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SSENSE

LIFE AS NAN GOLDIN KNOWS IT

*In Conversation with the Photographer Whose Work
Remains Intensely Personal and Always Political*

by Thora Siemsen (March 6, 2020)



Greer modeling jewelry, NYC, 1985

She's seen it all, she's photographed most of it—and yet, unspoiled by habit, the artist Nan Goldin remains an indefatigable looker. Watching awards screeners or cable news in the smoking bedroom of her Clinton Hill walk-up, she leans forward rather than reclining on the bed, held rapt at the expense of comfort. At Grand Central Station, she bends backward to behold the sidereal ceiling mural. At the Met, she stays until closing time. "See you tomorrow," she jokes to a docent who's clearing the galleries for the night. Goldin is someone who not only belongs to the Cloud Appreciation Society but also lives its credo: "Seek to persuade all who'll listen of the wonder and beauty of clouds."

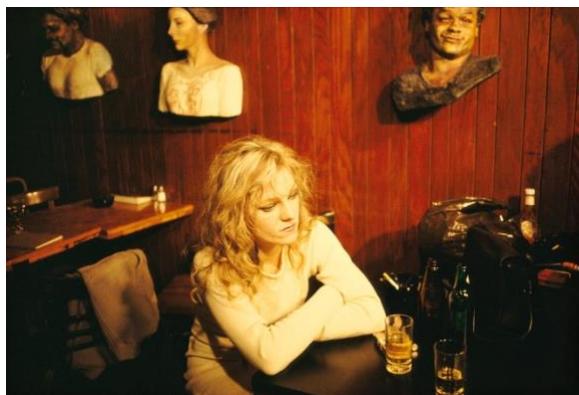
Goldin's feet are on the ground. The ongoing political group, P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), founded by her in 2017 to confront the opioid crisis, meets approximately once a week in her living room. Their movement began as an organized response to the billionaire Sackler family—who have been enriched by the sale of OxyContin—and continues to grow. Goldin elaborates, "The Sacklers made 35 billion dollars selling OxyContin like the best drug cartels. They're dealers in white coats. They fed on the stigma of addiction in America and blamed us, the drug users, for the epidemic."

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Her art practice remains invigorated. Earlier this year, just off London's Piccadilly Circus, was Goldin's first exhibition with gallerist Marian Goodman, called "Sirens." Clusters of photographs from her 1993 second book, *The Other Side*, reissued and expanded last fall by Steidl, hung from the gallery's painted walls while the updated slideshow of the same name played in a corridor video room. Here were Goldin's girls: the queens putting on the dog from Boston to Bangkok; Kim Harlow at Le Carrousel de Paris; Greer Lankton in New York; sweeping intercontinental suites of Sunny Suits and Miss Joey Gabriel. Over backgammon nights at hers, Nan and I discuss her life now.



Cookie at Tin Pan Alley, New York City, 1983

Thora Siemsen: Are you still nocturnal?

Nan Goldin: Nocturnal has changed meaning. Now it means midnight or at the latest two. In my day it meant all night. I didn't go to sleep before five AM for twenty years, literally. Now I live both day and night. As a little girl, I'd be under the covers all night reading with my flashlight. I was writing a screenplay in my head, and I'd go back to it every night.

What's your favorite film to reread?

I reread *Imitation of Life* about a hundred times. It was David [Armstrong]'s favorite movie. I cry so hard, the only thing that makes me cry. I watch it so I can cry. I watched the complete series *The Wire* three times in a row, because that world was more interesting than mine. I watch *Wanda* and *Opening Night* over and over. Everything with Barbara Stanwyck, Ingrid Bergman, Charlotte Gainsbourg. All of Hitchcock.

How do you like to stay in touch with people?

I'm a big texter. I don't use email very much. I pick up the phone very rarely.

Do you think of yourself as a keeper of your friend's histories?

Absolutely. So many people in my work are dead and they were extremely special. There are no people left like that. We lost a whole generation. There was an attitude towards life that doesn't exist anymore, everything's been so cleaned up. Some of my friends that are still alive live without engaging with the new normal. It's amazing to see them.

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Now that certain relationships of yours have stopped being bonded by drugs, what do you do to maintain them?

We play backgammon. Watch movies. That's how I bond when not doing drugs with people. Most of my friends are in P.A.I.N.. I think it's much easier for the people around me that I'm not using, so the relationships are completely new in a way.



C in the mirror, Bangkok, 1992



Joey in my mirror, Berlin, 1992

I know your father lived to be a nonagenarian, your mother a centenarian. How are you reflecting on the life spans of your loved ones now?

