

LIFE ISN'T PERFECT, BUT THEN PHOTOGRAPHY ISN'T EITHER. Indeed photography's imperfections are becoming all too familiar. Often now we hear that there are too many photographs, that we are buried in them. Growing accustomed to the burden of this accumulation has made it difficult to imagine what photographs we might still need.

Over the past decade photographers' answers to this challenge have been diverse and often tentative. Although it may be a sign of cultural disarray, even shallowness, the diversity also is a positive expression of independence from the gang mentality of artistic progress, in which a few artists mark the one true path for all others. If that is so, then shared concerns, when they do coalesce, may be explored more broadly, perhaps also more deeply. It appears that something of the sort is now happening as dozens of American photographers explore the life of the home.

It might be argued that this phenomenon represents not so much an advance as a retreat—a narcissistic withdrawal from the world's troubles into the secure domestic cocoon. But there are other ways to approach our photographers' new preoccupation with the place where honesty and charity were once said to begin. Certainly the pictures collected here, themselves but the tip of an iceberg, are too varied and too lively to submit to a single interpretation. Readers are invited to turn directly to them and reach their own conclusions.

TO MAKE A PHOTOGRAPH the photographer must be in the presence of the subject. This is true even in the special case where the subject is an arrangement in the studio, or simply another photograph. In the more general case it is not only true but enormously consequent. To photograph on the top of the mountain one must climb it; to photograph the fighting one must get to the front; to photograph in the home one must be invited inside.

"How I got the picture" is the stuff of tall tales. While the nature photographer may boast of elaborate equipment or long treks or superhuman patience, every photojournalist can tell of wary strangers befriended or guards duped or disasters narrowly escaped. Less often do we hear the stories behind more ordinary photographs, where no precipice yawned and no bullets flew, but that does not mean that these stories might not be interesting, and instructive, if we knew them.

Once the picture is made the photographer disappears, to be replaced by the viewer. This is photography's biggest, slyest trick, since the viewer sees only what is shown and (if the picture is good enough) takes it for the whole. The familiar technical questions—which lens did you use? which film?—barely scratch the surface of the mask behind which the making of the picture has vanished. What the picture doesn't show us — how the photographer got *here*; his or her relationship, in the broadest sense, to the subject — shapes the character of what we see within the frame.

This most fundamental condition of photography bears consideration. It helps to explain, for example, why the public life of the street has played such a prominent role in modern photography. The street and its extensions—the lobby, the airport, the beach—serve up a smorgasbord of

class and character, circumstance and behavior, all the while preserving for the photographer the anonymity and freedom enjoyed by the painter alone in the studio. The photographer may enter and leave the teeming arena at will, without asking permission or making an appointment or saying goodbye. And the material is so rich that the photographer may construct an image of life so varied and elaborate that we may never think to ask what is missing. Everything changes when the photographer enters the home, beginning with the difficulty of entering at all.



DAVIDSON
1967-68. From *East 100th Street*

IN 1982 JOHN UPDIKE WROTE IN A REVIEW, *American fiction deals in the main with the amorous and spiritual difficulties of young upper-middle-class adults; a visitor arriving in New York after studying the short stories of, say, Ann Beattie and Donald Barthelme . . . would be ill-prepared for the industrial sprawl of Queens and the black slums of Brooklyn,*

*for the squalid carnival of the avenues and the sneaking dread of the side streets after dark.*¹

Some might wish to substitute "stories in *The New Yorker*" for "American fiction," but there is no denying that our writers have dwelled on the domestic. Until recently, American photography precisely inverted the emphasis, offering an abundant record of the avenues and side streets and scarcely any account of life at home. One might expect, for example, to find many pictures of domestic life in *The Family of Man*, Edward Steichen's panoramic exhibition and book of 1955. In fact, fewer than one in ten of the photographs unmistakably were made in the home.

The barrier that is the front door goes a long way toward explaining the relative paucity of domestic material in the body of photojournalist and photojournalistic work upon which Steichen largely drew. It also helps to explain the mutual alienation of the two principal strains of domestic imagery that did exist in American photography in the three decades that followed World War II.

