

Claremont Colleges

Scholarship @ Claremont

Scripps Senior Theses

Scripps Student Scholarship

2020

Visual Archives of the AIDS Epidemic: Examining the Cultivation of Anticipatory Mourning in the Works of Nan Goldin, Cookie Mueller, and Vittorio Scarpati

Samantha M. Muckle

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Muckle, Samantha M., "Visual Archives of the AIDS Epidemic: Examining the Cultivation of Anticipatory Mourning in the Works of Nan Goldin, Cookie Mueller, and Vittorio Scarpati" (2020). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 1572.

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/1572

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

**VISUAL ARCHIVES OF THE AIDS EPIDEMIC: EXAMINING THE CULTIVATION
OF ANTICIPATORY MOURNING IN THE WORKS OF NAN GOLDIN, COOKIE
MUELLER, AND VITTORIO SCARPATI**

BY

SAMANTHA M. MUCKLE

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR JULIA LUM

PROFESSOR DANIEL HACKBARTH

MAY 4TH, 2020

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Introduction	5
Literature on Cookie Mueller, Nan Goldin, and Vittorio Scarpati	11
Chapter One: <i>Putti's Pudding</i>	15
Chapter Two: <i>The Cookie Portfolio</i>	31
Chapter Three: <i>Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing</i>	42
Conclusion	56
Appendix of Figures	59
References	76

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must express immense gratitude to my readers, Professor Lum and Professor Hackbarth, for their unconditional optimism, support, and guidance. I truly could not have completed this project without each of my reader's brilliant recommendations and insights. I would also like to thank Professor Koss and the entirety of the Scripps College Art History Department for their directive support throughout this project's earliest stages.

It is essential that I acknowledge the entire team behind the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives for not only inspiring the direction this thesis has taken, but for allowing me to access the most fascinating collection of publically unavailable materials on the individuals integral to this study, Cookie Mueller, Nan Goldin, and Vittorio Scarpati.

Lastly, I owe everything to those closest to me, Ari especially— for the endless love and encouragement.

Introduction

In the spring of 1990, a young journalism student named Therese Frare, camera in hand, walked into an AIDS hospice in Columbus, Ohio and unwittingly captured what became one of the most iconic images of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Frare's *David Kirby on his deathbed* permanently arrests the emaciated, haunted, gay activist David Kirby gasping for his final breath in the clutching arms of four agonized family members.¹ The photograph first appeared on the pages of *LIFE* magazine's November 1990 issue— shocking and touching a world that saw millions of people infected with the disease. Nearly a decade earlier in 1981, the *New York Times* published the very first article on what turned out to be the most devastating pandemic of the 20th century. The page 20 piece, an article subtly yet homophobically headlined by, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” describes Kaposi's Sarcoma: a rare and fatal form of cancer that appeared in the bodies of 41 gay men in New York and San Francisco.²

In the months following the initial *Times* report, the epidemic spread far beyond the initial bicoastal hotbeds— soon, there were cases in each and every state. Reported infections and deaths doubled with frightening speed, rendering both the medical community and then-president Ronald Reagan, who failed to mention the epidemic for the first five years of his presidency, essentially useless. The mysterious, rapidly spreading disease that would later come to be labeled AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) elicited worldwide waves of terror especially palpable in locations with large gay communities like New York City. Though AIDS in the 1980's alone took more American lives than the entire Vietnam War, the extremities of the epidemic's toll remained publicly underreported and all but ignored by political leaders. The lack

¹ Fig. 1. Therese Frare. *David Kirby on his deathbed*, 1990.

² Lawrence Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 1981.

of accurate medical information about AIDS bred an intense, specific strain of homophobia that manifested in horrifying jargon such as the infamous campaign to identify diagnosed patients by requiring individuals to hot-iron brand their bodies with the AIDS acronym.³ Protests to kill all gay men, criminalize sex outside of wedlock, and permanently quarantine all patients made receiving a diagnosis all the more wrenching. Meanwhile, the virus decimated the LGBTQ population beyond accurate measure, leaving the community in a state of compounded trepidation in which they wondered which to fear: life or death?

However paralyzing, the neglect inflicted on the LGBTQ community at the hands of the Reagan administration and the pharmaceutical industry incited a powerful counteraction of activist and artist organization in protest of the unparalleled homophobia and oppression revealed by the disease's onslaught. In the midst of heightened AIDS phobia, intimate, empathetic visuals like Therese Frare's photograph of David Kirby and his family functioned as acts of resistance.

At the heart of the body of raw, positive, authentic representations of life with AIDS lies the work of American photographer Nan Goldin. Beginning in the late 1960s, Goldin took a camera with her everywhere: she constructed a visual diary of her friends and lovers, all set against the backdrop of the urban subcultures spread between Boston and New York City's Lower East Side. Goldin's oeuvre reads like a family photo album filled with social outcasts: drug addicts, drag queens, prostitutes, and artists made up her circle of eccentric, unabashedly nonconformist friends existing at society's margins. Goldin rarely strayed from focusing her lens on those closest to her, filling rolls of film with the same group of faces, and thereby crafting an

³ Not only was the idea of branding those infected with AIDS widely circulated throughout the United States, but internationally. As recently as 2009, Swaziland anti-gay protestors attempted to mandate hot-iron branding for patients of AIDS.

intimacy with her photographic subjects unique to her practice. Her desires to simultaneously exhibit the lives of the marginalized and instantaneously document herself and her friends shaped her career.

As many of the members of her inner-circle were both queer and users of intravenous drugs, the AIDS epidemic became incidentally central to her work when the crisis of the 1980s hit New York. Reflecting on the on-set of the epidemic, Goldin wrote, “My art was the diary of my life. I photographed the people around me. I didn’t think of them as people with AIDS. About ‘85, I realized that many of the people around me were positive... I was in denial that people were going to die. I thought people could beat it. And then people started dying.”⁴ A large number of the friends she had been photographing and living amongst for decades died from infection. “They were family, a community,” Goldin noted. “And now most people are dead... I lost most of my friends. There is a generation missing in the history of the 20th century.”⁵

Particularly formative for Goldin were the diagnoses of enigmatic artist-actress Cookie Mueller, one of her closest friends, and Mueller’s husband Vittorio Scarpati. In a 2001 piece for *The Digital Journalist*, Goldin recalls being with Mueller when they first heard about AIDS in July of 1981: “Cookie just started reading this item out loud from The New York Times about this new illness... we certainly didn’t think of its magnitude. It didn’t affect us, like: this is going to be our future.”⁶ However, it very quickly became apparent that AIDS would change everything— not just for Goldin and Mueller, but for the art world at large.

⁴ Nan Goldin, “On Cookie Mueller,” *The Digital Journalist*, 20 Years: Aids & Photography, 2001.

⁵ Rena Silverman, “Nan Goldin Looks Back at Friends and Lovers,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2017.

⁶ Nan Goldin, “On Cookie Mueller.”

The photographer's career-long habit of instantaneously documenting those around her suddenly took on a new, historically important meaning in a world where the community to which she belonged was rapidly disappearing. Although she had all-along been proleptically establishing memories through her visual diary, the urgency with which she documented those around her increased as it became more apparent that if she did not continue preserving their stories, society would disappear them. Goldin's skill of proleptically capturing memory through the lens is best evidenced in her project *The Cookie Portfolio*, a series of photographs of Cookie Mueller from the beginning of their relationship in 1976 up until Mueller's funeral in 1989. Though many of *The Cookie Portfolio's* images were captured before AIDS took its toll, Goldin's postmortem curation of the *Portfolio* manipulates the tone of the project's contents, and consequently exhibits a version of Cookie Mueller semi-fictionalized by Nan Goldin's interference.

Before they died from AIDS related complications two months apart in the fall of 1989, Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpati began documenting their battle with AIDS as well — offering up an alternate, autobiographical version of Goldin's archive. In the final months of their lives, they shared a hospital room and began working on what they knew would be their first and last collaborative project, a book entitled *Putti's Pudding*. Upon admission to the hospital, thirty-four year old Scarpati, suddenly well aware of death's imminence and consequently fueled to memorialize his battle with illness, began to keep a visual diary with a pencil box and a small notepad— both borrowed from Cookie Mueller's son Max. Within four months, Scarpati filled three notebooks with nearly three hundred pen, ink and felt-tip drawings of body parts and doctors and tubes. For a few weeks in the middle of their stay, Mueller was

momentarily healthy enough to leave the hospital. During that short period, she began collecting his favorite illustrations and writing short captions to accompany them in hopes that if they were to depart, the work could be published in book format, leaving behind both a personal retelling of their entwinement with incurable illness and a vital archive of the AIDS epidemic. Just like Goldin, Mueller and Scarpati— anticipating the larger importance of their personal experience—crafted *Putti's Pudding* in an effort to proleptically self-memorialize.

Each of the narratives, one photographic and biographical, the other illustrative and autobiographical, came together in Nan Goldin's 1989 exhibition, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, New York City's first ever group show about AIDS. Artists Space, a non-commercial gallery influential in defining the New York alternative art scene, offered Goldin the opportunity to curate a show of any theme for their space. In the midst of the heated political climate incensed by the onset of AIDS, Goldin chose to curate the show exclusively with artwork completed by her close personal friends, each one a victim of AIDS. Goldin's contractual obligation as an artist under the representation of Pace/MacGill meant that she was unable to officially exhibit images from her *Cookie Portfolio* in her show, though *The Portfolio's* memorial tone certainly carried over to the exhibition. Though neither Scarpati nor Mueller survived to see the opening, Goldin ensured their presence's force throughout the exhibition. Not only were selected illustrations from *Putti's Pudding* hung for display, but Goldin dedicated the show to Scarpati, included an essay by Mueller in the catalog, and exhibited several photographs by other artists that captured the couple alive. *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* thus represented both Goldin's desire to make the intimate realities of AIDS visible to the world outside of hers and provide a space to allow for the efforts of preemptively capturing memory within the

practice of all three individuals— Mueller, Scarpati, and Goldin herself, to come to fruition in one final memorializing exhibition.

In examining *Putti's Pudding* and *The Cookie Portfolio* as independent yet intertwined projects of anticipatory mourning, this thesis identifies *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* as the artistic fulfillment of Vittorio Scarpati, Cookie Mueller, and Nan Goldin's combined efforts to proleptically manifest collective memory within the visual archive of their shared experience with AIDS. Assisted by an exploration of both the AIDS epidemic and the three artist's linked life histories, this study also recognizes the importance of creating an art history inclusive of social and personal history whilst considering materials so inextricably linked to their creator's biographical contexts.

Literature on Cookie Mueller, Nan Goldin, and Vittorio Scarpati

Despite the ample body of art historical literature dedicated to Nan Goldin and her work, few scholars focus exclusively on *The Cookie Portfolio*. Two authors, Lauren Sapikowski and Lauren Summersgill, each published essays analyzing elements of mourning in *The Cookie Portfolio* within the specific context of postmortem photography. Though this study is unconcerned with the historical traditions of death portraiture, both Sapikowski's "Cookie in Her Casket as a Response to the Medical Death" and Summersgill's "Family Expressions of Pain in Postmortem Portraiture" offer relevant explorations of memory and the process of photographing with the intention to memorialize within the context of the best known *Cookie Portfolio* image, *Cookie In Her Casket*. Summersgill comments on the ways in which the viewers are encouraged to assume authenticity within *The Cookie Portfolio*, writing, "Images such as these not only demonstrate intimacy, they encourage us to feel an intimacy with the subject... Through the narrative of *The Cookie Portfolio*, we have seen Cookie become good friends with Goldin, allowing her into increasingly more private moments, and felt a similar intimacy develop for ourselves."⁷ Sapikowski picks up on similar themes in her piece, writing that Goldin's image of Mueller "... encouraged viewers to see Mueller, and by extension other AIDS victims as part of a normal family cycle of loss... She is not a distanced AIDS victim, to be feared or isolated, but a deceased loved one, cared for by her family and friends."⁸

The second chapter of this study specifically confronts Abigail Solomon-Godeau's 1995 essay, "Inside/Out," in order to engage with the larger scholarly argument that Solomon-Godeau

⁷ Lauren Summersgill, "Visible Care: Nan Goldin and Andres Serrano's Post-Mortem Photography," Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of London, 2014.

⁸ Lauren Sapikowski, "Cookie in Her Casket as a Response to the Medical Death," *10th Global Conference: Making Sense of Death and Dying*, n.d., 9.

expresses concerning Nan Goldin's positionality as both photographer and inner-circle member.⁹ Solomon-Godeau's frequently cited essay argues against Nan Goldin's status as an "insider" of the community she photographed, writing, "Insiderness here, as elsewhere, can thus be seen to be about access and proximity, but whether one can argue for a non voyeuristic relationship in consequence of the photographer's position is another matter entirely."¹⁰ This thesis takes issue with Solomon-Godeau's argument in that her analysis relies heavily upon the audience's perception and hypothetical interpretation of Goldin's work. Rather than arguing for or against Goldin's positionality as an insider, this study considers the question itself irrelevant. In considering *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* a successful product of proleptically crafted memory, whether or not we can trust Goldin's positionality and subsequent representation of Mueller or Scarpati as "true to life" is unimportant: the key to Goldin's success in pre-humously cultivating visual memory is her ability to communicate the illusion of intimacy— therefore, I argue that the verification of "truth" in Goldin's body of work is unnecessary so long as the illusion persists.

