



Nan Goldin:  
*Misty and Jimmy  
Paulette in a taxi,  
NYC, 1991.* © Nan  
Goldin. Courtesy  
Matthew Marks  
Gallery, New York.

# Photography After Feminism

by Dore Bowen

ABIGAIL SOLOMON-GODEAU

## Photography After Photography: Gender, Genre, History

Sarah Parsons, ed., Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2017; 280 pages, 38 black-and-white illustrations, \$94.95 cloth, \$26.95 paperback.

With its refusal to separate photography from power and patronage, Abigail Solomon-Godeau's *Photography After Photography: Gender, Genre, History* arrives at an auspicious moment. Published the same year that the #MeToo movement emerged, it makes a case for understanding photography within a social and political nexus that includes, first and foremost, issues pertaining to sex and gender. As Sarah Parsons, the book's editor, notes in her preface, photography often serves a culturally conservative role by "figuring sexual difference and reproducing hierarchies of gender" and, indeed, Solomon-Godeau incriminates photography—not only fashion photography, nudes, and pornography, the obvious culprits, but also documentary photography, portraiture, and landscape—for perpetuating gender inequality.

In the book's twelve chapters, Solomon-Godeau discusses photographers and bodies of work known for their unflinching imagery. These include Nan Goldin and Larry Clark, both of whom picture adolescents and young adults having sex and taking drugs; the social critique vignettes of Jeff Wall, Robert Frank, and Chantal Akerman; nudes, radically different in kind, by nineteenth-century photographers Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden and Eadweard Muybridge; Edward Steichen's famous 1955 "Family of Man" exhibition; photographs taken by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib military prison in Iraq, many of which show prisoners being tortured and humiliated; modernist Harry Callahan, in particular, and "street photography" more generally; Susan Meiselas's lurid "Carnival Strippers" series; landscape photographers, notably the French nineteenth-century practitioner Gustave Le Gray; and documentarians, including an entire chapter on the "nanny-photographer" Vivian Maier. The last three chapters concern, respectively, Robert Mapplethorpe, Francesca Woodman, and Cindy Sherman. Solomon-Godeau places photographers, their pictures, and the exhibitions in which their work appears under a strong

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theoretical light by posing questions that weave throughout the book: How are we to reckon with the voyeuristic nature of photography? If photography is not art in the traditional sense, what is it? What is the effect of class differences between photographer and subject? What role does the art market play in determining the reception of photographs?

The chapters were written as stand-alone pieces between 1995 and 2014, and the original contexts for them speak to Solomon-Godeau's broad engagement with her field: four were authored for exhibition catalogues, two for museum blogs, two for academic conferences, one for the French journal *Multitudes*, and three for edited art history volumes. It would have been helpful to find this information in the body of the book rather than in the endnotes, for it reveals the critical daring of the author's incursions: the essays were produced not on the fringes of the art world but at its center, where money talks and genius is touted.

Solomon-Godeau dismantles the truisms that domesticate photographic practices, posing her arguments in dialogue with European philosophers and cultural theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes as well as Anglophone photography historians and practitioners who, like the author herself, approach the topic from a politically engaged angle: Rosalind Krauss, Allan Sekula, Victor Burgin, Christopher Phillips, Susan Sontag, Martha Rosler, and others. Nearly all the chapters serve as case studies of artists or exhibitions, and this narrow focus helps to ground Solomon-Godeau's theoretical claims while allowing for illuminating insights. In the chapter on Steichen's "Family of Man," for example, she methodically dismantles the well-worn but persistent belief that a photograph gives voice to "reality speaking itself."

Elsewhere, she tackles other widely shared beliefs, including, in relation to Callahan, the idea of artistic genius and the notion that photography has its own formal categories (she claims there is no such thing as a coherent genre of "street photography," but rather disparate practices involving the street as location). In her study of Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion* series she argues against the common assumption that a photograph is authored by the person who clicks the shutter, and, in relation to Maier's posthumous fame, the equally entrenched idea that art historians "discover" photographers.

Throughout the book, Solomon-Godeau pinpoints not only the myths but also the logical constructs—and their structural oppositions—that have informed photographic practice since its inception. For example, her chapter "Inside/Out" explores and ultimately challenges the idea that being inside a community exempts the photographer from charges of exoticizing his or her subjects. In "Written on the Body," she examines the tenuous idea of beauty in relation to the photographic nude, noting that although von Gloeden posed the young male models in his photographs to conform to nineteenth-century notions of beauty, indexical details

in the photographs—notably, signs of physical wear and tear on the models' bodies—betray the plebeian reality of the sitters' lives, thus piercing the pornographic illusion. She writes, "Desire trumps beauty, as the working-class models, who risked fines, even imprisonment, for their activity, were rarely attractive."

Bringing a wealth of information to bear on photographic meaning, Solomon-Godeau explores her topics in historical context. In doing so, she demonstrates that the way many photographs are understood today has little to do with the circumstance of their creation, or the manner in which they were originally distributed and viewed. For example, in her discussion of so-called street photography, she shows how the popular practice, which became possible with the advent of George Eastman's Kodak camera at the turn of the twentieth century, flourished due to the fact that privacy was initially considered etiquette (and not law), thereby "authorizing the photographer to depict subjects unawares."