Because lack of privilege too easily translates into lack of privacy, domestic poverty has been far more accessible than domestic affluence. Moreover, the Depression documents of the Farm Security Administration provided subsequent photographers of poverty with both a stylistic model and a badge of sympathetic concern. Given the authority of the work that Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and others made for the FSA, it is not surprising that the idiom has survived even though few would dispute that its social effectiveness has waned (ill. 1).

When photographers did cross the threshold into an affluent home,

VERY
man and Joanne Woodward,
ills. 1958



the pictures they made there generally were ruled by a contract, real or implied. More often than not the resulting pictures were promoting something, even if nothing more specific than the postwar ideal of domestic prosperity. Although its subjects are celebrities, Sid Avery's charming valentine to Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward is typical of this genre, notably in the way it adapts to its aims the candid vocabulary of photojournalism (ill. 2). Especially when paired with the durable imagery of domestic poverty and distress, the anodyne picture of material bliss encouraged the notion that trouble was something that happened to someone else.

The record of home life is still thinner and more fragmentary within the aesthetic tradition of American photography that stretches from Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston to Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind and beyond. Here, too, domestic imagery has tended to fall into two mutually exclusive categories. The first comprises snapshots: casual records of everyday life. While better made than most, these pictures remain essentially snapshots, quarantined from the demands and opportunities of the photographer's art. In the second category, the domestic subject is so thoroughly subordinated to an aesthetic program that it is drained of domesticity. In the work of Stieglitz and Callahan, Georgia O'Keeffe and Eleanor Callahan typically are not wives at home but the Eternal Feminine at Parnassus (ill. 3).

The polarity of these two categories has been bridged frequently in isolated pictures but only rarely in a sustained effort, such as Weston's late family pictures (ill. 4), or Emmet Gowin's early work (ill. 5). In about 1966 Gowin, a student of Callahan, discovered snapshot intimacy as a potent artistic theme. The originality of this discovery may be measured against the domestic portraits that appeared a few years later in Bill Owens's book *Suburbia* (1973) (ill. 6). Owens's subjects present the public face of private life, obliging the photographer by adopting representative roles. To Gowin's subjects he is not the photographer but Emmet, and they to him are not types but individuals. What he discovered is that the essential power of the snapshot lies not so much in candor of style or modesty of subject as in the relationship between photographer and photographed. In the early 1970s Gowin retreated to the more familiar ground of romantic fantasy, where his wife Edith, formerly pictured as lover and companion, became an actress in fairytale roles. But his early pictures possess an unembellished tenderness that remains exemplary to many of the photographers represented here.



3. HARRY CALLAHAN
Eleanor, Chicago



4. EDWARD WESTON
Cole and Dorothy Weston

That photographers, like businessmen, generally have maintained a barrier between work and home, makes all the more remarkable the apparent ease with which Lee Friedlander has ignored that barrier. As he matured, Friedlander made of photography such a supple tool that whatever subject he chose became, as if beforehand, a subject for art. Thus, while he seems not to have planned it, his pictures of family and friends became part of his work, his *oeuvre* (for example, page 101). These pictures trick us into thinking that all snapshots—all umpteen billion of them—must be wonderful, and of course in a way they are.



R. GOWIN
Dwayne, Danville. 1969

NOT LONG BEFORE HER DEATH in 1965 Dorothea Lange conceived the idea of a new national documentary project. On a visit to New York she told John Szarkowski at The Museum of Modern Art about her idea and asked him to invite several young photographers to discuss it with her. Szarkowski remembered the meeting this way:

*The young photographers were all salivating. "When do we start?" But as the conversation went on, Lange became a little quiet and finally a little restive. And after listening to all the photographers talk about how wonderful it would be, she said, "Well now, just a minute. I am not talking about finding a lot of money so we can do the Farm Security Administration over again." She said, "Actually, you know, we've learned how to photograph poor people. It might be really more interesting now, it certainly would be more difficult, to see if we can learn how to photograph affluence."*²

Lange did not say *domestic* affluence, and of course it is impossible to imagine how the project she envisioned, had it been realized, might compare with the work collected here. But at least two of the story's potential morals seem relevant: first, that just as the inertia of tradition enforces the persistence of successful styles, it also inhibits the discovery of new subjects; and second, that an old approach might not work for a new subject.