The tragedy is that all my friends died so young. We always thought we were immortal. And I think you have to, to a certain extent, to keep going. If you don't live in denial of death, how are you going to live at all? At my age, you become very conscious of death. Getting old, I can't believe I have only twenty, thirty, years left. It's shocking. I didn't know I was old until I got clean. I didn't look in the mirror for fifteen years. I thought I was still 49. I didn't understand why people treated me like I was old. I've had to deal with that and look in the mirror and accept that I've gotten old. But I didn't get to grow old. I was young and then I was old. It's been one of the big things of my last few years, dealing with that. If my friends were alive, we would've been the same age and it would've softened the blow. I'm very angry at your generation for how they treat old women, it's horrible. All this supposed social consciousness and they treat elderly women like shit. Men are respected and viewed as sophisticated and elegant. As a

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woman, not only are you invisible—which is sort of a relief—when you do interact, you have no credibility. They treat me like a crazy old lady, because I look like a punk grandma. It's constant micro-insults all day long. I talk to a lot of other women over 50 and most of them experience the same. Some just don't give a fuck, and I would like to embrace that attitude.

You're the baby of your family. How did your birth order organize your childhood?

I was the youngest, they called me The Babe. I was the little one. My oldest sister and I—I really loved her—we were close in a way. She wasn't around much, they kept putting her in mental hospitals and reform schools. Then when I was 14 they sent me to an adoption agency, but it was good. It saved my life. But my sister didn't want to be out of the house. It's really a tragedy and it's significant about people who live in different mental states and are so emotionally attuned to the world and are so sensitive. It's an indictment of fathers with their daughters, but it's also about the attitude towards women in those days. Girls were not allowed to be angry. Becoming sexual was completely forbidden. My sister was not whatever labels they gave her. She was just alive. We lived in Washington D.C.. I wish she'd run away and become involved with the women of her generation. I ran away and I found my people. But I do believe the order of birth is very significant in people's lives. I'm spoiled. I expect a certain amount of attention. I still feel like a youngest child. In the world I feel somehow like The Babe.



Bruce on top of French Chris, Fire Island, N.Y., 1979

How do your friendships supplant romantic love?

I've always cared more about friendship than romantic love. If you live with somebody, you have a buffer to the world. The need for a sexual relationship only occurs to me once in awhile. Friends can be deeper than lovers, because you don't have all the jealousy and possessiveness. Those things exist in friendship but not the same way. David [Armstrong] was my best friend of my life. He introduced me to myself. When I met him, I spoke in a whisper, I was painfully shy. He basically gave me a personality, or showed me that I had one. He taught me how to laugh. I think after he died, I lost my personality again, to some extent. That's what a friend can do. They can be a reflection of you, the best you can't see. My friendships are the major relationships of my life. They were the family that I had in my life. We shared a history and I don't share a history with my family, because I left so young. I have friends, but as my doctor who I've known for thirty years said, "You'll never find people like that again, they don't exist."

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The intensity of those friendships. In my new piece, *Memory Lost*, I use answering machine tapes from the '80s. There's evidence of those relationships. You can hear how fucked up I am, but there's love.

How do you recover from a friendship ending?

I'm not sure I do. A lot of my major friendships have ended. I still mourn them. Now that I'm sober, I dream about trying to reconnect. In some cases, I hate them for a little while, and then I don't. Some cases, I still really love them. Lately I wish I had a wife and children, I have a dream of that, which I'm surprised by. I'm envious of women with that life. When you have a lover, you have somebody to wake up to. I miss having someone to confide in. I think my friendships were close in a way that most people don't get. When I say I don't have a best friend, in the old sense of it, I think my sense of that is maybe more extreme. I needed my friends so badly in my life. I sound so tragic [*Laughs*]. My god.



Kim in rhinestones, Paris, 1991

How often are you shooting photos lately?

I hardly do and I take really bad pictures now. Once in awhile, I'll see a really beautiful face, like my nephew, and I'll bring out my camera. But the pictures are no good. I photograph the sky. It's the most magical thing in our lives, the best art. I used to be afraid of flying and then I discovered if I took pictures, I'm not afraid anymore. I think if I took my camera places I would have something to do with my hands besides not drink. I think it's a good idea to try it again.

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When you're doing an edit for a book or a show, about how many photographs go begging?

Hundreds, maybe thousands. My archive has maybe ten thousand slides. It will take me years to go through it all. For this new piece I dug deep. The worse the picture, the better it was for this piece. It was all the pictures that I'd never been able to use anywhere else. The gorgeous photos were always edited out, because they didn't work in any part. So I made a slideshow of the worst work of my whole years photographing, and I love it [*Laughs*].

When did you first identify as a political person, a political artist?

I think it was about 1980. There's a woman I worked for in Times Square, at Tin Pan Alley, and she was very political, she politicized me. I worked there from 80-85. She recognized me as political as soon as she saw *The Ballad*. She identified the gender politics in my work before they called it gender politics. When I was living with the queens in the 70s I didn't see myself as a political artist.

Your first action targeting Sackler-funded institutions was through your work, through photography documenting your addiction and your writing in *Artforum*.