It is in this expanded field that Solomon-Godeau locates feminist issues. She argues, for instance, against critics who sever Woodman's artwork from the feminist context in which it was produced, writing that "this legacy of feminist thought . . . helps account for the great power and accomplishment of her work." Yet, for Solomon-Godeau, critics and scholars must do more than rescue female artists from art historical oblivion or, worse, "the trivialities of sentimentalism and mythology"; they must also do "feminist work on photography," by which she means that they should address not only photographers and photographs, but also the underlying visual codes "through which the multi-form components of individual and collective gendered identities are produced, confirmed, or contested." While *Photography After Photography* is a scholarly work, and not intended as a catalogue or coffee-table book, more and better reproductions would have helped it achieve this goal, since the author's arguments rely, ironically, on the seductive power of the photographs discussed.

Solomon-Godeau's prose undergoes a fascinating stylistic transformation over the two decades covered in this book, paralleling a broader shift in critical writing on photography. Her poststructuralist references fade into the background as her authorial voice shifts to a more personal, if no less critical, register, until, in the final two essays, she reflects on feminist art history. In the book's final essay, "The Coming of Age: Cindy Sherman, Feminism, and Art History," she notes that as Sherman's career peaks, critics cease to discuss the feminist milieu that inspired her work.

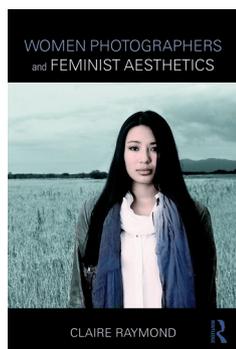
As Solomon-Godeau considers the legacy of Sherman's art one can't help but wonder about the legacy of her own substantial body of critical writing. Given the increase in visual literacy across ages and communities, combined with the proliferation of popular texts on the topic of gender inequity (Parsons cites to great effect Rebecca Solnit's 2014 book *Men Explain Things to Me*), the essays in this volume

may have a widened readership today. Those individuals who take issue with the status quo will be intrigued to learn how the history of photography helps shape cultural norms.

So what is the state of Solomon-Godeau's subject today? In her introduction, she points out that there is no longer a pure medium of photography. This demise of medium-specificity is due largely to the development of digital imaging processes that meld photographs with other materials and forms, such as film and architecture. Ostensibly, the titular "photography after photography" stands in contradistinction to the historical activity known as photography. The term evokes both new imaging practices and a new understanding (less formalist, less

universalist, more culturally attuned) of what was done under the old medium's name. However, Solomon-Godeau also demonstrates throughout the book that there never was an isolated medium of photography; it was always embedded in a larger (if often unacknowledged) social and critical context. Taken in this sense, "after photography" is not descriptive but prescriptive; it suggests getting beyond, once and for all, the stubbornly held belief that there is a unified practice called "photography." Only then can we fully embrace the various and contradictory lens-based activities that, when viewed critically, reveal the patriarchal underpinnings of visual culture and subvert the very art economy such prejudices depend on for legitimization. ○

## Books in Brief



CLAIRE RAYMOND  
**Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics**

The feminist aesthetic is predicated on photographs that "carry the ethics of the feminist movement through formal contour and symbolic figure." In developing this concept, art historian Claire Raymond considers work from twenty-two female photographers. Her book covers multiple continents and three centuries, offering critical assessments and new sociopolitical interpretations of artists such as Diane Arbus, Sally Mann, and Carrie Mae Weems.

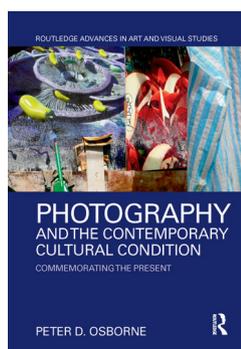
London, Routledge, 2017; 242 pages, \$140 hardback, \$39.95 paperback, \$19.98 eBook.



CHARLOTTE COTTON, et al.  
**Public, Private, Secret: On Photography & the Configuration of Self**

Identities constructed using digital technology and social media often reflect the contemporary preoccupation with race, gender, and sexuality. Charlotte Cotton, the International Center of Photography's 2015–16 curator-in-residence, explored the resulting relationship between "real" and fabricated selves in the group show "Public, Private, Secret." This follow-up book features thirty critical essays plus interviews with eleven artists, including Trevor Paglen and Martine Syms.

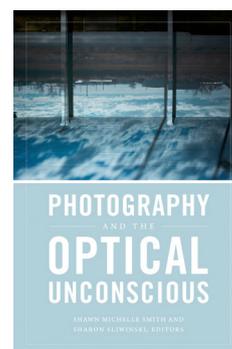
New York, Aperture and the International Center of Photography, 2018; 232 pages, 77 color and black-and-white illustrations, \$29.95 paperback.



PETER D. OSBORNE  
**Photography and the Contemporary Cultural Condition**

Photography began in 1800 with the camera obscura and gained notoriety with the development of film. Predicted to become obsolete, photography instead advanced with the rise of technology. Peter D. Osborne examines the effects of digitization on the medium, noting why and how it continues to prosper. His analysis, which spans the last three decades, focuses on photography's complex contribution to the contemporary social climate.

London, Routledge, 2018; 194 pages, 53 black & white illustrations, \$150 hardback, \$27.45 eBook.



SHAWN MICHELLE SMITH AND SHARON SLIWINSKI, eds.  
**Photography and the Optical Unconscious**

German theorist Walter Benjamin rethought cognitive engagement by connecting photography and the psyche. In 1931 he coined the term "optical unconscious," believing photography captured the unseen. This book's fifteen articles, accompanied by several artist portfolios, examine history, politics, and race through the lens of Benjamin's theory. The mix brings together topics ranging from Sigmund Freud to Zoe Leonard, from Kristan Horton to North Vietnamese war photography.

Durham, Duke University Press, 2017; 392 pages, 20 color and 116 black-and-white illustrations, \$104 cloth and \$28.95 paperback.

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