Integral to this study's third chapter's examination of *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* is Sophie Junge's book, *Art about AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. Junge's substantial, 353 page book is the very first comprehensive analysis of Goldin's exhibition. *Art about AIDS* greatly benefitted my study in providing never before published materials concerning the *Witnesses* exhibition. Junge's book offers a study of the exhibition while also detailing the events of the AIDS crisis, its effect on the art world, and the

⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Inside/Out," *Focal Press, Basic Critical Theory For Photographers*, 2015, 126–31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

contemporary relevance of art about AIDS. The author's interviews with Susan Wyatt, the director of Artists Space at the time in which *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* was exhibited, provide essential new information about Goldin's curatorial process.

Never having considered themselves to be artists per se, neither Cookie Mueller nor Vittorio Scarpati were survived by any artwork aside from *Putti's Pudding*. Though the cultish reputation that Cookie Mueller cultivated throughout her life continues today by way of trendy *Dazed* or *VICE* magazine articles celebrating her posthumous iconization as the "underground it-girl" or even as the newest "inspiration behind Raf Simons' latest collection," very little has been written about Vittorio Scarpati, who led a comparatively private life up until his early death at 34 years old.¹¹ *Putti's Pudding* has only ever been exhibited thrice— twice in 1989, the year it was published, and more recently at Studio Voltaire in 2017. The body of scholarly literature pertaining to *Putti's Pudding* is nonexistent, making this thesis the premiere scholarly analysis of Mueller and Scarpati's work.

As the narratives delineated by both *Putti's Pudding* and *The Cookie Portfolio* are deeply personal and biographically involved, this study utilizes both autobiographical and biographical literature to best attempt an accurate interpretation of the contexts within which these projects were developed. Chloe Griffin's *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* was particularly useful in that it tells the story of Mueller— with essential mentions of both Goldin and Scarpati— through an oral history.¹² Griffin's book collects more than 80 interviews, each from someone close to Mueller, in an exploration of her extraordinary life. Along with the text, Griffin includes

¹¹ Matt Kessler, "Get to Know Cookie Mueller, Dreamlander and Underground It-Girl," *Dazed Magazine*, February 9, 2018.

¹² Chloe Griffin, *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller*, Munich: Bbooks Verlag, 2014.

photographs and a vast archive of multimedia material related to Mueller that had previously gone unpublished. I also looked to many of Mueller's own published texts— specifically those relevant to her experience with AIDS; *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*, a posthumously published collection of her autobiographical writings, particularly highlights Mueller's state of mind in she and Scarpati's shared final months.¹³

My thesis divides the discussion of *Putti's Pudding*, *The Cookie Portfolio*, and *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* into three separate chapters. The chapters focused on *Putti's Pudding* and *The Cookie Portfolio* each present the projects within their creator's personal biographical contexts as well as the broader context of the AIDS epidemic. Through a discussion of selected pieces from *Putti's Pudding* and *The Cookie Portfolio*, I illuminate the ways in which each of the three artists, within their respective projects, anticipated the future memorial contexts within which their work would be viewed. Within the third chapter, through an examination of the history of the exhibition itself, Goldin's curatorial process, and the show's posthumous representations of Scarpati and Mueller, I identify *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* as the manifestation of what had been collectively anticipated by each of the artists within *Putti's Pudding* and *The Cookie Portfolio*.

¹³ Cookie Mueller, *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black (Native Agents)*, Semiotext(e)/Native Agents. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1990.

Chapter One

In the years before Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpati received the shared AIDS diagnosis that fueled their efforts to proleptically self-memorialize within their collaborative book project *Putti's Pudding*, they individually led lives that influenced the world around them in major ways. Cookie Mueller first acquired cult status amongst those interested in the wild and relatively obscure. Though she constantly reinvented herself as an artist, writer, drug dealer, editor, poetess, go-go dancer, witch doctor, mother and muse, her first foray into the public eye was as one of filmmaker John Waters' most beloved Dreamlanders.¹⁴ John Waters' ensemble was chock-full of weirdness and shock-factor to match his movies— transgressive, filterless films that savor all things obscene. Mueller almost always played a character whose name and likeness mirrored her own: in *Pink Flamingos* she is Cookie, the star of an iconic and notoriously unsexy sex scene involving a chicken. *Female Trouble*, *Multiple Maniacs*, and *Desperate Living* present audiences with three more Cookies: a deplorable Catholic school girl, a prostitute daughter, and a one-armed lesbian, respectively.

Her silver-screen appearances took her from Baltimore to Provincetown, and eventually to a floor-through apartment on New York City's Bleeker Street, where Mueller lived with her son Max, hosting salons and selling cocaine and ecstasy.¹⁵ Mueller ingratiated herself within a budding generation of rapidly succeeding creatives like Robert Mapplethorpe, who took her portrait in 1978, and Jean Michel Basquiat, with whom she appeared in Edo Bertoglio's film

¹⁴ "Dreamlanders" describes the intimate cast of actors whom John Waters repeatedly used in his films. The term stems from the name of Waters' production company, Dreamland Productions.

¹⁵ Linda Yablonsky, "The AIDS Crisis as Drawn by Cookie Mueller's Artist Husband," *Dazed Magazine*, 2017.

Downtown 81, all the while dancing topless in bars at night to accentuate her income.¹⁶ It was in New York's underground that Mueller coined a specific style— her perpetually black lined eyes, unbrushed hair, and outrageous clothing choices affected a kind of junkie starlet vibe that went on to directly influence stars like Courtney Love and Madonna.¹⁷ Longtime friend and author Linda Yablonsky wrote of Mueller:

She affected a kind of bohemian floozy look. She had great style— very sexy. She had this monkey fur jacket that she wore for years, outrageous clothes. Always makeup. She put on makeup to go to bed... Cookie would take dance classes in the morning and dance in bars at night to make some cash— they weren't really topless bars, she wore a little G-string and some pasties and said, 'It's great exercise.'¹⁸

Somewhere along the way, Mueller began to write about everything, obsessively: "Cookie Mueller wrote like a lunatic Uncle Remus— spinning little stories from Hell..." John Waters described.¹⁹ Mueller wrote stories about bad mushrooms and climbing the Berlin Wall in a blue leather miniskirt and almost joining the Manson family, read poetry with Allen Ginsburg, critiqued art for *Details* magazine, co-wrote a play called *Drugs* with Glenn O'Brien, and maintained the *Ask Dr. Mueller* section of the *East Village Eye*, a fabricated advice column in which she answered her own questions. The short stories collected in *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* give a glimpse of Mueller pre-fame. She writes about being a

¹⁶ Emily Gould, "Cookie Mueller," *Interview Magazine*, October 8, 2014.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Linda Yablonsky, "The AIDS Crisis as drawn by Cookie Mueller's artist husband."

¹⁹ Cookie Mueller and John Waters, *Ask Dr. Mueller: The Writings of Cookie Mueller*, High Risk Books. London: Serpent's Tail, 1996.

high school bad girl, a victim of suburban imprisonment in Catonsville, Maryland, and her teenage runaway quest for drug cocktails and San Francisco.²⁰ Her stories are often eccentric to the brink of unbelievable: if it were not for the slew of fantastical yet factual accounts written by other authors corroborating Mueller's propensity for chaos, they might even appear fictionalized. Chloe Griffin's hefty 2014 expose, *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* is the most recent tribute. The piece includes fragments of writings by John Waters, Mink Stole, Gary Indiana, Sharon Niesp, Max Mueller, Linda Yablonsky, Richard Hell, Amos Poe and Raymond Foe in order to trace the many strands of Mueller's life from Maryland to San Francisco to Baltimore to New York and beyond.²¹ Griffin paints a picture of Mueller that feels modernist in its willingness to discard the aspirations of one-point perspective in favor of an entire bouquet of truths.

In 1983 Mueller left New York for a summer on the Amalfi Coast with her then-partner Sharon, but within weeks returned to New York without Sharon and in love with a younger Italian man she'd happened to meet on the street. The man was Vittorio Scarpati— an elegant, art-obsessed, recreational drug connoisseur with money. “It was love at first sight, more aptly put, we bonded to each other because of a kindred spirit, we became inseparable,” Mueller wrote.²² All of those closest to Mueller seemed to bond to him just as immediately as she did: fellow writer and life long friend Linda Yablonsky describes, “I began to see very quickly what she saw in Vittorio. He wasn't this macho guy, he was more like a poet, but he was really a political cartoonist. Vittorio had luxurious, long, curly black hair and this classic Neapolitan profile. Big, sad eyes, very thin— he was a junkie, registered as a legal addict.”²³ Scarpati stole

²⁰ Cookie Mueller, *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*.

²¹ Chloe Griffin, *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller*.

²² Cookie Mueller, *How to Get Rid of Pimples*, Top Stories, 1984.

²³ Yablonsky, “The AIDS Crisis as drawn by Cookie Mueller's artist husband.”

his morphine from hospitals in Naples, modeled nude for introductory drawing classes, sailed boats off of the Italian coast, and made jewellery for all of Mueller's friends. By the spring of 1986, the two were married on the roof of an East Village apartment building.

In 1977, the first HIV-1 infected AIDS cases announced themselves in Manhattan, and within a decade, AIDS was the leading cause of death in the city for young adult men and intravenous drug users. Mueller and Scarpati were diagnosed just before their wedding, joining many of their friends who had already become terminal patients. Linda Yablonsky recalls the hostility of the city's climate while accompanying Mueller in seeking medical care:

AIDS had changed everything in New York, starting around '85— although it appeared much earlier. We knew so little about it. There was a lot of superstition and paranoia about how you got it and how you could transmit it. Doctors didn't want to treat people because they thought they would get it. Hospitals wouldn't accept people. If a woman came in, she was assumed to be a prostitute or a junkie, and they would just leave Cookie sitting there and say nasty things: 'You asked for it.' All we knew was that, every day, somebody else we knew was dead. If you got HIV, it was a death sentence.²⁴

After two years of struggling to find apt medical care, Mueller and Scarpati found a hospital in which they were allowed to share a room. By the late summer of 1989 the couple lived out of Cabrini Medical Center in New York, passing their final months of life together while working on their first and last collaborative project, *Putti's Pudding*. Yablonsky recalls visiting the couple in the hospital and paging through the early stages of *Putti's Pudding*, which then existed as

²⁴ Ibid.

three large notebooks, brimming with three-hundred or so bright illustrations by Scarpati. Of the work, Yablonsky wrote, “[Vittorio] documented it in a way that nobody else did— with a bleak sense of humor, just trying to handle what was happening to him and leave something behind of some value.”²⁵ The candid, painful diary floats from hopeless curses of his infected reality to ethereal dreams of living in a body with wings. Scarpati vulnerably exposes himself, documenting each change in his emotions and physical body throughout the stages of a fatal illness, inviting onlookers to laugh and cry with him along the way.

Though Scarpati had neither received a formal education in art nor seriously considered himself an artist, the work that he completed in the final months of his life directly engage with longstanding art historical traditions of Symbolism and Surrealism. Scarpati’s drawings are primarily figural, although they often contain cartoon-style dialogue in English or Italian. *Putti’s Pudding* is full of recurring symbols and metaphors to be decoded, often assisted by annotations written by Mueller. For a short period of time, Mueller was released from the hospital while Scarpati was made to stay. During that time she began compiling his illustrations and writing short captions to accompany them in hopes to publish their collaboration in book format. In her attempts to not only organize but clarify via captioning the archive of Scarpati’s AIDS narrative, Mueller engaged in artistic prolepsis. Anticipating her husband’s death, Mueller recognized the value in preserving and publicizing their personal story for the greater remembrance of all those who had experienced something similar.