IN 1976 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PUBLISHED William Eggleston's *Guide*, which reproduced forty-eight photographs made about five years earlier. That the pictures were in color was a novelty, which perhaps helped to mask the deeper artistic novelty of the book. From Robert Frank in the 1950s to Garry Winogrand in the 1970s, the characteristic American photograph had been made in the street, and however idiosyncratic its maker's viewpoint, its meanings had been essentially social. As Szarkowski noted in the essay that opened Eggleston's book, his pictures instead presented a private world, "appearing not at all as it might in a social document, but as it might in a diary."³

Both enthusiasts and critics of Eggleston's work recognized in it a stylistic similarity to the drugstore snapshot. An explanation is required here, since other work also had been visited with such a recognition where little basis for it existed. Winogrand was justifiably irritated that some crit-

ics found the roots of his sophisticated compositions in the casual accidents of snapshots. He pointed out that the cutting edges of his pictures were calculated with precision to frame a seamless puzzle, whereas the typical snapshot points with fixed attention at its centered subject. Defined in this way, snapshot style is as close to Eggleston's art as it is remote from Winogrand's.

If Eggleston's pictures bear a family resemblance to snapshots, still deeper is their affinity with the way snapshots hold meaning. Perhaps the most ubiquitous of all photographs, snapshots are also the most hermetic. To the insider, to the member of the family, snapshots are keys that open reservoirs of memory and feeling. To the outsider, who does not recognize the faces or know the stories, they are forever opaque. At the same time, because we all have snapshots of our own, and thus know the habit of understanding them, we all are equipped to imagine ourselves into the snapshots of others, into the dramas and passions they conceal.

In the *Guide* Eggleston exploits this ready momentum of imagination. He makes insiders of us, so that his pictures are intimate without being voyeuristic. It is this aura of intimacy that lends emotional weight to mundane subjects, even (or especially) those that are improbable candidates for the family album—an open oven (page 31), for example, or dinner for one (page 75). Like Philip Guston's discarded shoes and bare lightbulbs, Eggleston's household details are momentous, psychically charged, invested with sorrows and yearnings.

Even before the *Guide* was published Eggleston had begun to broaden the scope of his work, and the flavor of his style is evident in no small part of the color work that soon followed and has continued to grow. The less easily imitated aspect of Eggleston's work, its poetic fusion of ordinary subject and personal sensibility, in fact has been less often imitated. Nevertheless, a prodigal garden has now grown up around what first appeared as a beautiful, solitary blossom. If grossly classified as an intimate view of domestic experience, the *Guide* now, fifteen years later, belongs to a broad array of contemporary photography. Since 1980 American photographers have turned with an enthusiasm to the *terra incognita* of the domestic scene.

The pictures reproduced here have been assembled to survey this development. That it is a coherent artistic phenomenon seems indisputable. That the character of the whole is richer than the sum of its parts is the thesis that underlies this book and has dictated the survey form. Such a survey is unlikely to do justice to the distinctness of each photographer's work, and it is simply inadequate to represent the sort of sustained project that more than a few of the photog-

6. BILL C
We Are Really Happy



raphers represented here have achieved. In compensation it allows the inclusion of pictures that amplify our image of domestic experience, although the photographer's main concerns may be peripheral to the present theme. The survey also permits an experimental search for points of contact among varieties of photographic work that generally have been segregated one from another. For the sake of coherence, however, only American work has been included. Among the resulting omissions, perhaps the most regrettable is the work of the Germans Bernhard and Anna Blume, in which inanimate household objects take revenge on their terrified masters (ill. 7).



