.

3) Immersing *The Other Side*: A Photographic Analysis

When taking a closer look at *The Other Side*, many of the above-mentioned topics and theories re-occur in an embodied way through photographic images.

In the following paragraphs, I will develop an in-depth analysis of a few of the photographs Nan Goldin has taken in the 1990s. The focus lies on these specific pictures as they were created in a time in which queer theory was rising. Accordingly, these photographs already bear a stronger subversive character than those taken in the 1970s and can thus be best linked to the theoretical frame previously discussed.

What strikes one's immediate attention when looking at Nan Goldin's pictures is the aura of the momentary, i.e. the snapshot aesthetic of most of her pictures. Objects as well as subjects seem to be randomly scattered throughout the picture space as the photographs themselves appear to have been taken out of a momentary impulse. The snapshot aesthetic firstly speaks the language of authenticity and of an unmodified reality, a grand concern of Goldin's, as previously stated. The seemingly chaotic rendering of the subjects in the photographic realm also hints towards a disorganized world. Through these formal features the artist achieves to reflect on the subject matter of her photographs, i.e. the disintegrating gender traditions during the early 1990s, which completely disrupted the common worldview of many Americans. These formal aspects thus have a self-reflexive quality.

However, when analyzing the photographs at a deeper level, one finds that while Goldin's pictures seem to be transient chaotic snapshots, at the same time many of her pictures nevertheless follow traditional formal rules. Here, one needs to remember that the artist indeed had a formal academic training in photography, which certainly guided her to structure the pictorial space. Accordingly, in most of her pictures we find many diagonal and horizontal lines, such as walls or doorways, which in many cases run parallel to the groupings of people within the photograph. Depending on the photograph, this can either lead to a harmonization of the picture space or produce a feeling of entrapment.

The photo *Misty, Tabboo!, and Jimmy Paulette Dressing* gives further insights into this matter. This photograph depicts three drag queens in three different stages of transformation. Misty, the queen on the left-hand side, is in the most primal stage of feminization, given that she is merely wearing makeup, a brassiere, a corset, underwear and a hairnet that will serve to facilitate the positioning of the wig on her head. Her shorts reveal a pink fabric in the crotch area, resembling the vulva. The drag queen standing on the right, Jimmy Paulette, is already wearing a wig and although still topless, finds herself in a more evolved stage of transformation. It is quite striking that these two individuals are placed sideways to the camera, facing what appears to be a mirror outside the picture space. In contrast to the third queen in the background, they are not yet ready to present themselves to the public. Their preoccupied looks again highlight the aspect of transformation as a process. The drag queen positioned between these

two, sitting with her legs crossed in a very feminine posture, represents the ultimate stage of the male to female transformation. She is the one gazing directly into the camera and is consequently looking directly at the viewer of the photograph. One could state that her seriousness is almost confrontational, as if to incite the viewer to ponder on the aforementioned performativity of gender. Indeed, this picture brilliantly summarizes Judith Butler's view on gender by giving visibility to the performative nature of gender. As gender is commonly linked to the biological sex of a person, through superficial bodily variants, these confining gender limitations are easily disrupted. This snapshot can thus be read as a step-by-step unmasking of the gender-building process and introduces original new forms of gender understanding that exist in-between the traditional restrictions of gender.

It is very meaningful that this deconstruction is not only embodied by the three individuals in the picture but that it is also represented by the objects in the room. The background is a brick wall (which mirrors the idea of revealing the raw construction underneath a surface) on which a bookshelf hangs. Placed on the shelf, next to a row of books, we find two frames of taxidermied butterflies, covering a larger painting of a man's face in profile. Taking into consideration that these objects bear a strong symbolic meaning, as will be shown, one might question how much of this arrangement has been intuitively captured and how much has been deliberately positioned.

The framed butterflies for instance parallel the action presented in the foreground, in so far as these insects symbolize metamorphosis, namely from a caterpillar into a final stage in which they have been conserved. Then

again, seeing that the butterflies are dead, they might also symbolize the idea of *memento mori* or *vanitas*, hence a remembrance that all things in this world are fleeting. This also points towards a rejection of loss. In fact, as I have previously underlined, Nan Goldin's photograph itself performs a similar function of immortalizing the transitory before it disappears, thus gaining a self-reflexive layer. In other words, the framed butterflies self-reflexively highlight the fact that Misty, Tabboo!, and Jimmy Paulette will equally be captured in this photograph for years to come.