In September of 1989 Scarpati passed away six weeks before Mueller, leaving their book to be published posthumously just a month later. The book of sixty-two illustrations, ordered

²⁵ Ibid.

chronologically, offers insight into the evolution of Scarpati's illness. Though the majority of Scarpati's illustrations are darkly comedic, brightly colored, fantasies and gripes, as the page number increases, so does Scarpati's focus on death. The final pages of the book are entirely black and white, perhaps because as Scarpati grew more ill, his ability to detail the sketches with colored ink cost more energy than his body could afford. *Putti's Pudding* opens with a piece written by Mueller before her husband's death in which she recalls the origins of the project, Scarpati's final months, and the importance of what they had archived. Mueller writes:

Seen chronologically this is a journey of extreme pain made bearable by his sublime imagination. It's the story of a trip along the paths of Vittorio's fantasies and for a man who hasn't felt the warmth of sunlight or the sweet breezes of fresh air for four months, there's a lot to create in the inward eye. From limitations come finally an emancipation, a disengagement with restraints. From the realization of the depths of his plight, comes a reach toward a pinnacle of inspiration... There is no where to go but up.²⁶

The introduction's sentiment comes to life in the book's fourth illustration. Scarpati, in blue jeans and red slippers, stands in profile directly in the middle of the notebook page, fingers clutched to his unbuttoned red shirt's seams, baring his chest and exposing a powerful light from inside.²⁷ Yellow rays of sun burst from his chest and radiate to the edges of the page. Mueller's caption reads: "As Vittorio opens his shirt, there are no wounds, no scars from incisions, no tubes that connect him to long pumps, there instead, pouring from Vittorio's chest, comes soothing light, the radiance of gold, the warmth of a compassionate spirit like solar flares from

²⁶ Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpati, *Putti's Pudding*, Kyoto: Kyoto Shoin International Co., 1989.

²⁷ Fig. 2. Vittorio Scarpati. *Untitled*, 1989

his solar plexus.” It is one of many images in which Scarpati imagines himself not only healed, but ethereal— otherworldly. Mueller’s words work to emphasize the message already made present by Scarpati, echoing his illustration’s sentiments in descriptive prose.

Almost immediately after being placed in the medical center, Scarpati’s chest was plugged with pneumothorax suction pumps to keep his lungs from collapsing. His illustrations frequently wrestle with this specific moment of medical intervention, likely because it also coincided with the complete loss of his vocal ability. Several of the images that focus on Scarpati’s lungs and medical respirator draw upon musical imagery. He draws a man with an accordion in his chest, a bagpipe player with horns for hair, and a flute-nosed drummer, amongst other music-human hybrid characters. In a particularly poignant piece, Scarpati surrounds the words “what a dream” with a delineation of a living room filled with musical instruments.²⁸ Above the room’s lit fireplace sits a painting of a pair of lungs, and directly to its left is a window through which Scarpati looks, hands pressed against the glass, wishing to be inside. Mueller’s annotation reads, “He is outside in the mean cold looking in, watching the hearth blazing with flames. Fire is the life giver. Warmth floods into every pore of the body, and the chill, the creeping blue chill has left. The life force returns. The lungs are safe. Dreams set you free... I arrived at the edge and jumped off.”

Along with repeated musical symbols, Scarpati incorporates animalistic imagery throughout *Putti’s Pudding’s* pages. Many of the drawings include pairs of dolphins, including the book’s final two images, one of which Mueller captioned: “Maybe in the next reincarnation the wiser among us shall become dolphins. Their hearts are joyful and open and their lives are

²⁸ Fig. 3. Vittorio Scarpati. *Untitled*, 1989

unfettered. There are no shackles. There is no cruelty or destruction. There is no technology. Only flips and dives. They smile all the time. What is the aim of life? To be content, to be happy.”²⁹ Similarly, Scarpati frequently incorporates pig figures within his pieces, most likely stemming from his childhood. The Scarpati family owned a farm outside of Sorrento that slaughtered pigs, something that horrified and fascinated Scarpati. In *Putti’s Pudding* the pigs transform into lifeless objects, such as his breathing machine. In one image, Scarpati presents himself entirely nude and holding two semi-electronic pigs at his side: “So I am all ready to go...” reads the text bubble. The pig’s flesh matches his own, blending them into one whole body— part human, part animal, part machine. Scarpati often draws himself as both machine and human, or as he wrote, the “inglorious cyborg, at the mercy of mechanics embedded in his chest... thin, sick and filthy, he is dismissed as an ugly creature by the cherubs and homunculi that look on from the margins of his drawings: a grim fate for one of New York’s beautiful people.”³⁰

As the book’s title suggests, *putti* float about in many of the drawing’s backgrounds.³¹ Whether hovering above Scarpati as he lies in his hospital bed, riding the tails of dolphins, or otherwise engaging in the illustration’s surrealistic scenes, *putti* symbolize heavenly protection whilst serving as a reminder of the artist’s foreboding mortality. The *putti* bring comfort to Scarpati in that they are aspirational beings— they are free of the mortality and bodily restrictions that he must face, they exist in the space that comes after what exists now. On death, Mueller once wrote:

²⁹ Fig. 4. Vittorio Scarpati. *Untitled*, 1989

³⁰ Hettie Judah, “Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpati,” *Frieze*, September 22, 2017.

³¹ The *putti* figure comes from Renaissance traditions of art. *Putti* are usually represented by angel-like figures, cherubic infants, or Cupids.

Fortunately I am not the first person to tell you that you will never die. You simply lose your body. You will be the same except you won't have to worry about rent or mortgages or fashionable clothes. You will be released from sexual obsessions. You will not have drug addictions. You will not need alcohol. You will not have to worry about cellulite or cigarettes or cancer or AIDS or venereal disease. You will be free.³²

The symbolist influence and surrealist qualities of Scarpati's collection of self portraits certainly call upon the artistic legacies of Surrealist artists like Frida Kahlo or Leonora Carrington, both of whom experienced and painted their respective periods of serious illness. Kahlo's relationship with chronic pain began when she was just six years old. She contracted and violently battled a poliomyelitis virus as a child, in the midst of the Mexican Revolution. As a teenager, she once again became familiar with the walls of a hospital room when she narrowly survived a car accident in which a metal handrail pierced through her body, disfiguring her spinal column and pelvic organs. This accident led to an existence brimming with doctors, depression, infertility, and the inability to predict her own physical and mental conditions. These challenges are prominently documented in her artwork. Kahlo's canvases serve as reflections of the emotional and physical toils of her experiences with pain, fear, and hospitalization, just as *Putti's Pudding* reflects Scarpati's. Kahlo specifically and frequently employs Aztec imagery and ancient symbology in order to honor her Mexican heritage in a way that reflects both the pain of her being and the pain of her country's history. Symbols like organs and the Coatlicue appear repeatedly to connote both the bloodiness of Aztec history as well as her social and political

³² Cookie Mueller, *Ask Dr. Mueller: The Writings of Cookie Mueller*.

belief in *Mexicanidad*, a subset of nationalism that romanticizes indigenosity, ancient tradition, and pre-Columbian society.

Kahlo's 1932 painting *Henry Ford Hospital* is a raw and violent self portrait completed after a miscarriage.³³ Kahlo lies awkwardly in the nude as the bright red blood pooling from her body stains the white sheets of the hospital bed: a twin mattress sitting on a red frame with "Henry Ford Hospital" inscribed on its side. Kahlo and the bed are angled into the center of the frame in the midst of an otherwise desolate scene. In the faraway distance, the city of Detroit bustles with steam and industry led by The Ford Factory— but Kahlo is far away, alone, vulnerable, and surrounded by nothing but the rusty dirt below her and a crew of six objects, tied to her open hand like balloons. A brown snail, a male fetus, a model of the female reproductive system, a metallic machinelike object, a purple orchid, and a pelvic bone float above and below Kahlo and her bed. Each of these objects hold significant symbolic value for Kahlo— though some are expressed with more ambiguity than others. Critics confidently identify the male fetus and pelvic bone as directly relating to Kahlo's struggle with infertility, however objects like the mysterious mechanical structure and the snail remain obscure, opening up the piece to a multitude of micro-interpretations.

Woven throughout both Kahlo and Scarpati's work are patterns of repetitive iconography— symbols that appear and reappear like clues, a secret language unique to the artists. Scarpati follows this tradition in *Putti's Pudding*. The musical instruments, dolphins, and putti that populate his drawings are tokens of heavenly protection. As Kahlo looks to her heritage, Scarpati looks to heaven. The myriad of *Putti's Pudding* illustrations with harps and

³³ Fig. 5. Frida Kahlo. *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932.

angels surrounding Scarpati in his hospital bed are symbolic of what was to come— a concept that weighed heavily on Scarpati’s mind as he awaited the inevitability of death. Further, Scarpati’s employment of annotation and mapping throughout the project is reminiscent of Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington’s drawings from her time in the Santander Mental Asylum.

At just twenty-three years old, Leonora Carrington had lived a remarkable life; after being disowned by her family, taken as a lover and protege by Max Ernst, and ingratiated amongst a powerful group of surrealist artists like Andre Breton and Marcel Duchamp, Carrington suffered a bout of insanity in the middle of World War II. Though Carrington and Ernst’s friends urged them to flee Europe, as Ernst was likely in danger due to his prominence as a modernist with a German passport, the couple ignored the warnings. While living in Saint Martin d’Ardeche, the French military caught up to Ernst at he and Carrington’s shared home, where they arrested him and placed him in several camps. For Carrington, this was a monumental loss in the midst of an uncertain political climate. It was on a car ride from France to Madrid that Carrington fully lost sense of herself and reality. She was placed under the care of Doctor Luis Morales, who importantly acts as a central figure in her art and writings from this period. In the asylum Carrington was treated with electroconvulsive therapy and a number of experimental drugs, leading her to experience moments of hysteria and terror. Carrington renames Dr. Morales “Don Luis,” the antagonist of her experience. In 1943, Carrington drew a piece entitled *Portrait of Dr Morales*.³⁴ The doctor's face is young and soft, contrasting the etched gradation of background. Morales’ striking, massive eyes are the feature of the piece, as they ominously stare through the page. This drawing, along with a sketched and semi-fabricated

³⁴ Fig. 6. Leonora Carrington. *Portrait of Dr. Morales*, 1943.

magic map of the Santander Asylum titled *Map of Down Below*, was published in VVV, a magazine devoted to the dissemination of Surrealism.³⁵ The map, like much of Carrington's artwork, displays her fascination with all things alchemical and occult. As casually as Scarpati drops putti into otherwise semi-realistic scenes, Carrington accentuates her map with crescent moons, sunrays, spirals, crosses, coffins, snakes, gates, caves, and orchards— all traditional symbols of alchemical illustration. The second item on Carrington's map, labelled "Radiography," stands in for the facility in which nurses treated Carrington with Cardiazol. The map reflects the horror Carrington associated with the location: on the spot lies a coffin with a two-headed body inside. Instead of coffins, Scarpati draws pigs in place of his medical equipment— machines that cost him immense pain. Carrington and Scarpati each substitute universal imagery for their personal traumas in order to both deindividualize their experiences and connect their work to a larger conversation amongst symbolists. In transforming their complicated pains into simple objects— pigs and coffins— the artists obscurely engage with the subject matter of their illustrations beneath the layers of iconography. Carrington's map and Scarpati's further work to clue the audience in on their invented languages. The artists demystify their own nightmarish landscapes with written hints and arrows that point the viewer in the direction of the intention. In this way, Scarpati bridges the gap between artists like Kahlo and Carrington— he makes use of the inherently sacred roots of symbols and demystifies the coded nature of his iconography in the same stroke.

Perhaps Scarpati's affinity for iconography is also in part a reaction to the culture wars of the 1980s. The term "culture wars" describes the ideological conflicts between liberal America

³⁵ Fig. 7. Leonora Carrington. *Map of Down Below*, 1943.

and the resurgence of Christianity spurred by the AIDS crisis. In his article “Profane and Sacred: Religious Imagery and Prophetic Expression in Postmodern Art,” Jerry Meyer identifies the ways in which the resurgence of religious thinking in relation to homophobia actually inspired postmodern artists to appropriate traditional Christian imagery within their own work. Meyer writes:

[...] a number of artists have utilized Christian images and religious references to attack or question some of the societal conventions and mores which are associated with the western cultural traditions [...] Postmodernist artists intent on engaging contemporary culture in issues of political portent have referenced religious images and formats in order to invest the aesthetic artifact with a power and authority still resonating with the shadow of its former religious context. And while the new contexts may not arise out of traditional ecclesiastical inspiration or sources of religious patronage, they do in a real sense speak to some aspects of religious tradition and theological concern: the issue of regendering divinity and broadening or redefining the humanity of Christ.³⁶

Artists like Scarpati were members of a socially marginalized community. Creating art that appropriates the symbolic language of the oppressor— in this case the religious sector of society— was for many an act of visual resistance in the midst of politically chaotic times.