EDWARD AND ANNA BLUME
from the five-part work
enzy (Küchenkoller), 1986

WHEN COMPARED WITH THE POETRY of Eggleston's distilled vernacular, much of the other work collected here seems to speak the voluble prose of the documentary tradition. Readers consequently may be tempted to approach these works of art as if they were illustrations to a sociological report. The temptation should be resisted.

The pictures contain plenty of evidence of what anthropologists call material culture—what people own, how they dress, the stuff they hang on their walls or pile up on their desks. And perhaps social psychologists will find meaningful clues to patterns of behavior: among children, between children and adults, among adults. But a great deal is missing. Racially, ethnically, and economically the pictures are far from representative of contemporary America. Absent also are the journalistic favorites of domestic trouble—homelessness, drug abuse, child abuse, violence.

The photographers represented here have worked not as members of an FSA-like team but as independent artists, most of them unaware of most of the others. Inevitably and quite deliberately this survey assigns a level of generality to the pictures it includes that was not, or not necessarily, intended by their makers. But that generality should not be construed as an image of ordinary domestic life in America, for there is no single ordinary life in America any more than every member of the family of man is the same as all others. What is ordinary depends upon who is speaking, and that is the point. What most of these artists share (and what separates them from journalists and sociologists) is that what they photograph is ordinary *to them*. In this sense (although not in others) many of the pictures here might be classified as unusually interesting snapshots.

ARTISTS, ESPECIALLY IF ONE EXCLUDES PROPAGANDA ARTISTS, are perpetually open to the charge of irrelevance. In the early 1950s Henri Cartier-Bresson complained of the landscape school led by Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, "Now, in this moment, this crisis, with the world maybe going to pieces—to photograph a *landscape*!"⁴ The world is still going to pieces, and it is difficult to dispute the claim that there are more important

subjects for photography than the home life of more or less comfortable Americans. It might be added that most of the work here was made in the decade of Ronald Reagan, who thrived on and seemed to mirror the self-absorption of the nation. With stunning ease, Reagan persuaded a majority of the most prosperous people in the history of the planet that they were being cheated. Against this background it may well seem that the photographs collected here constitute a massive exercise in yuppie navel-gazing.

But perhaps such a judgment is too sweeping. To the extent that this work represents a withdrawal from the world's conspicuous problems (and from the broad audience that might be expected to hold concern about them) it merely joins the main stream of American photography since the 1960s. *Life* magazine has been reborn but it and other vehicles of mass circulation contain little that might coax the involvement of our best photographers. This does not mean that wariness of the public forum inevitably has entailed indifference to public issues. Beginning with Robert Adams a quarter-century ago, for example, a growing number of talented photographers have addressed our use and abuse of the land. But their work has appeared on the wall of the gallery and museum or in the modest book, not in the magazine. For a generation or more in American photography, to deal seriously with a subject and to influence a large audience have been, with notably few exceptions, mutually exclusive goals.

What the magazines (and television) did for photography, Reagan (and others) may have done for politics. Although Vietnam and Watergate are cited routinely as distressing symptoms of moral decay, the resolution of these crises credits the late 1960s and early 1970s with a reassuring if less than triumphant exercise of political protest and democratic process. But as Reagan, then Bush, strode through the 1980s, showering ridicule on the hapless Mondale and Dukakis, it became all too reasonable to conclude that moral conviction and political effectiveness, at least on a national scale, had parted company forever.

If there is any truth in these partisan simplifications, then perhaps an effort to get one's own house in order, or at least to see it clearly, will seem less a withdrawal from responsibility than an expression of sanity.

ALTERNATIVELY, THERE IS ROOM TO ARGUE that domestic life is a subject of broad importance. In the 1980s the political right and left rediscovered the bitterness of their mutual antipathy, nowhere more deeply than in their shared conviction that the home is a major battleground of social struggle. Some on the left might explain the joining of this battle as a defense of the private sphere against the intrusive strictures that the right sought to impose. (The debate over abortion has been framed in just this way.) But quite on its own the left has identified domestic life as an issue of public concern. As feminists made gains toward equal pay for equal work, for example, they also saw that a change in paychecks was not necessarily accompanied by a change in assumptions about who does the housework. From this point of view, to focus on the home may be to get at the heart of the matter.