The painting of the male face right next to the framed butterflies bears a great importance as well, be it on a compositional, as well as on a content-related level. Firstly, the image of a male figure fills in the missing link in the depicted feminization process. He represents the initial stage in the male to female transition. Similar to the two queens in the process of transformation, he too is looking to the right side of the picture frame, as if actively partaking in the whole transformation process. Regarding the context in which he is placed, this detail undeniably destabilizes his seemingly "stable" gender identity. This means that just as the painted faces of the presented gender-bending individuals, his face as well is simply a painted illusion on a blank canvas. The presence of the framed male figure in this photograph hence leads to a complete questioning of heterosexual gender norms, since even the apparently stable male identity is indeed presented as a fragile construct.

Furthermore, this painting bears a compositional function. When connecting the male face with the three other subjects in the picture, one detects that the subjects in this photograph are arranged in a form of the

rhombus. The arrangement therefore brings a certain balance to the photographic space. At the same time, the arrangement visually connects the “four drag performers” to one another and along with it all four stages of a cross-gendered being. In the end, this all-embracing interconnectedness reveals that, after all, the only stable truth is that there are always various diversified and ever-changing truths. Or, to put it into Butler's words, gender “can be neither true nor false” (174).

In this respect the open door on the right-hand side brings further uncertainty to the photo. An open door might symbolize a new hope, but seeing that it leads to a darkened room it might also speak of exclusion and marginalization. The outside world is thus represented as a darkened, non-accepting place for gender-crossers, who have to remain in a closeted space to live out their own gender identity.

A similarly deeply layered picture, which features one of the queens depicted in the above-described photograph, is *Jimmy Paulette and Tabboo! in the bathroom*. This photo introduces us to two drag queens, which once again find themselves in the process of transformation. The couple has been photographed from the waist up. While Jimmy Paulette is placed in the center of the picture space, gazing directly into the camera lens, Tabboo!'s body is half cut off from the frame with the back towards the viewer. Tabboo! appears to wear a necklace or a dress with an open back. Jimmy Paulette's upper body on the other hand is completely naked. She wears strong facial makeup and has placed her left hand on Taboo's right shoulder

plate. The background is in a greenish-blue hazed color and the mirror reflection reveals what appears to be a window or a doorpost.

Here, the photograph's formal aspect again underscores its content. In fact, the doorpost in the background and the wall on the right-hand side frame the two drag queens in this confined space. Hence, the picture gains a rather restrictive and claustrophobic feel to it, which reflects on the social position of the queens, as they lead marginalized lives.

This photograph also speaks the language of intimacy, meaning that it could have only been taken in the closeness of an amicable context based on trust. Jimmy Paulette's face is the key to this assumption. It shows a strong vulnerability that speaks of great trust, even underneath the mask she is wearing. Her naked upper body enhances the fragility of her appearance. In a way, she is presenting herself with utmost openness, even though her face is covered in makeup. She thus seems to reach out to the viewer, inviting him/ her into her intimate world. Also, taking up the center of the picture and most of the picture space, Jimmy Paulette appears to claim a space in the outside world for her existence. Moreover, Jimmy plays the role of the link between the viewer and Tabboo!, who, in contrast to her friend, is not directly exposed to the camera. It seems that, as her name suggests, she prefers to stay in the shadows, to hide from the picture frame and not to be exposed to the outside world (Skodbo 2007, 67). Jimmy therefore symbolizes change, a growing openness, while Tabboo! may transmit a more pessimistic view on society's abjection of otherness. The hand placed on Tabboo!'s shoulder does have an almost soothing and conciliating quality

to it, as if Jimmy is calming her friend down, taking away her fears of the outside world staring at her back.

In this picture once again Nan Goldin provides a mundane situation that reveals an immensity of beauty and provides many layers of symbolism.

In comparison to the above-discussed photographs, *Misty & Jimmy Paulette in a taxi* frees the drag queens from the restrictions of their home and places them into the outside world in broad daylight. In this photograph, Misty and Jimmy Paulette are on the back seat of a taxi, in New York City. This time, both are presented in full drag wearing heavy makeup. Misty wears a synthetic blue wig and heart-shaped earrings and is dressed in a black latex-like top. On her right sits Jimmy Paulette, wearing the same makeup and the same blond wig she wore while dressing up in *Misty*, *Tabboo!*, and *Jimmy Paulette Dressing*. Thus, the pictures could be perceived as narratively linked. Jimmy is also dressed in a two-layered top, which consists of a white, torn fishnet, topped by a golden push-up bra.