One of Scarpati’s *Putti’s Pudding* illustrations particularly exemplifies the postmodern phenomenon that Meyer describes. The Christlike image captures Scarpati bound to a tree by his

³⁶ Jerry Meyer, “Profane and Sacred: Religious Imagery and Prophetic Expression in Postmodern Art,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 19–46.

hands and feet with green, vine-like rope.³⁷ On the tree branches sit two birds: one blue and one red, while a butterfly flits past. Despite four bloody needles protruding from his nearly-nude frame, Scarpati draws himself steady-faced and emotional. A cartoon text bubble written in Italian translates to: “You are not serious, are you? Aren’t we kidding?” Below the image, Mueller morbidly captions the piece: “The tree he is tied to has enticed a red and blue bird to hear the wind whispering in its lifeless branches.” The pain emanating from the piece’s Christ comparison plays against the text bubble’s levity. Much like many of the pages of *Putti’s Pudding*, the tone is darkly comedic. Scarpati borrows the familiar religious image of the crucifixion to represent his own suffering through Christian imagery. Within the traditions of Christian votive art, images of Christ on the cross symbolize colossal sacrifice and suffering. Within his lifetime, Christ, like Scarpati, existed as a social outcast. With irony, Scarpati notes this similarity, assumes the role of Christ, and instills himself with the prophetic power of revolutionary ideology.

Following the posthumous publication of Scarpati and Mueller’s *Putti’s Pudding* were several small gallery exhibitions of the work, although many of the original notebook pages were sold for \$125 a piece while Mueller and Scarpati were still alive in an effort to cover medical expenses. The most recent exhibition of *Putti’s Pudding* occurred in 2017 at Studio Voltaire in London, marking the project’s first international showing. Studio Voltaire, a Victorian former chapel in a neo-gothic style, complemented the religious iconography woven throughout Scarpati’s illustrations. Curator Paul Pieroni described his reimagining of their work as “a

³⁷ Fig. 8. Vittorio Scarpati. *Untitled*, 1989

displaced history of what it was like to have AIDS in the 1980s.”³⁸ Pieroni’s interest in Mueller and Scarpati’s work began after reading a David Wojnarowicz biography that mentioned the couple. In speaking about the essentialism of the work, Pieroni commented, “If someone is on life support and they are still making drawings, well, that feels to me like a justification for the whole thing.”³⁹ The show featured 45 of Scarpati’s drawings paired with Mueller’s captions in a small, isolated, square white room in the midst of the gallery. The setting was sterile and intimate—the whiteness of the space transformed it into a hospital room, and yet, Scarpati’s colorful, childlike drawings turned it more specifically into his own hospital room. In this way, the exhibition is also an installation. In order to view Mueller and Scarpati’s work, visitors must intentionally enter the square room, stepping into a simulation of the setting in which the work on display was first born. This manipulation of *Putti’s Pudding’s* initial publication indicates the gallery’s interest in both emphasizing and making accessible the most tantalizing question in the post- AIDS crisis era: what was it *really* like?

The content of *Putti’s Pudding* essentially examines the reality of illness, and AIDS specifically, in a time marked by pungent hatred for the infected. Like a sacrifice, or perhaps a votive offering, Mueller and Scarpati publicized a deeply personal experience for the greater archive. Embedded in a period in which their suffering was ignored by not only the government and the medical community, but also society at large, Mueller and Scarpati recognized the opportunity to create a visual archive that would proleptically capture the memories of their experience. Constantly aware of death’s imminence, the couple sought out to archive what they

³⁸ Chris McCormack, “Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpati: Putti’s Pudding,” *Art Monthly*, no. 410 (October 2017): 30–31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

could while they could, all for the benefit of eventual remembrance. The power in their work lies in its simultaneous individuality and ability to be deindividualized. The story told is both extremely like and unlike that of many others who suffered from AIDS during the epidemic. The details are distinct enough for those unaffected by the disease to recognize a human being amongst the illness, and yet the experiences are familiar enough that those who have been affected by AIDS see themselves in the artists.

Chapter Two

Shrouded in dingy orange light, Nan Goldin's *Cookie at Vittorio's Casket* uncharacteristically lacks the photographer's signature sullied glitterati.⁴⁰ The gaunt Vittorio Scarpati, torso concealed by a bouquet, lies beneath deep maroon drapes, a lit candle, and a crucifix. Though the puffy, satin white casket sizably dominates the composition, Goldin draws the eye elsewhere. The black-eyed, black-clad figure in focus is Cookie Mueller, frozen in the frame moments after viewing her dead husband's open casket. She gently leans on a black cane, gazing off towards something obscure in three quarters profile. The bleak sullenness of her expression, augmented by deep facial lines and obscured eyes, reflects the tone of the occasion. *Cookie at Vittorio's Casket* first hung as one of the fifteen images that make up Nan Goldin's postmortem tribute to Cookie Mueller, *The Cookie Portfolio*. The series captures Cookie Mueller, an intimate friend of Goldin's, from the beginning of their relationship in 1976 until Mueller's funeral in November of 1989.

In print, *The Cookie Portfolio* begins with a eulogistic essay authored by Goldin. The piece's tone suggests that the *Portfolio* be viewed with a memorial lens, evoking themes of mortality and memory. Each page of Goldin's book holds a single image, captioned below in Goldin's own handwriting—an intimate detail that emphasizes *The Cookie Portfolio's* preserved intimacy. The project questions the nature of autobiography, remembrance, death, and the photographic archival practice. In both creating and curating the memorial *Portfolio*, Goldin is acting proleptically in establishing a visual memory of Mueller that may only be acquired through the act of viewing, and viewing's artistic prerequisite, exhibition. Just as Mueller and

⁴⁰ Fig. 9. Nan Goldin. *Cookie at Vittorio's Casket*, 1989.

Scarpati worked to preemptively memorialize their experience with AIDS, Goldin's *The Cookie Portfolio* exemplifies the documentation of loss and the pre-preservation of a human existence.

The Cookie Portfolio's focus is undoubtedly Cookie Mueller, although Goldin does include two other photographs of Mueller with Vittorio Scarpati, including a wedding portrait captured in the spring of 1986. *Cookie and Vittorio's Wedding: the Ring* focuses on the couple mid-ceremony.⁴¹ A disembodied hand grasping a wedding ring emerges from the bottom right corner of the frame. The image appears strange amongst the other *Portfolio* photographs, which overwhelmingly find free spirited Cookie Mueller leading a lifestyle congruent with polyamory. Autobiographical writings by Mueller about her confused feelings concerning monogamy reflects the tone of Goldin's wedding portrait. Despite Mueller's documented ambiguity, the photograph captures Scarpati smiling serenely. His shoulder-length black curls and black suit blend together as he angles his body easily toward the ring. Mueller appears wary in comparison. Wearing a pearl clasped dress and satin striped overcoat, she casts her heavily lined eyes downward. Goldin's composition symmetrically contrasts the two halves of one union: Scarpati's palette overwhelmed by black, Mueller's by white. Their expressions oppose one another, underlining the untraditional tension of the wedding portrait, and perhaps, their relationship.

Scarpati and Mueller's fatal bond of a shared AIDS diagnosis was all too common amongst the queer and intravenous drug-addicted lovers of the 1980s. The couple passed away long before activist organizations like ACT UP began the labor of changing the narrative surrounding the agency of AIDS patients. Goldin's work from the crisis period glitters with

⁴¹ Fig. 10. Nan Goldin. *Cookie and Vittorio's Wedding: the Ring*, 1986.

ghosts. Scarpati and Mueller were not the first nor the last friends that Goldin lost to AIDS throughout her career, a fact that left her with a case of survivor's remorse. As she expressed to *The New Yorker*, "I felt so guilty in '91, when I tested negative. I was disappointed that I was negative, and most people don't understand that."⁴² Many of the artist-friends she had lost to AIDS were young, and were therefore not ever afforded the opportunity to develop their artistic careers in the way that she was. Her recognition of both her privilege of health and her photography's power to capture the physical body's process of disappearance emanated from her desire to never forget those she loved. Therefore, when faced with the reality of Mueller's illness, Goldin began sorting through her enormous photographic archive to compile *The Cookie Portfolio*, a project that would feature her lifelong friend.

Mueller and Goldin belonged to the same chosen family in the underground of New York for just short of two decades. The majority of Goldin's earliest images present her tight-knit inner circle as a consistent cast of characters. Made up of artists, actresses, writers, and other creatives, Goldin's group initially bonded over their desires to experiment with drugs and challenge societal conventions of gender and sexuality. Writer Linda Yablonsky, a friend of both women, published *The Story of Junk* about her experiences with Goldin's "tribe."⁴³ Yablonsky's novel includes two characters based on the women: Honey Cook and Ginger Snaps. *The Story of Junk* narrates the New York of 1986 and it's nocturnal, club-going, heroin addicted inhabitants: "We would go to (Cookie's) place, get high and hang out... energy was sparking between everyone; we'd go out to the same places every night, hang out at the same restaurants, bars and

⁴² Hilton Als, "Nan Goldin's Life in Progress," *The New Yorker*, 2016.

⁴³ Linda Yablonsky, *The Story of Junk: A Novel*, 1st ed. New York: Back Bay Books, 1998.

clubs. Whatever anybody did, everybody else would show up for.”⁴⁴ Yablonsky’s novel and Goldin’s collection of images delineate Mueller similarly. Goldin’s photographs animate Mueller’s gregarious liveliness against the grunge of the city’s Lower East Side. Images of a perpetually smiling, dramatically made-up Mueller dancing with her lover Sharon or posing cheek to cheek with Scarpati flood the *Portfolio*. *Cookie Laughing*, a 1985 image, presents Mueller as irreverent and bright.⁴⁵ She faces the camera with tattooed-hands clasped to chest, mouth wide open, and eyes tightly shut in mid-grin.

Unlike many of Goldin’s famously tragic-yet-glamorous frames, she rarely captures pure melancholy in Cookie Mueller. When she does, the effect is more reclusive than it is sad: Mueller sitting in Goldin’s bed opening a beer, Mueller, the last one drunk in a bar. Even in the few years before Mueller’s death, months in which AIDS seized her ability to eat, walk, and speak, Goldin never presents her weakly. In 1986, Mueller joins Goldin for a self portrait entitled *Cookie with Me after I Was Beaten Up*.⁴⁶ The women take up the left half of the frame, each dressed in black with black-painted eyes. Goldin’s swollen nose and bruised skin indicate her familiarity with domestic abuse, in this case at the hands of her lover (and *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* cover star) Brian.⁴⁷ Goldin’s eyes are watery and her mouth is slightly open— she appears enervated. Mueller, by contrast, has strength in her face as she stares down the lens and protectively wraps her arm around Goldin’s slouched shoulders.

Goldin’s career depends on the continual exploitation of her own trauma. Frames of her face battered, crying, smiling, naked, and otherwise vulnerable frequent her collection of self-

⁴⁴ Linda Yablonsky, “The AIDS Crisis as Drawn by Cookie Mueller’s Artist Husband.”

⁴⁵ Fig. 11. Nan Goldin. *Cookie Laughing*, 1985.

⁴⁶ Fig. 12. Nan Goldin. *Cookie with Me after I Was Beaten Up*, 1986.

⁴⁷ Fig. 13. Nan Goldin. *Nan and Brian in Bed*, 1983.

portraits. Her friends and contemporaries often describe her camera as being very literally attached to her body, like an extra limb. Her habit greatly accounts for her massive stockpile of images. Perhaps the most obvious example of her artistic prolificacy is the collection of the 800 some photographs that make up *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, the infamous slideshow that first played for an audience of Goldin's friends sitting in Cookie Mueller's apartment on Bleecker Street, and eventually the MoMA. The resulting project is a hybrid of multimedia formatting: part photography, part film, part installation art. Goldin ordered the photographs herself, not necessarily chronologically, and added a soundtrack complete with tracks like the Velvet Underground's "Femme Fatale" (1972) and Dean Martin's "Memories are Made of This" (1955).

The effect is similar to that of the traditional family photo album or slideshow of photographs that might play on a projector at a loved one's birthday party, wedding, or funeral. Viewers of *Ballad* see Goldin and her family of outcasts, the outrageous artists and lovers, frozen on screen for a temporary moment in the midst of various intimacies: intercourse, addiction, violence, hysteria. Goldin's sociability and absolute vulnerability made her subjects comfortable enough with her to grant her total access. In interviews, she often discusses her rule of only ever photographing those she knows, crediting her success to the sense of recognition between photographer and subject.

The New York Times art reviewer Andy Grundberg raised the question of documentary versus autobiography within Goldin's work after the Burden exhibition of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* in 1986. Grundberg discusses the exhibition's successful authenticity of Goldin's "Bleak Diary of the Urban Subculture," calling the *Ballad* "a frank reflection of the

dissatisfaction felt by a generation.”⁴⁸ Grundberg outlines the critical difficulty in defining Goldin’s work through a documentary framework due to its aestheticized amateurity, but concludes his review with a comparison to Diane Arbus that essentially pigeon-holes *Ballad* as an unconventional piece of documentary.