Nevertheless, many of the photographers here would disclaim such a grand interpretation of their motives. Many began to photograph at home not because it was important, in the sense that political issues are important, but because it was there—the one place that is easier to get to than the street. After they had worked for a while, many also recognized that the overlooked opportunity was also a rich one, full of uncharted mysteries. By then it was too late to adopt the more detached viewpoint of the social critic. Sheron Rupp, who made the pictures on page 54, explained in a recent letter, “I’ve grown bored with the obvious photograph and find myself excited with seeing the more subtle turnings and events in everyday life.”

When he began to make sculpture around 1970, Joel Shapiro encountered an austere artistic landscape. The reductive project of Minimal art had created a forbidding *tabula rasa*. But it had also cleared a path to the immediate, the modest, the personal. Later Shapiro thought back to 1973: “My marriage had broken up, I moved out of the house, my wife and I had really no communication and we had a child. Imagery had begun to interest me and I gravitated toward it.” He made a horse, then he made a house (ill. 8). Once the house had insinuated itself into Shapiro’s work, he found it difficult to dislodge. “I sensed that the house was a metaphor for my past or for experience digested.”³⁵

IN THE MID-1970S AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY, after decades of profligate vitality, began to lose momentum. Young photographers of talent continued to appear, among them Jan Groover and Nicholas Nixon. So different is the work of these two, however, that to name them together is to acknowledge in the same breath the absence of a commanding imperative. By the early 1980s some critics were claiming that a new imperative had

emerged and that its first order of business was to cast the modern tradition of photography on the junk heap of history, where it might be admired but must be regarded as dead. Collected under the banner of “postmodernism,” the artists whose work was said to embody this new outlook—Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and others—agreed that photography in the mass media was thoroughly rotten. But, instead of seeking to reclaim photography from its degraded state, they proposed to answer back in the same overheated language, turning the arsenal of media culture upon itself (ill. 9). For decades advanced photographers had defined their ambitions in opposition to the cheap tricks of the mass media; now a new generation appropriated those tricks as the essential vocabulary of a new art. There

were precedents for this strategy, notably in the art of Andy Warhol, but the best of the new work was both original and persuasive.

Such a summary of the postmodernist enterprise is an oversimplifi-



cation, but it helps to suggest why many adherents of photographic tradition felt baffled or defensive in response to the new work, and why apologists for the new work considered photography's prior achievements irrelevant. This climate of mutual alienation was exacerbated by the thorough success of postmodernist photography in the art world, which previously had admitted photography grudgingly if at all. In a few years Cindy Sherman, who admirably declined to issue a manifesto, accomplished what Alfred Stieglitz had failed to achieve in a lifetime of earnest propaganda: a photographer was acclaimed as an artist.

Thanks in part to the worldly success of postmodernist photography, the artistic experiment soon was encircled by a strident brand of rhetoric, which insisted on an absolute polarity between the postmodernist triumph and the pathetic residue of modernism. This rhetoric tended to poison the interpretation of contemporary photography generally by focusing critical inquiry on the question of whether a given artist did or did not belong on the bandwagon. It also tended to diminish the work it sought to celebrate, by narrowing it to an illustration of theory. To move beyond this rhetoric and the divisiveness it fed thus may be to see all varieties of current photography more clearly. Now, a decade later, perhaps this is possible.

ONE OF THE CENTRAL TENETS of the postmodernist creed is that the impersonal stereotypes of the media have saturated personal behavior, that the anonymous, corporate "they" reaches out to touch the most intimate "you." The case has been overstated by those critics who stake the originality and authenticity of their theories on the claim that media culture has robbed experience of originality and authenticity. Still, there was a point to be made. For artists, stalking the clichés of advertising and the movies often has meant following them into the home; although by definition the imagery of postmodernist photography is drawn from the public sphere, its themes not infrequently are domestic. Thus it is that the beleaguered modernist tradition, in its aim to clarify personal experience, and the postmodernist juggernaut, eager to unmask Big Brother, meet (of all places) in the kitchen. The messages that they bring there may not be the same, but that is what makes for a lively conversation.