What distinguishes this picture from the previously analyzed is that both subjects look directly into the camera. Their gaze might be read as a cautionary reaction to being outside the safety of their home. So, the queens appear to be more restrained and thus more aware of the fact that they are being photographed. The looks on both faces are rather tense and uncomfortable. After all, they may be located in the outside world, but then again they are still trapped in a confining space; this time represented by the

taxi, which also serves as a framing device. Hence, even in a supposedly public space, the drag queens can never be fully free.

The strong artificiality of the looks of both queens also comments on the artificiality of gender in a most subtle way. It can be said that the presented drag styles do not speak the language of female impersonation but instead bear the marks of true gender parody, since they are produced in a highly stylized, unnatural manner. In other words, the color of the wigs, the dresses, the strong makeup and the fact that underneath Jimmy Paulette's bra a white filling material (like foam or paper tissue) is revealed, speak more of construct than of realness (Skodbo 2007, 45). Herewith, Nan Goldin once again finds a way to visualize what Judith Butler and other gender theorists wrote about when they discussed the performativity of gender.

Another important recurrent theme in Nan Goldin's work are mirrors. As a matter of fact, she has devoted one of her photography collections to mirrors, namely the 1996 collection *I'll be Your Mirror*, inspired by the eponymous song by The Velvet Underground and Nico. However, years before, at the time of *The Other Side*, Goldin had already brought many mirrors into her photographic world. One of the great mirror pictures from this collection is *Misty at Home*. This photograph captures Misty in full drag, while applying makeup with the help of a brush in front of a large wooden mirror.

Mirrors might be perceived as one of the great mysteries in film and photography. The question of what a subject regarding himself/herself in a

mirror actually sees in most cases remains unanswered. Does Misty perceive her true self in her reflection or is it a distorted vision of the self? A mirror can speak about self-revelation since gazing at one's mirrored projection is often associated to self-examination or self-confrontation. Moreover, the doubling of the self, created by the mirrored image, allows its viewer to indulge in narcissism through his/her own gaze. A mirror can also work on a symbolic level, as it might comment on the reflection of the photographer on his subject (as in "I'll Be Your Mirror"). Through its capacity of doubling a subject in the photographic space, a mirrored image might likewise reflect on the "postmodern fragmentation of identity" (Skodbo 46), which the abovementioned notion of the destruction of gender boundaries is a part of.

Taking a closer look at *Misty at Home* one gets the feeling that the mirror works on different symbolic levels. Besides the already mentioned question of the subjective perception of a mirrored image, the mirror also has a framing effect. In this particular picture, the subject is thus double-framed and double-trapped. As in the previously analyzed photos, the surrounding walls and vertical lines in the picture first of all enclose Misty's corporeal self. Simultaneously, the mirror frames her mirrored projection. One might ask oneself now if this double framing is a commentary on the prescribed notions of gender (the reflection) and sex (the corporeal self) that are both put into question as the subject disregards the social specification that one's sex should match one's gender. More precisely, Misty's physical body is spatially separated from the blurry reflection of a woman we see in the mirror, which underlines the performativity of drag. Namely, the gender

the viewer perceives in the mirror does not match the sex that is hidden underneath the wig and makeup (nor the male gender of a drag queen once the mask is taken off). The photograph thus refuses any correlation between gender expression and physical sex. Again, this goes hand in hand with the previously described fragmentation of a supposedly fixed gender identity.

Simultaneously, the mirror in this specific context questions the male gaze and male desire as such. Mirrors in the visual arts were traditionally used "to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight" (Berger 1990, 51). Accordingly, Misty becomes the target of the male gaze. However, when taking into consideration that she is a gender-crosser, the heterosexual gaze is questioned. A male viewer thus might desire the queen's feminine outward appearance, though in fact she bears a male body underneath the costume.

Besides, a mirror can be understood as a means to create a new self-image and therefore as a tool to rethink the self through visualization and observation of one's reflection. Again, this can be linked to the function of Goldin's photography and thus gives this photo a self-reflexive touch as well. Certainly, "the structuring of the 'I'" (Dor 1998, 95) found in this picture, is evocative of the one in Lacan's mirror stage. This is to say that Misty builds her own perception of the self with the help of a mirror, just as the child in the mirror stage does.