Grundberg’s take is not uncommon amongst scholarly interpretations of Goldin’s work. In her 1995 essay “Inside/Out,” Abigail Solomon-Godeau opens with a summary of the vehement words once imparted by Susan Sontag concerning Diane Arbus’ allegedly violently voyeuristic photography practice. Solomon-Godeau, “without necessarily disagreeing with [Sontag’s] characterization,” asks whether Arbus and Goldin are really all that dissimilar.⁴⁹ Solomon-Godeau raises suspicions about the seemingly frequent critical judgments of Arbus due to her status as existing “outside” of her subjects’ communities, suggesting that perhaps Nan Goldin’s claim of existing “inside” is not enough to excuse her from the label of voyeur. She specifically examines Goldin’s 1993 project *The Other Side*, an archive that depicts the lives of drag queens she intimately knew throughout varying periods of her life.⁵⁰ On *The Other Side*, Solomon-Godeau writes,

[...] the Boston pictures (which are all in black and white) resemble nothing so much as arty fashion photographs, very much in the style of the period. One would not necessarily think that certain of the portraits— particularly those of the person called “roommate”— represented anything other than a fragile-looking, fine-boned woman. But this too subverts the privilege and

⁴⁸ Andy Grundberg, “Photography Review: Nan Goldin’s Bleak Diary of the Urban Subculture,” *The New York Times*, 1986.

⁴⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Inside/Out,” 126-131.

⁵⁰ Nan Goldin, *The Other Side*, Germany: Steidl, 2019.

authority of the insider position, insofar as one confronts what is itself a perfection of simulation... Insiderness here, as elsewhere, can thus be seen to be about access and proximity, but whether one can argue for a non voyeuristic relationship in consequence of the photographer's position is another matter entirely.⁵¹

Solomon-Godeau continues by asking two questions:

Goldin may well claim her devotion and emotional closeness to her subjects, but does this mitigate the prurience, or indeed the phobic distaste, so often manifested toward her subjects by the straight world? Does a photographic representation, however sympathetic, of drag queens and transsexuals constitute an effective intervention against the political and ethical problem of homophobia?⁵²

Not only does Solomon-Godeau underplay the role of context in her dismissal of Goldin's androgynous "roommate" as nothing but a "fragile-looking, fine-boned woman," she also utilizes a subtle variation of the same homophobic mindset popular throughout the AIDS epidemic's peak. Solomon-Godeau ignorantly insinuates that Goldin's roommate's ability to pass as a cisgendered woman negates part of the project's success in effectively resisting homophobia—a claim that is not only a stretch, but reveals her dependency on the gender binary—a concept Goldin openly attempted to deconstruct since the beginning of her career. Further, Solomon-Godeau leaves the definition of "insider" or "outsider" to be decided by the viewer, entirely disregarding the contexts of Goldin's artistic authority. In pivoting the critical focus from Goldin in her moments of creation to her artwork's reception by some abstract audience,

⁵¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Inside/Out," 126-131.

⁵² Ibid.

Solomon-Godeau claims that viewers of Goldin's work are unable to find any semblance of "truth."

Despite scholarly claims akin to that of Grundberg or Solomon-Godeau, Goldin continuously argues that her work is entirely un-documentary because of her positionality as both artist and group-member. Goldin recognizes and rejects the role of documentary photographer because of its connotations of judgement, spectacle, and possible alliance with hegemonic systems of power, instead asserting herself in direct opposition to the judgement and violence inherent to documentary photographic practice. In response to Diane Arbus comparisons, Goldin once sharply noted that she not only did not enjoy Arbus' photographs, but that she found them self-involved. What Grundberg and Solomon-Godeau miss in their analyses is that unlike Arbus' work, Goldin's photographs intimately humanize their subjects; whether or not the distance between photographer and subject is truly eliminated by Goldin's claimed insider positionality, projects like *The Cookie Portfolio* not only render Goldin's alleged lack of interest in documentary irrelevant, but they also trivialize the scholars' concerns about her archives potential lack of "truth." Whether or not the Cookie Mueller that Goldin presented her audience with reflects the woman that she once knew, Goldin's practice of proleptically establishing memory nonetheless successfully imitates a recognizable authenticity. In exhibiting *The Cookie Portfolio*, Goldin gifted both those directly and indirectly affected by the AIDS epidemic with the ability to engage with what appears to have originated as an authentic memory.

The haphazard, snapshot aestheticized look of Goldin's work reproduces this authentic spontaneity, inspiring empathy within the viewer and inviting them to voyeuristically share in

her photographically preserved moments of lived intimacy. In a conversation with both David Armstrong and Walter Keller included in her book *The Other Side*, Goldin discusses her affinity for the snapshot method:

My work comes from the snapshot. It's the form of photography that is most defined by love. People take them out of love, and they take them to remember—people, places, and times. They are about creating a history by recording a history. For me, it is not a detachment to take a picture. It's a way of touching somebody— it's a caress. I am looking with a warm eye, not a cold eye. I am not analyzing what's going on— I just get inspired to take a picture by the beauty and vulnerability of my friends.⁵³

In his introduction to the catalogue of Goldin's 1996 Whitney Museum of American Art retrospective, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, author and historian David Ross discusses the loving, intimate quality of Goldin's work that she described above, writing that her photographs “emerge from both collective memory and unfettered personal space... [Goldin] reveals herself as a woman loved by her world, and unafraid to live her life as fully as she can. She shares her life with us, shares her need for a release, and her expectations of the sublime.”⁵⁴ Goldin's work is thus motivated by both empathy and her desire to share the experience of another. *The Cookie Portfolio*, like much of Goldin's work, is an exercise in multilayered biography: in documenting Mueller, Goldin documents the generation of AIDS, and in documenting anything at all, Goldin implicitly documents herself. This process instills Goldin's photographs with the intimacy so integral to her success in preemptively establishing memory. In exposing the intimacy between

⁵³ Nan Goldin, *The Other Side*.

⁵⁴ Nan Goldin, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, Germany: Scalo Verlag Ac, 1996.

herself and those she photographs, Goldin conjugates a narrative form in which something is shared between photographer and viewer.

The Cookie Portfolio's final slide, the ominous and ornate *Cookie in Her Casket*, exemplifies Goldin's ability to project empathy.⁵⁵ Nestled between plush layers of gardenias and jewels, Mueller's dimly lit face disappears in the orange luminescence of the satin crucifix splayed across her chest. The light of the cross casts a glow on Mueller's ring-stacked fingers and braceleted arms, complementing the subtle scatter of gems on her dress. Allowing the ruffles of the propped-open casket and a handful of lit candles to serve as a backdrop, Goldin focuses the camera on Mueller's corpse from scalp to hip-bone. The somber woman who once appeared in *Cookie at Vittorio's Casket* seems to have disappeared and been permanently replaced by the Mueller that Goldin's audience remembers best: decked in brilliant stones and a bewitching aesthetic of melodrama. By ensuring that the final image of *The Cookie Portfolio* reflects the iconography of a woman that Goldin spent over a decade crafting, Goldin actively manipulates the narrative of both Mueller and the AIDS epidemic by inserting her own personal, mournable memory into the public archive. For the benefit and consumption of the modern viewer, *The Cookie Portfolio* revives Goldin's personal structures of memory and reimagines otherwise publicly inaccessible moments as both individually and communally resonant.

In contrast with many of her peers' work about AIDS, Goldin's images refuse to align with themes of once-removed nostalgia. Both despite and because of Mueller's death's personal significance to Goldin, *The Cookie Portfolio* transcends the realm of the personal to join the greater public AIDS archive. The post-AIDS crisis LGBTQ generation's memory of the 1980's

⁵⁵ Fig. 14. Nan Goldin. *Cookie in Her Casket*, 1989.

viral trauma depends on images like Goldin's. Her work is particularly successful in establishing a sense of shared memory because of its vulnerability. Her images of Mueller present viewers with a woman who was known and loved— not by some abstract community, but by a family that the viewer will recognize and recall from past work, the same family of which the photographer is an intimate member. These layers of illusory familiarization are products of Goldin's artistic prolepsis. Her process of creating history instantaneously results in the ability for viewers to engage in the projection of a stranger's experience onto one's own narrative through the manipulation of empathy. The vast majority of Goldin's subjects are now deceased— their images outlived them. In an act of anticipatory memory, Goldin managed to capture the process of her family of friends' disappearances. The fragments of memory she exhibits provide the basis for the contemporary generation's connection to the past. Like a family photo album, Goldin's photographs allow those outside of her group to understand, mourn, and self-reflect all through the medium of an image.

Chapter Three

In her introductory essay, *In The Valley of the Shadow*, to the catalogue of the 1989 Artists Space exhibition, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, Nan Goldin mournfully rages against the toll of AIDS on her community, unreservedly clarifying her curatorial ethos:

My priority was to formulate an exhibition that would include the whole community, that those who have died would be as much a part of as those who still survive, and that would serve to both keep their spirit with us and allow us to formally say goodbye. [...] The tone of this exhibition has become less theoretical and more personal, from a show about AIDS as an issue to more of a collective memorial. [...] I want to empower others by providing them a forum to voice their grief and anger in the hope that this public ritual of mourning can be cathartic in the process of recovery, both for those among us who are now ill and those survivors who are left behind.⁵⁶

In the summer of 1988, a period marked for Goldin by severe personal and universal loss, Artists Space director Susan Wyatt approached her with an offer to curate a show— of any theme— for the gallery. The resulting exhibition, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, tangibly manifested Goldin's years-long efforts to proleptically establish and publicize collectively mournable memories. Like an open funeral, the exhibition provided a public space to grieve those who had already passed as well as those remaining in limbo, infected, waiting to pass. Goldin not only included selected pages from *Putti's Pudding* in the exhibition, but dedicated the show to Vittorio Scarpati, then unaware that Cookie Mueller would pass away the very day of its

⁵⁶ Artists Space, ed. *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing [Exhibition Catalogue]*. (New York: Artists Space, 1989): 4.

opening, which fittingly took place on November 16, 1989—the two-month anniversary of Scarpati’s funeral. By its very existence, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* is the culminating physical realization of Goldin, Scarpati, and Mueller’s intentions to visually cultivate anticipatory memories. Goldin’s curatorial process as well as the exhibition’s recontextualization of *Putti’s Pudding* are key to this study’s identification of *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* as the consummate product of artistic prolepsis. Through an examination of Goldin’s curatorial process and the exhibition’s post-mortem representations of Scarpati and Mueller, this chapter argues that *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* proves the success of *The Cookie Portfolio* and *Putti’s Pudding* as preemptively constructed archives of loss.

Artists Space, the exhibition’s host, was founded in 1972 by Trudie Grace and Irving Sandler. Artists Space influenced Manhattan’s art scene with its strictly innovative ethos. In an effort to set the space apart from the myriad established commercial galleries of the city, the founders prioritized the work of young, politically motivated, and socially conscious artists.⁵⁷ Artists Space specifically appealed to Goldin because of its independent and experimental nature; the venue frequently granted successful artists the opportunity to curate their own exhibitions so long as their shows prominently featured the work of young and unknown creatives. Goldin’s globally respected career and large network of artist-friends made her an excellent candidate to curate a unique group show for Artists Space.

As a rule, the venue granted its guest curators complete freedom— Goldin independently conceptualized the exhibition’s theme and hand-selected each of the participating artists from her own intimate group of friends. After spending a year and a half camera-less and rehabilitating

⁵⁷ Artists Space was financed by Trudie Grace and Irving Sandler’s mutual employer, the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA).

from drug addiction, Goldin reentered the city's art scene with the task of curating the upcoming exhibition only to find her community decimated by AIDS. Mourning, and in the midst of a season littered with the funerals of her closest friends, Goldin emailed Wyatt a formal proposal for what would be New York City's first ever group show spotlighting AIDS.⁵⁸

Speaking to the hostility of the climate within which Goldin planned the revolutionary show, just weeks before the exhibition was set to open, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* made national headlines as Goldin and Wyatt found themselves in the midst of a publicized war with The National Education Association (NEA). In the midst of the culture wars, the conservatives and Christians of the 1980s took particular offense to what they considered to be sacrilegious, deviant art. Before Goldin's exhibition became the center of NEA related controversy, the NEA had already been making waves by publicly funding art by artists like Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe's images of intimacy between gay, often nude men, enraged the public in the time of AIDS and incited debates about the NEA's financial support of what was labeled obscene art. It is unsurprising then that Goldin's show, brimming with homosexual imagery, nudity, lust, and intimacy— all within the context of the infected body— would both shock and horrify the public. In November of 1988, one year prior to the show's opening, Susan Wyatt applied for and received a grant from the NEA for Goldin's show.⁵⁹ At the time, Goldin had already made clear her intention to center the exhibition on AIDS— though ultimately titled *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, the working title presented to the NEA was *The Age of AIDS*. Frank Hodsoll, the NEA president who approved the funding for the show, was replaced by John E. Frohnmayer—

⁵⁸ Sophie Junge, *Art about AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016): 89.