It is true that Sherman's catalog of female roles is powerful social criticism and that by playing all of them herself she calls attention to the malleability of our selves. It is also true that Sherman's pictures are exciting to look at and, in a thoroughly old-fashioned sense, poignant. A generation earlier Warhol had celebrated the completeness with which the persona can



9. BARBARA KR

Untitled

swallow up the person. Sherman shifted the emphasis, making us feel the predicament of the individual within the role. The best of her work is not only intelligent but deep, and like all good art it invites and rewards comparison with other art. If her brilliant recapitulation of social clichés makes it easier to recognize that Eggleston's little girl is trapped in one (page 48), perhaps the moving intimacy of Eggleston's diary will encourage us to take to heart Sherman's young woman who lies on the kitchen floor dreaming of a better life (page 87).

Another central tenet of postmodernism is that photographs are not natural truths but man-made fictions, whose mechanisms can be exposed. The proposition came as no surprise to photographers; indeed from the 1960s onward American photography has been rife with evidence, from subtle clues to bald pronouncements, of its own artificiality. While Ed Ruscha and Ken Josephson, William Wegman and Robert Cumming patiently dismantled the modest pretensions of the flat-footed photographic record, Winogrand and Friedlander gleefully infected the sober documentary style with the germ of comic improbability. By the mid-1970s a strain of self-reflexive hyperbole was in the bloodstream of straight photography, and it continued to nourish new arrivals.

Between 1979 and 1983 Mary Frey made a series of black-and-white photographs of home life titled "Domestic Rituals" (pages 52, 63). Like many of her contemporaries Frey exchanged the ubiquitous 35mm for a larger camera, thus achieving sharper detail and so raising (or recapturing) the standard of descriptive precision that lies at the heart of the documentary tradition. In 1984 Frey began working in color, further enriching the descriptive vocabulary; in this respect, too, her work was representative of a broad trend in advanced photography. In her new color series, "Real Life Dramas," Frey captioned her pictures with bouquets of pop psychology, which read like (and occasionally actually are) passages from pulp romances. Under a picture of a middle-aged woman whose task of cleaning the kitchen floor seems to have been interrupted by a sudden thought, the caption reads, "She quickened with the realization that things would never be the same" (page 95). Frey's captions abruptly pull the rug of realism out from under the pictures and simultaneously charge them with narrative implication.

Around 1979 Philip-Lorca diCorcia had begun a series of photographs, also domestic in setting, although generally limited to a single protagonist and often rather more ominous in mood. While Frey's oddball captions instantly derail the gullible viewer, diCorcia's pictures present no such device. But after looking at a few of them the viewer develops the vaguely troubling impression that the artist has tampered with the unspoken contract between documentary photography and its audience. The impression is encouraged by the stylistic sophistication of the pictures, which are lit and framed with the skill of a master cinematographer. As it turns out, all of the pictures are stage-managed, in degrees ranging from the trivial to the elaborate. What makes diCorcia's work powerful (and original) is that the contaminant of fiction, instead of causing us to reject the picture as false, draws us further into its drama. As a thirtysomething guy peers into his

refrigerator at night, we see not a banal search for a snack but a man confronting the chaos and dissolution of his life (page 30).

Between the implied sincerity of the documentary idiom and the unapologetic fictions of popular culture, Frey and diCorcia, following different routes, discovered a twilight zone where the unexploded bomb of psychological narrative incessantly ticks. Pictures here by Gregory Crewdson (pages 31, 34), Carrie Mae Weems (pages 32, 89), and Nic Nicosia (page 58) suggest the enthusiasm with which photographers have explored that zone recently. But its boundaries are not infinitely broad, and to stay within them is to achieve a delicate balance. In their zeal to embrace the new god of fiction, many photographers have forfeited the viewer's partial but essential suspension of disbelief. The labored crudeness of such work is doubly, if unintentionally, instructive. First, it reminds us that Cindy Sherman's critique of movie clichés is effective only because she preserves their seductiveness. Second, and perhaps more profoundly, it invites us to appreciate again (some of us for the first time) the precision with which photographers who remain loyal to the documentary tradition have tuned *their* fictional realities. Sage Sohier (page 53) and Tina Barney (page 49), Joel Sternfeld (page 49) and Joan Albert (page 99) present their subjects not as desiccated specimens trapped in a case, but as characters brought to this point by the complex plot of experience.