Finally, the background of this photograph is also worth analyzing. The background is divided into two parts, i.e. a yellow-blue segment dominating the left side of the frame and a smaller dark part, which is concentrated on the right side. A clock in the shape of a sun is hanging on

the wall, giving the impression that it is responsible for the bright yellow coloration of the room. If one reads the picture from left to right, considering the symbolic unfolding of an implicit narrative, again, this picture speaks of a bleak doom for the drag community. Indeed, the light colored area may represent the safe space of the house, whereas the future, or the outside world, is symbolized by the veiled dark space on the right area of the pictorial space. Very significant is the fact that Misty's dress appears to dissolve into the darkness, while her hat merges with the blue background. This detail might again speak about the fluidity and disintegration of gender and the vanishing of a stable self.

The last snapshot to be discussed is the touching *Taboo (Stephen) + Misty (Scott) on the street*. This photo also portrays a scene of the daily life of two of the drag queens we have gotten to know in the previously analyzed pictures. However, for the first time both performers are out of drag. In this shot the two men are walking and holding hands, with their backs turned towards the camera. The camera thus seems to follow them, almost as in a movie. The two of them are walking down a narrow sidewalk, which is fenced off by a wooden railing on both sides. On the right hand side of the railing one notices a street filled with cars, while on the left side there is a second sidewalk, where two individuals walk in the opposite direction.

Again, this picture presents its two subjects in a most confining manner. Here, it is the railing that once more traps the two men in a frame. Although, Taboo! and Misty are not wearing any kind of female attire and

should thus be able to walk around freely, they are still considered outcasts due to their unhampered public display of queer affection. Consequently, these men do symbolically as well as literally walk against the main current. They are not part of the traditional heteronormative lifestyle that is epitomized by the gentleman in the black suit walking in the other direction, with his blurred face turned towards them, possibly even gazing at the queer couple. The night sky in the background underlines this bleak message of marginalization and the underground quality of their lives. Accordingly, their movement into the darkness of the night could thus represent a future of uncertainty.

Despite the darkness, this image does not necessarily exude an aura of despair and melancholia. The message of hope in this picture lies in the love the two men feel for one another. As a matter of fact, all the pictures included in *The Other Side* manage to transmit the same loving statement of redefined family bonds. In truth, the discussed photos depict diverse shared moments of proximity of the same group of people. Thus, the overall message from *The Other Side* is the idea of queer solidarity, which helps to form a positive queer identity. After all, solidarity is the strongest weapon in times of marginalization and death. Stephen and Scott (or Tabboo! and Misty) have become part of this reimagined queer family and through Goldin's snapshots leave a legacy of empowerment and love.

4) Conclusion

Lastly, only one question remains to be answered: What constitutes this so-called "other side?" To answer this question, I will explore the polysemy of the title *The Other Side*.

First and foremost, the title alludes to a drag bar, a space of freedom of gender expression. It was here that Nan Goldin was introduced to a lifestyle apart from the conventional and officially accepted road of life. This alternative path, this road not taken, would become crucial for Goldin's personal and professional future. *The Other Side* thus presents us a flipside of life, the underground dwellings of the ones turned into social outcasts. Consequently, *The Other Side* also works as an affirmation that one can indeed live outside the constrictions of society and gender. Alternative lifestyles include alternative relationships and even alternative families. *The Other Side* also speaks about the colorful and diverse spectrum of sexuality as well as about gender expression and the many possibilities that lie in the liminal place of the "in-between." The title furthermore points towards the unveiling of the truth underneath the queer mask. It introduces its audience to the person behind the drag performer in his most intimate and fragile moments. In this way, the feared "perverted" and "diseased" homosexual deviant becomes humanized. Not only are the featured outcasts presented as human beings but moreover they are also shown to be able to and worth of love.

After all, in *The Other Side* Nan Goldin has been able to make a visual statement that helped to open up and to reinforce a discourse in queer and gender theory concerned with the questioning gender identity and considering if one can lead a life outside the general gender constrictions.

Hereby, the artist has also unquestionably proven that art can indeed make a strong political and personal difference by taking a stance. As demonstrated, the creation of a visual discourse of counter-memory certainly bears a strong subversive power that should not be underestimated, demonstrating that art can indeed change lives on this so-called "other side."

Appendix



Fig.1 Nan Goldin | *Misty, Tabboo!, and Jimmy Paulette Dressing*, NYC, 1991



Fig 2. Nan Goldin | *Jimmy Paulette and Tabboo! in the bathroom*, NYC, 1991



Fig. 3 Nan Goldin | *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC, 1991*



Fig. 4 Nan Goldin | *Misty at home, NYC, 1991*



Fig. 5 Nan Goldin | *Taboo (Stephen) + Misty (Scott) on the street, NYC, 1991*

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