⁵⁹ The NEA approved a grant for 30,000 dollars.

a former Oregonian lawyer appointed to the position of president by George H. W. Bush, in October of 1989. Frohnmayer, who had not been the one to approve the funding of Goldin's exhibition, assumed the position of NEA president in the midst of an increasingly chaotic climate. Following the lead of notorious Christian fundamentalist American Family Association groups and Republican government officials Jesse Helms, Dana Rohrabacher, and William Dannemeyer, large masses of the public targeted the NEA with accusations of financially supporting the creation and exhibitions of blasphemous, crude artwork.

The massive controversy was first set off by one photograph in particular: Andres Serrano's 1987 *Immersion (Piss Christ)*.⁶⁰ Serrano's sixty-by-forty inch Cibachrome print presents a small, plastic Christ on the cross submerged in a yellow liquid that, according to the title and Serrano's own comments, is urine. Like Scarpati's reappropriation of himself as Christ at the moment of crucifixion in the previously discussed *Putti's Pudding* illustration, *Piss Christ* engages in the same reappropriation of religious iconography within a new, contemporary context. Serrano's photograph was first shown in an exhibition at the Southeastern Center of Contemporary Art—an institution that received funding from the NEA. Reverend Donald Wildmon, the president of the Christian fundamentalist American Family Association, took to the U.S. Congress with a selection of other CAFA members in April of 1989 to protest the NEA, specifically utilizing Serrano's *Piss Christ* as the center of his argument. The CAFA protest incited senator Alfonso D'Amato, with the assistance of Jesse Helms, to make a speech in agreement—focusing specifically on the burden of art funding on American taxpayers, and conveniently avoiding any discussion of the oppositional argument, which focused on the

⁶⁰ Fig. 15. Andres Serrano. *Immersion (Piss Christ)*, 1987.

obvious violations of both freedom of speech and freedom of opinion involved in censoring artwork like Serrano's.

Similar debates occurred in the following months, the majority of them led by Jesse Helms, and each directly attacking the NEA. On July 26th, 1989, Helms formally proposed an amendment to the NEA's grant guidelines that would not only decrease its budget to 400,000 dollars per year, but also entirely ban the funding of indecent art. Helms defined indecent art as anything (including but most definitely not limited to) homoerotic, sexually explicit, or sacreligious.⁶¹ Within the first week of October in 1989, the Bush administration passed a slightly modified version of the Helms Amendment that stood true for almost three years—greatly affecting the art world and market.⁶²

The law applied only to grants accepted by the NEA after the first of October 1989, meaning *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* was not necessarily under the threat of having its funding withdrawn. However, Goldin's exhibition was set to open and run well past the deadline, leaving Susan Wyatt with concerns about the show's funding nonetheless. Wyatt was most uneasy about the public's potential reaction to one item in particular: a raw, angry essay authored by David Wojnarowicz that, although would not be included in the show, was included in the catalog. Wyatt's concerns turned out to be valid: upon release, the catalog—which included a statement indicating the NEA's financial support of the project, incited NEA president Frohnmayer to publish an open statement announcing the withdrawal of the NEA's funding from the exhibition, writing that: "There is a certain amount of sexually explicit material, but the

⁶¹ Sophie Junge, *Art about AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, 27.

⁶² The passed version of the Helms Amendment left the NEA with the ability to decide what work should or should not be considered obscene, though an independent committee was set up to influence and monitor the NEA processes of granting any type of financial support.

primary problem is the political nature. I can understand the frustration and the huge sense of loss and abandonment that people with AIDS feel, but I don't think the appropriate place of the National Endowment is to fund political statements."⁶³ In response, the board of Artists Space refused to submit to Frohnmayer's demands, instead insisting that the grant from the NEA be handed over in full. The battle continued back and forth for weeks, making headlines in *The New York Times* amongst other publications.

The tides changed in favor of Goldin and Wyatt just one day before the show's opening. Frohnmayer made his first ever visit to Artists Space to see the show from himself, an event so personally pivotal for him that it was included in his 1993 memoir. Immediately after his visit, Frohnmayer publicly announced his distaste for the Helms Amendment and reinstated the funding for *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. Thousands of people, thrilled with the victory, gathered in front of Artists Space on Goldin's opening night to protest the Helms Amendment and show support for the show. Though the exhibition was relatively small and short-term, the months of building controversy finalized in unprecedented success: the first few days of the show brought with it nearly 5000 patrons, and following that, an average of six-hundred people visited per day up until the exhibition closed.⁶⁴

Before the funding had been restored, Wyatt issued a press release emphasizing the personal nature of the show, noting that the concept had evolved into something "more inclusive, and, at the same time, more personal."⁶⁵ Wyatt continues, writing that despite Goldin's intimate connections with the artists included in the show, "the ravaging effects of the disease on this

⁶³ Sophie Junge, *Art about AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, 129.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

group of people is not only representative of the larger cultural context in which we must all face not only the immediate crisis of funding, health care, education and awareness, but life in our community with AIDS.”⁶⁶ In this way, Goldin conceptualized an exhibition representative of her entire career; in each of her artistic efforts, Goldin vulnerably prioritizes the expression of authenticity amongst those in her immediate circle in order to offer universal access to otherwise personal memories. Beyond the exhibition’s inherently political nature, through an intimate exploration of personal responses to AIDS, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* offered viewers the opportunity to enter the narratives constructed visually from Goldin and her circle’s lives, to both personally and collectively mourn alongside her, and to see ourselves, and each other, in their work.

Correspondingly, rather than choosing specific artworks for the exhibition, Goldin chose twenty-five young artists— each a close personal friend of hers— to display nearly one-hundred total artworks of various mediums.⁶⁷ Like Vittorio Scarpati’s *Putti’s Pudding* illustrations, the contributed photographs by both Peter Hujar and Mark Morrisroe were exhibited posthumously.

⁶⁸ Each of the men died from AIDS before the gallery’s doors opened. Adhering with ease to Artists Space’s requirement that the majority of the artists shown be largely unknown, twenty of the twenty-five artists hung never before displayed pieces that had been specifically created for

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ The number of contributing artists is inconsistent amongst reports. Robert Vitale, according to Susan Wyatt, was not officially named as a participating artist, although his work was indeed displayed as evidenced by photographs of the exhibition. Despite Susan Wyatt’s comments, this study considers the total number of artists to be twenty-five.

⁶⁸ Peter Hujar (1934-1987) was an American photographer best known for exploring themes of sexuality and lust through black and white portraits. Mark Morrisroe (1959-1989) was a performance artist and photographer integral to the development of the Boston art punk scene of the 1970s.

Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing.⁶⁹ Like Scarpati, many of the artists in the show were young and infected, and therefore never afforded the opportunity to carry out full careers: only nine of the artists had previously had their work exhibited. Each work selected for the exhibition is a visual exploration of the physical, psychological, social, and political effects of AIDS on the infected body. Many of the pieces explicitly capture bodies— sometimes autobiographically, sometimes abstractly— in moments of intimacy, dissociation, decline and deindividualization.

Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing, although inherently an exhibition about AIDS, was more than a display of artworks. Though inextricably connected by their overarching categorization as art about AIDS, the pieces displayed were not chosen for their shared form or content. Goldin's goal as curator was not to choose artworks that fit aesthetically or thematically well together, but was instead to strategize an exhibition that would represent her community, a group of artists who had been gravely affected by AIDS.

However diverse in style and perspective, the artworks in Goldin's show converse with one another, each sharing a personal expression of loss in the time of the epidemic. The show occupied two gallery rooms. In the first room, a wide, seemingly uncategorized array of media decorated the walls and floorboards. A bombardment of paintings, photographs, sculptures, drawings, and small-scale installations— the work of fourteen of the twenty-five artists— greeted visitors upon entry to Goldin's show. In contrast with the first room's heterogeneity, the second room was almost exclusively curated with works of photography. Thirty-nine of the pieces included in the show were photographic portraits. Twenty-eight of those were importantly placed together, prominently presented in a row. Self-portraits by David Armstrong, Philip-Lorca

⁶⁹ Aside from Scarpati and Mueller's *Putti's Pudding*, the exceptions were the selected works by Peter Hujar, Mark Morrisroe, Robert Vitale, David Armstrong and Tom Chesley.

diCorcia, Darrel Ellis, Peter Hujar, Mark Morrisroe, and David Wojnarowicz functioned to emphasize the exhibition's sense of community. The work of the included artists frequently featured themselves, Goldin, and each other. Just like John Waters' group of Dreamlanders or Goldin's greater oeuvre, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* presents a family. The artist's interwoven narratives not only bolster the exhibition's familial theme, but delineate a strong, positive example of queer community.

In curating the second room so that each of the photographic portraits hung together, Goldin made obvious the shared sense of connectedness amongst those involved. Sophie Junge's *Art About AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* the first and only comprehensive art historical analysis of the *Witnesses* exhibition, includes an aptly written map to delineate the way Goldin intentionally hung connected pieces in conversation with one another:

[...] across from Peter Hujar's black-and-white photographs were three stills of him on his deathbed, taken just after his passing by his closest friend, David Wojnarowicz. On the other side of the room hung a photograph by Philip-Lorca diCorcia of Vittorio Scarpati in his sick-bed, across from drawings Scarpati had done in the hospital. On the wall between them hung David Armstrong's portraits of friends and acquaintances, including Cookie Mueller, Scarpati's wife and catalogue author. Two other Armstrong photos portrayed Nan Goldin and Tom Chesley, another contributor to *Witnesses*. Armstrong took both photos in 1989 expressly for the show. Another photo was of Tabboo!, whose large-format

portrait of Mark Morrisroe hung in the same room and created a visual axis with Morrisroe's self portraits, which in turn hung next to Wojnarowicz's work.⁷⁰

Junge continues by writing, "The hanging presented the participants as a group of friends who posed for one another and, as in a family album, were sometimes in front of and sometimes behind the camera."⁷¹ Just as Junge notes, Goldin's placement of the artworks emphasizes her will to equate the roles of photographer and subject. Goldin's group is a continuous meshing of artists and muses— everyone created and was recreated. In this way, Goldin cultivated self-expression through communal-expression: each individual artist was a mirror for the others. As they captured themselves, they captured one another, all the while forming an archive of images simultaneously exclusive to their community and representative of the larger AIDS epidemic.

Due to this mirroring effect, deceased members of Goldin's group like Vittorio Scarpati and Cookie Mueller remained unforgotten as they were perpetually mourned through the work of their surviving counterparts. As the aforementioned section of Sophie Junge's book mentions, directly across the wall from Philip-Lorca diCorcia's *Vittorio*, a softly lit, brightly accented photograph of the bandaged Scarpati in a hospital bed and surrounded by birthday balloons, hung the *Putti's Pudding* illustrations.⁷²

Like rays emerging from the sun, eight black and white selections from Scarpati's notebook symmetrically revolved around the single, striking, colorful centerpiece: the fiery blue and red cover art for *Putti's Pudding*. One of the simple illustrations delineates a scene in which

⁷⁰ Sophie Junge, *Art about AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, 101.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Fig. 16. Philip-Lorca diCorcia. *Vittorio*, 1989.

four putti with their naked, winged backs to the viewer stretch their arms above their heads as the cluster of eight hands clutch for Scarpati's haloed pair of floating lungs.⁷³ The image presents a theme of holy protection common throughout *Putti's Pudding*. Scarpati instills his illustrations with a language of religious iconography as he ponders what might come after life. As the angels reach for his lungs in a gesture of protection and worship, Scarpati imagines himself being healed.

Though the published version of Scarpati and Mueller's *Putti's Pudding* is filled with brightly colored, tragic yet comical drawings about living with and dying of AIDS, Goldin intentionally selected eight of Scarpati's most muted drawings to best shape the memorial tone of her exhibition. Each of the untitled pieces come from the final pages of the chronologically ordered *Putti's Pudding*, meaning Goldin chose the works he created just before passing. The handful of illustrations are exhibited on their own, unaccompanied by Mueller's captions. Three of the eight illustrations include Scarpati's Italian text bubbles, though Goldin offers no English translation. In presenting the works this way— raw, speaking for themselves— Goldin represents Scarpati's work as though it were torn straight from the miniature notebook that lived on his hospital's bedside table. In crafting their project, Scarpati and Mueller ensured its readability in an effort to communicate their experience with AIDS to a universal audience. *Putti's Pudding's* opening essay, translations, added captions, and chronological order all work to give its viewer context— further information to assist in piecing together Scarpati and Mueller's narrative. These efforts can only be described as anticipatory mourning: the artists were preemptively aware of their work's future memorial context.

⁷³ Fig. 17. Vittorio Scarpati. *Untitled*, 1989.

Though Goldin chose to exclude *Putti's Pudding's* captions, she still prominently included Mueller's written voice in the exhibition. "A Last Letter," an essay first authored by Mueller for the City Lights Review, is reproduced for the *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* catalog. Within the essay, Mueller grieves the loss of filmmaker Gordon Stevenson, the first friend she lost to AIDS in 1982. She celebrates his accomplishments and mourns the loss of what was meant to be a bright future. Mueller closes the essay with a reproduction of the last letter she ever received from him. Gordon's final lines echo the same fantasy for a peaceful afterlife expressed in Scarpati's illustrations:

I hope this letter finds you in good spirits. I hope you're not upset that I don't want you to visit me. I wish you happiness, love, prosperity, and a limitless future.

