

One of the Family: The Subculture as an Alternative Queer Family in the photography of Larry Clark and Nan Goldin

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Throughout the history of documentary photography, the question of portraying marginalized communities the artist did not identify with has been at the center of discussions of voyeurism and privilege. But what happens when the artist does identify with the community and does the way the people are portrayed when they are documented by someone with an insider status change? Photographers Larry Clark and Nan Goldin are infamous for pushing the limits on what activities and which individuals can be portrayed. What makes these two artists differ from others with their work is not just the subject matter, but their personal connections to the people they document. Both of these artists focus on photographing subcultures they are part of, communities based around shared interests that are usually positioned outside of normative society.

Larry Clark grew up in Oklahoma where he became involved in the local drug scene- his friendships with working-class youths influenced his early photographs where he captured a group of people challenging their parents' ideas of sexuality and appropriate activities. Nan Goldin was influenced by Clark's "confessional mode" of photography by not shying away from the personal aspects of her intimate relationships with the people she loved.¹ Living in New York City post the Stonewall Riots and part of an openly queer subculture, Goldin's photographs capture the individuals questioning accepted views of gender.

For both of these artists, the subcultures they document radically challenge the idea of the nuclear family. They seem to be creating an alternative family through their images- that could be considered a queer restructuring- within their communities because their outsider status pushes them to spaces where they need to create something new. But even as they make these radical modifications to questions of gender roles and family structure, are they able to actually break away from these norms? Or do they continue to recreate just a different understanding of the family because they cannot imagine a society without some configuration of one?

I will present these varying questions by looking at different photographs of Clark and Goldin's and see how visually capturing their subcultures illustrates common themes between their communities: gender and queerness and how these concepts form the radical but also problematic potential of these communities.

¹ Kaplan, "Photography and the Exposure of Community: Sharing Nan Goldin and Jean-Luc Nancy.", 82