The group exists because of Sam Roeck and David Velasco. I was with Sam at an airport when I read an article called "The Family That Built An Empire of Pain" in *The New Yorker* by Patrick Radden Keefe, which exposed the Sackler family as the billionaire puppet masters who ignited the opioid crisis. I read the article and became furious. I'd always thought of the Sacklers as philanthropists in museums I went to as a kid. There was also an article in that same issue of *The New Yorker* by Margaret Talbot asking where are the activists on the ground, like ACT UP during the AIDS crisis. I worshipped ACT UP, so I decided I would do something and that I would do it in the museums, because I figured that's where the Sacklers would listen. I thought, that's where they live. And I have my own voice there. I was with Sam and we went to Brazil and I gave a speech, in which I said I was going to do it. It was streaming to like 6,000 people, so then I had to do it. You know how you have these ideas and then you don't do them? When I came back, Sam talked to David about publishing something in his first issue as the Editor-in-Chief of *Artforum*. I called and said, "Let's publish self-portraits of me when I was high," and I was kidding. And they said, "That's the exact same idea we had." So it was in *Artforum* that I declared what I was going to do. P.A.I.N. started a few weeks later. When I roped my friends—artists and activists and drug users—into working with me I had never organized before. I had no idea what I was doing, I never expected it to work. My friend Darryl Pinckney reminded me that back in 89, when I got sober the first time, I curated the first big show about AIDS in New York. This time when I got sober, I started P.A.I.N.. I knew I had to do something in these dark times and I went to what I know in my body—drugs. ACT UP was our model from the beginning. Our first objective was to shame the Sackler family, to make them pariahs in their social world like during Big Tobacco. We succeeded in that, they've fled from New York City to Palm Beach when they were no longer invited to galas. A lawyer on one of the big opioid case settlements told us we saved them millions of dollars in raising public awareness. We made their name synonymous with the opioid crisis.

How did the dominoes fall with the museums?

We called out the museums to demand they stop taking their money. First, I threatened that I would cancel my coming retrospective at the National Portrait Gallery if they accepted the million dollar donation that the Sacklers were offering. They were the first to refuse their money. Next, it was the Tate

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and the Guggenheim, both of which I had work in. Then eventually it was The Met, the museum where we did our first action in New York where we threw our bottles in the Nile surrounding The Temple of Dendur. At the Guggenheim, we threw fake prescriptions from the top of the rotunda with some of the most nefarious quotes from the Sacklers. At the V&A in London, we threw blood money and held a die-in in the Sackler courtyard made up of 1100 handmade porcelain tiles. In the Louvre, we swam out in the pool in front of the pyramid and dropped a banner. The Louvre has been the first and only museum to take down their name. Now, Tufts University has scrubbed out their names in the medical school.



Pawel's back, East Hampton, NY, 1996

What do organizing efforts for P.A.I.N. look like?

P.A.I.N. is a small group with a big voice that believes in direct action. There are about a dozen core members. When we're planning an action, there's extra people, because that's when everyone gets excited. We designed a pill bottle with a fake prescription for OxyContin prescribed by Dr. Sackler, which has become the emblem of the crisis like the Silence=Death logo of ACT UP. Last year, we put a bell jar in a show at Jeffrey Deitch's gallery filled with 200 bottles of OxyContin that signify the number of dead from overdose in a day, and set up a portable safe consumption site. The group got training in how to use Narcan [the drug that counters the effects of overdose]. Harry Cullen and Megan Kapler are the lieutenants of the group, it wouldn't be going so well without them. The kids taught me everything. It really works without hierarchy. The creative work comes from everybody in the group, we work beautifully together. When I started, I wanted to petition, really old time [*Laughs*]. I wanted to walk around with signs. I didn't know about using the internet. I didn't know about the media. And at first, I didn't want the media, because they terrified me. But now we try to get media all the time. Some members wanted to do an action where there was no public, just the media, but the public is still really important to me. We're going to the courts now, we're more policy-driven. I spoke in the state assembly the other week and they invited me to come to Albany to speak about medication-assisted treatment. That's what we're fighting for, that it be available and affordable for everyone, that it be available in prisons. We got arrested a few months ago blocking the governor's office because he refused to sign the bill to implement a trial of five supervised injection sites in New York. Now, we've been going to the bankruptcy court where the Sacklers are offering a fake settlement of ten billion of their blood money that's predicated on future sales of OxyContin, which we refute. And they refuse to admit culpability. It's so dark, it's so cynical. We work alongside other activist groups like VOCAL-NY and Housing Works and a group of angry mothers called Truth Pharm. We're proud to work with other activists.

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Cross in the Fog, Brides-les-bains, 2002

In the new introduction for *The Other Side* reissue, you write, “Our common enemies are powerful and we need to trust we’re on the same side.” How have the ways you make allies changed since the book’s first publication?

I know more strangers than I did then, but Sunny and Joey are still in my life. Sunny edited her own chapter. All the girls who are still alive—like Joey, Gina, and my old roommate from Boston—had the final edit of their own images. At the time of the first book, life was really pleasurable. Joey used to say then, “You’ll never be as beautiful as you are now.” At that time, I was living with David [Armstrong] and Joey in Berlin. They were some of the best years of my life. That book was made out of pleasure. And this book was also a pleasure to make, but framed more politically. I decided to reissue it because of your generation. I wanted you all to see your history.

Thora Siemsen is an interviewer and writer living in New York City.