I KNOW, I KNOW, I KNOW that somewhere there is a paradise and although I think it's really far away, I KNOW, I KNOW, I KNOW I'm gonna get there, and when I do, you're gonna be one of the first people I'll send a postcard to with complete description of, and map for locating.⁷⁴

For *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, Goldin collected the most mournable fragments of Mueller and Scarpati's autobiographical narrative in order to reconstruct their efforts of anticipatory mourning within the new posthumous context that each of the three individuals had prepared for. In his own controversial essay for the catalog, "Post Cards From America: X-Rays From Hell," David Wojnarowicz notes the utility of the memorial, writing specifically about funerals:

⁷⁴ Artists Space, ed. *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing [Exhibition Catalogue]*, 14.

One of the first steps in making the private grief public is the ritual of memorials.

I have loved the way memorials take the absence of a human being and make them somehow physical with the use of sound. I have attended a number of memorials in the last five years and at the last one I attended I found myself suddenly experiencing something akin to rage. I realized halfway through the event that I had witnessed a good number of the same people participating in other previous memorials. What made me angry was realizing that the memorial had little reverberation outside the room it was held in.⁷⁵

Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing essentially functioned as the reverberating funeral Wojnarowicz describes as ragefully missing. In contrast to the traditional funerary events held after each of their friend's deaths, Goldin's exhibition created a space in which everyone could mourn for everyone else, publically. Despite the interference of death, Goldin ensured that the presence of each of her group members, in physical attendance or not, was felt. Goldin's exhibit presents her family of friends as chroniclers of a community desperately attempting to archive its members through film, illustration, and text while under the threat of death. *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* revives lost members like Scarpati and Mueller through a recontextualization of their own posthumously crafted autobiographical narratives. In exhibiting a highly personal memorial for her own specific community of friends ravaged by AIDS, Goldin allows for the public to appropriate her grief and utilize it for self-reflection. In this way, Goldin's exhibition provides worldwide "reverberation," just in the way Wojnarowicz describes— *Witnesses:*

⁷⁵ Artists Space, ed. *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing [Exhibition Catalogue]*, 6.

Against Our Vanishing stands for not just the narrative of one community, but each of the communities destroyed by the 1980s AIDS epidemic worldwide.

Conclusion

The intertwining narratives of Cookie Mueller, Nan Goldin, and Vittorio Scarpati present a visual archive of intimacy yielding vivid, unexpected, beautiful, and terrifying results. As they captured their stories on film and paper for the benefit of the generations to come, they exposed their own experiences with pain, grief, illness, and death in the time of AIDS. The artworks they made were personal, revolutionary, and importantly immediate reactions to the sociopolitical consequences of the epidemic. However, it is essential to note that this thesis' study of one community's grappling with the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s does not cover the current, continued global spread of HIV. Thirty years after its onset, the epidemic continues to destroy regions like sub-Saharan Africa, where a fifth of adults are HIV positive. In their battle against AIDS, Goldin's community importantly exhibited elitist structures. All but one artist included in the *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* show were white.⁷⁶ Five of the group members, Vittorio Scarpati included, were privileged enough to travel back and forth between their European homes and New York City. Aside from David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar, each of the artists had gone to college— three of them holding Master's degrees. Though minorities in their sexual orientations, Goldin's group members were absolutely nonrepresentative of the broader demographic of HIV positive Americans— the overwhelming majority of whom were people of color.

Contemporarily, following decades of near total inattention, there is an increase in interest in the AIDS epidemic's effect on the American art world. When *Art AIDS America*, the first major, mainstream exhibition to examine the artistic response to the AIDS epidemic of the

⁷⁶ The exception is Darrell Ellis, an African-American photographer.

1980s opened at Washington's Tacoma Art Museum in 2015, *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter penned a review aptly entitled, "Art of the AIDS Years: What Took Museums So Long?"

Within the article, Holland writes:

Given the volume, quality and variety of art made in response to AIDS over 34 years, it seems inexplicable that no mainstream museum ever attempted a historical survey... I say the wait for a survey was puzzling, but by the late 1990s, American interest in AIDS was waning... The art establishment, which had tiptoed around gay and AIDS-related art when government arts funding began to be cut, now considered it old news.⁷⁷

In the years since Cotter's article appeared in the *Times*, several exhibitions dedicated to work about AIDS activism and art have made their ways across the country. Though much of the art world's interest remains centered on overtly activist, political visual archives of AIDS, curators like Stepher Vider are working to publicize "the activism that happened in private."⁷⁸

Vider's experimental exhibition *AIDS at Home: Art and Everyday Activism*, held in 2017 at the Museum of the City of New York, exemplifies the ways in which contemporary curators are working to modernize the memorialization of AIDS. The show examined the ways in which artists and activists expanded their definitions of family and conceptualizations of caretaking in order to protect one another in navigating the political stakes of living with AIDS in the 1980s. Vider's exhibition merged photographs, films, and paintings with archival materials in order to raise questions about community building and art making as an act of resistance. The show included over twenty artists— including both Nan Goldin and David Wojnarowicz. By design,

⁷⁷ Holland Cotter, *The New York Times*, July 28, 2016.

⁷⁸ Muri Assuncao, "How AIDS Changed Art Forever," *VICE Magazine*, August 21, 2017.

AIDS at Home mimicked a real four-bedroom apartment. Each separate room of the exhibition explored a different theme of the exhibition. As the show's visitors navigated the space, they read letters like *Peter Hujar's Diagnostic Letter*, a 1987 note penned by Hujar's doctor describing in detail his new AIDS diagnosis, complete with a small Wojnarowicz drawing of two men kissing hanging above the letter's first line. A particularly tender painting by Hugh Steers, *Bath Curtain*, softly delineates a man caring for his lover in the bath. Of the show, Vider said, "I didn't want anybody to be able to leave the exhibition with a sense that HIV/AIDS is not urgent."⁷⁹

Modern exhibitions like *AIDS at Home* prove that though receiving an AIDS diagnosis in America today is not the terror that it once was, we must continue to reckon with all that was lost in the years of the epidemic—both locally and globally. Importantly, there is no common style amongst the art made thirty years ago in response to the crisis. The artists who were addressing the issue were pressed by death, and therefore expressed themselves in various mediums, motivated by a multitude of individual experiences. Though loss, grief, and the body are each integral themes, the single common thread holding artwork about AIDS together is the absolute refusal to be ignored while trapped in a period so threatened by life's fragility.

⁷⁹ Muri Assuncao, "How AIDS Changed Art Forever."

Appendix of Figures



Fig. 1. Therese Frare, *David Kirby on his deathbed*, 1990, online image. Image source: Life Magazine.



Fig. 2. Vittorio Scarpati, *Untitled*, 1989, ink on paper. Image source: original.

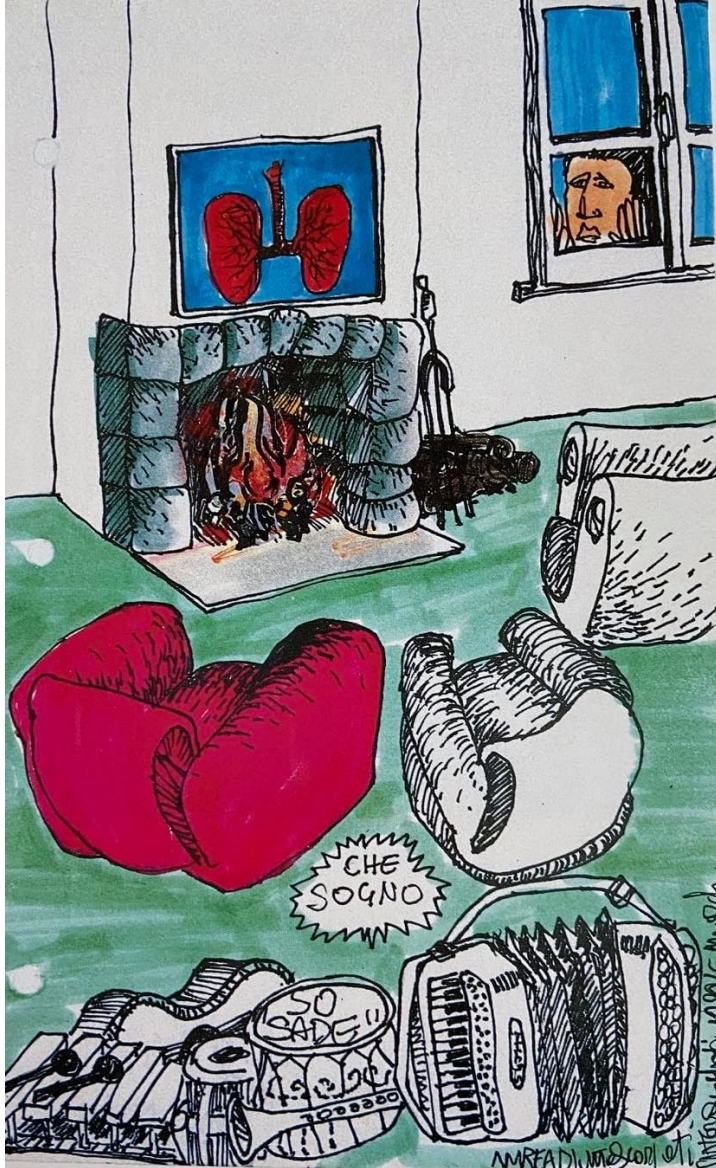


Fig. 3. Vittorio Scarpati, *Untitled*, 1989, ink on paper. Image source: original.

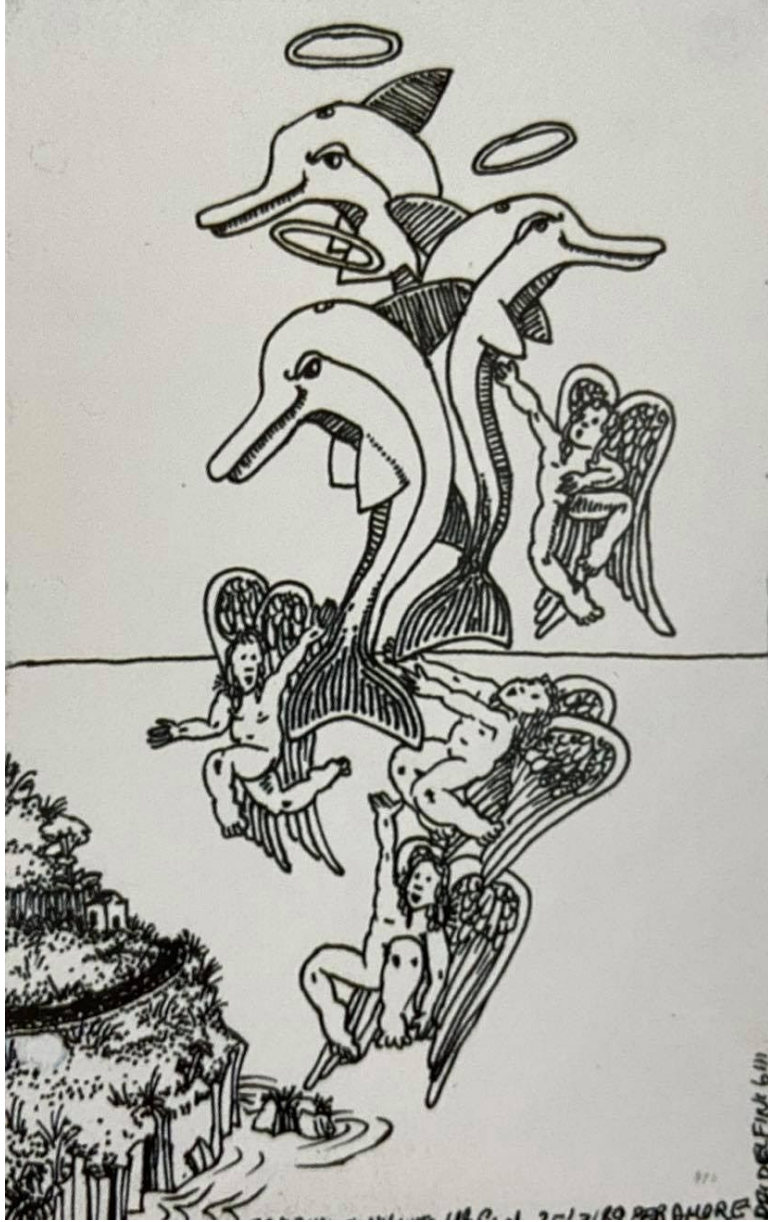


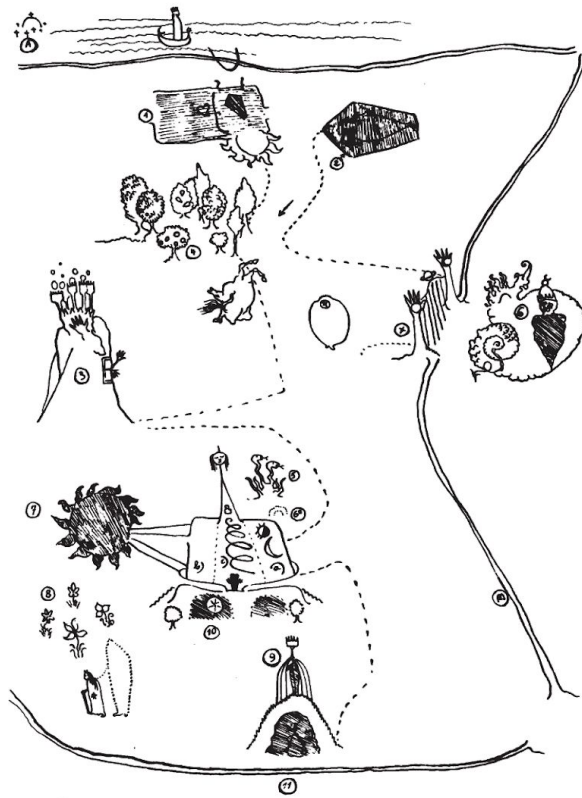
Fig. 4. Vittorio Scarpati, *Untitled*, 1989, ink on paper. Image source: original.



Fig. 5. Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932, oil on metal, 38.5 x 31 cm. Purchased by Dolores Olmedo in 1955. Image source: fridakahlo.org.



Fig. 6. Leonora Carrington, *Portrait of Dr. Morales*, 1943, graphite on paper. Image source: Michael Brautigam.



Key to the map

- | | |
|--|---|
| A. A desert scene, Covagonda cemetery | 7. "Down Below" |
| B. High wall surrounding the garden | 8. Kitchen garden |
| X. Gate of the garden | 9. Bower and cave |
| 1. Villa Covagonda | 10. Don Mariano's "place" |
| 2. Radiography | 11. "Outside World" Street |
| 3. Villa Pilar | a. My room at "Down Below," the
eclipse and the limbos |
| 4. Apple trees and the view of Casa
Blanca and the valley | b. The lair |
| 5. "Africa" | c. The library |
| 6. Villa Amachu | Wide "Down Below" alley |
| 6b. Arbour | |

Fig. 7. Leonora Carrington, *Map of Down Below*, 1941-43, ink on paper, 32.4 x 25.1 cm. Image source: artnet.com.



Fig. 8. Vittorio Scarpati, *Untitled*, 1989, ink on paper. Image source: original.



Fig. 9. Nan Goldin, *Cookie at Vittorio's Casket*, 1989, cibachrome print, 33 x 49 cm. Collection Fotomuseum Winterthur, gift of Andreas Reinhart, Winterthur. Image source: Fotomuseum Winterthur.



Fig. 10. Nan Goldin, *Cookie and Vittorio's Wedding: the Ring*, 1986, cibachrome print, 33 x 49 cm. Collection Fotomuseum Winterthur, gift of Andreas Reinhart, Winterthur. Image source: Fotomuseum Winterthur.



Fig. 11. Nan Goldin, *Cookie Laughing*, 1985, cibachrome print, 33 x 49 cm. Collection Fotomuseum Winterthur, gift of Andreas Reinhart, Winterthur. Image source: Fotomuseum Winterthur.



Fig. 12. Nan Goldin, *Cookie with Me after I Was Beaten Up*, 1986, cibachrome print, 33 x 49 cm. Collection Fotomuseum Winterthur, gift of Andreas Reinhart, Winterthur. Image source: Fotomuseum Winterthur.



Fig. 13. Nan Goldin, *Nan and Brian in Bed*, 1983, silver dye bleach print, 50.8 x 61 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, New York City. Image source: The Met Museum.

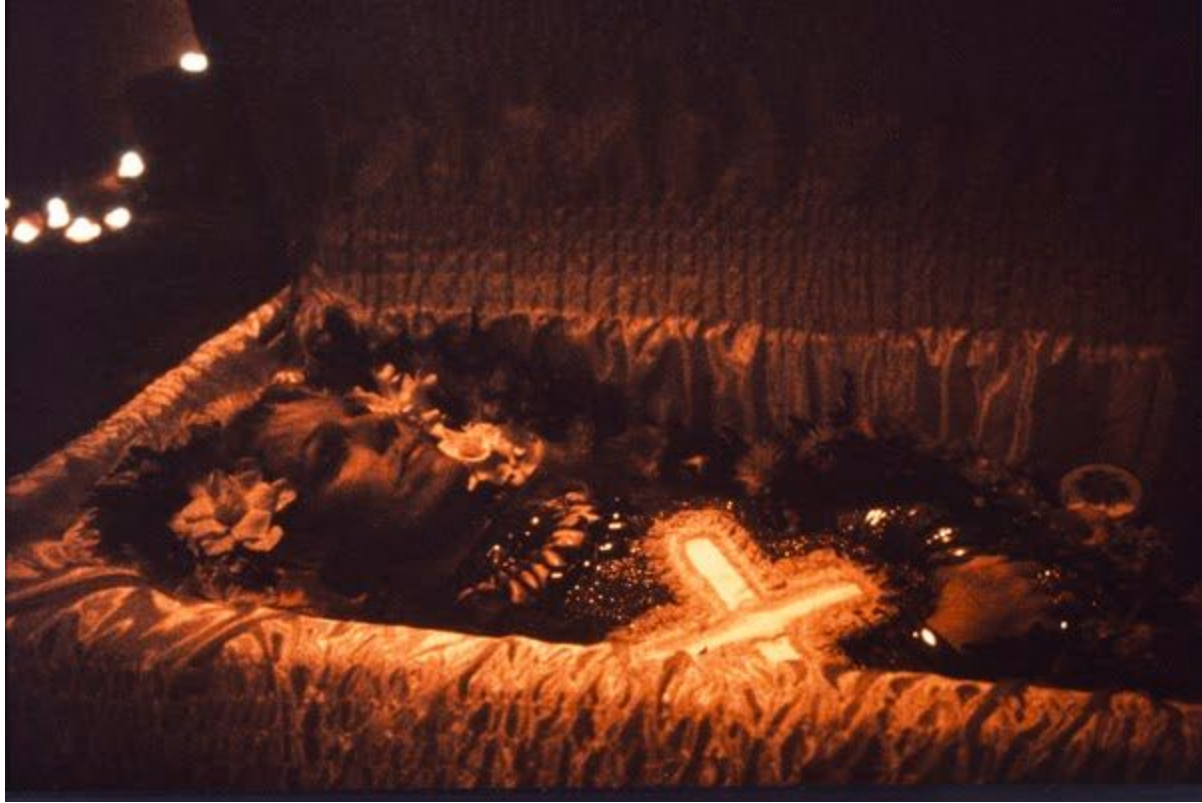


Fig. 14. Nan Goldin, *Cookie in Her Casket*, 1989, 1989, cibachrome print, 33 x 49 cm.
Collection Fotomuseum Winterthur, gift of Andreas Reinhart, Winterthur. Image source:
Fotomuseum Winterthur.



Fig. 15. Andres Serrano, *Immersion (Piss Christ)*, 1987, cibachrome print, 150 x 100 cm. Image source: artway.eu.



Fig. 16. Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Vittorio*, 1989, chromogenic color print, 62.2 x 95.3 cm. Gift of Carol and Arthur Goldberg, MoMA. Image source: MoMA.



Fig. 17. Vittorio Scarpati, *Untitled*, 1989, ink on paper. Image source: original.

References

- Adams, Brooks. "New Humanist Photography." *Art in Print Review: The Print Collector's Newsletter* 27, no. 2 (June 1996): 53–56, 82–83.
- Als, Hilton. "Nan Goldin's Life in Progress." *The New Yorker*, 2016.
- Altman, Lawrence. "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals." *The New York Times*, July 3, 1981. <https://nyti.ms/29Rhk8F>.
- Artists Space, ed. *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing [Exhibition Catalogue]*. New York: Artists Space, 1989.
- Assuncao, Muri. "How AIDS Changed Art Forever." *VICE Magazine*, August 21, 2017. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3kkvdk/how-aids-changed-art-forever.
- Cotter, Holland. *The New York Times*, July 28, 2016. <https://nyti.ms/2aygL2C>.
- Finkelstein, Avram. "Kissing Doesn't Kill." In *After Silence: A History of AIDS through Its Images*, 107–24. University of California Press, 2018.
- Goldin, Nan. *I'll Be Your Mirror*. Germany: Scalo Verlag Ac, 1996.
- Goldin, Nan. "On Cookie Mueller." *The Digital Journalist*, 20 Years: Aids & Photography, 2001. http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0106/voices_goldin.htm.
- Goldin, Nan. *The Other Side*. Germany: Steidl, 2019.
- Goldin, Nan, and Mark Holburn. "Nan Goldin's Ballad of Sexual Dependency." *Aperture* Fixture and Metaphor, no. 103 (Summer 1986): 38–47.
- Goldin, Nan, and David Wojnarowicz. "Love, Sex, Art, and Death: In September of 1990, David Wojnarowicz and Photographer Nan Goldin, Longtime Friends, Sat down to a Three-Hour Conversation..." *Aperture* Brush Fires in the Social Landscape, no. 137 (Fall 1994): 56–69.
- Gould, Emily. "Cookie Mueller." *Interview Magazine*, October 8, 2014. <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/cookie-mueller>.
- Griffin, Chloe. *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller*. Munich: Bbooks Verlag, 2014.
- Grundberg, Andy. "Photography Review: Nan Goldin's Bleak Diary of the Urban Subculture." *The New York Times*, 1986.
- Guibert, Herve. *Cytomegalovirus*. University Press of America, 1996.
- Judah, Hettie. "Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpati." *Frieze*, September 22, 2017. <https://frieze.com/article/cookie-mueller-and-vittorio-scarpati>.

- Junge, Sophie. *Art about AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016.
- Kessler, Matt. "Get to Know Cookie Mueller, Dreamlander and Underground It-Girl." *Dazed Magazine*, February 9, 2018. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/38966/1/get-to-know-cookie-mueller-writer-dreamlander-and-underground-it-girl>.
- Leask, Ian. "The Caravaggio Within Nan Goldin's Gina." *Photographies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 131–43.
- Marcus, Greil. "Songs Left Out of Nan Goldin's Ballad of Sexual Dependency." *Aperture* 197 (Winter 2009): 76–81.
- McCormack, Chris. "Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpati: Putti's Pudding." *Art Monthly*, no. 410 (October 2017): 30–31.
- Meyer, Jerry. "Profane and Sacred: Religious Imagery and Prophetic Expression in Postmodern Art." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 19–46.
- Mueller, Cookie. *Ask Dr. Mueller: The Writings of Cookie Mueller*. High Risk Books. London: Serpent's Tail, 1996.
- Mueller, Cookie. *How to Get Rid of Pimples*. Top Stories, 1984.
- Mueller, Cookie. *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black (Native Agents)*. Semiotext(e)/Native Agents. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1990.
- Mueller, Cookie, and Vittorio Scarpati. *Putti's Pudding*. Kyoto: Kyoto Shoin International Co., 1989.
- Precup, Mihaela. "'The Wound Which Speaks of Unremembered Time: Nan Goldin's Cookie Portfolio and the Autobiographics of Mourning.'" *ASX*, no. Editorial (2012).
- Qualls, Larry. "Performance/Photography." *Performing Arts Journal, Inc* 17, no. 1 (January 1995): 26–34.
- Ruddy, Sarah. "'A Radiant Eye Years from Me': Figuring Documentary in the Photography of Nan Goldin." *Feminist Studies, Inc.* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 347–80.
- Sapikowski, Lauren. "Cookie in Her Casket as a Response to the Medical Death." *10th Global Conference: Making Sense of Death and Dying*, n.d., 9.
- Silverman, Rena. "Nan Goldin Looks Back at Friends and Lovers." *The New York Times*, December 5, 2017. <https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/nan-goldin-looks-back-at-friends-and-lovers/>.
- Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Inside/Out." *Focal Press, Basic Critical Theory For Photographers*, 2015, 126–31.

Summersgill, Lauren. "Visible Care: Nan Goldin and Andres Serrano's Post-Mortem Photography." Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of London, 2014.

Thompson Reid, Phyllis. "Nan Goldin- Dark Diary." *Aperture*, no. 176 (Fall 2004): 62–75.

Yablonsky, Linda. "The AIDS Crisis as Drawn by Cookie Mueller's Artist Husband." *Dazed Magazine*, 2017.

Yablonsky, Linda. *The Story of Junk: A Novel*. 1st ed. New York: Back Bay Books, 1998.