AS THE EDIFICE OF PHOTOGRAPHIC TRUTH CRUMBLED a few observers solemnly applauded, as if a dangerous criminal had been brought to justice. Everyone else enjoyed a few good laughs, and then a few more. As the recognition that photography's hold on reality was highly unstable spawned a new family of pictures, it also inspired new ways of looking at old pictures. In 1973, by the simple trick of unmooring news photos from their captions, John Szarkowski demonstrated that the link between photographic fact and narrative interpretation is highly elastic. Szarkowski's *From the Picture Press* was soon followed by Mike Mandel's and Larry Sultan's *Evidence* (1977), and then still other related efforts, each in turn invading, dissecting, and lampooning a different classification of photography's vast archive.⁶

In the 1980s the most diligent and imaginative contributor to this genre has been Marvin Heiferman. Beginning with *Still Life* (a collection of movie-promotion photographs edited with Diane Keaton in 1983) and most recently in *I'm So Happy* (a fairytale of ascending prosperity edited with Carole Kismaric in 1990 from the files of advertising and stock-photo agencies) Heiferman has reveled in the overabundant, overdetermined dreamland of commercial photographic artifice' (ill. 10).

Shooting down the American Dream has become easier than shooting fish in a barrel, and a lot more common. But in its flagrant excess *I'm So Happy* touches a nerve. As we recoil from the shallow fictions of material success and domestic bliss, we are invited to recognize that they are our own: we are forever wanting things to get better and better, even expecting that they will.

What happens when they do? In the spirit of Professor Irwin Corey, *I'm So Happy* has conjured up the question to which the pictures collected here provide an answer.

IN *I'M SO HAPPY* THE SPIRAL OF RISING EXPECTATIONS originates in the 1950s. In choosing the postwar years as the ground-zero upon which our current predicament has been built, the book endorses a widespread consensus. Laurie Simmons (page 72) and others who take aim at domestic conventions often look back, as if to get at the root of the problem; but rarely do they look back further than the 1950s. The horizon of our domestic history is not distant.

When the subject is the home, the decade that gave us *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* (and the rest of the usual suspects) remains the decade we love to love and love to hate. The cookie-cutter blandness of suburbia was denounced as soon as it appeared, and the repressions and exclusions that lay beneath the ideal of family harmony have been pilloried relentlessly. For nearly a generation, in sitcoms such as *All in the Family*, or in the self-immolation of the Loud family, or in more

conventional documentaries, television itself has eagerly if not always candidly embraced the crumbling of the postwar domestic myth.

Photography also has played a substantial role in this process of demolition, nowhere more vividly than in the work of Diane Arbus. The power of Arbus's pictures lies not in her proof that society's outcasts exist but in the persuasiveness of her conviction—even awe—that they possess an authenticity of character that is impossible to achieve within the polite evasions of convention. Perhaps that is too pat, perhaps Arbus found outsiders mysterious and compelling partly because she found them horrifying. But when, rarely, she photographed her own world, the world in which she had grown up, she found it merely horrifying (ill. 11).

Directed at the suburban family, Arbus's gaze is withering. That was more than two decades ago, and we have not lowered our guard against the duplicities of white-bread normalcy. So readily does our collective knee jerk to kick away the pretensions of the 1950s, that it seems almost brave of Nicholas Nixon to admit that his nuclear family is a happy one (pages 43, 80–81).

Our preoccupation with the 1950s has special meaning to children of the Baby Boom, for whom the fortunes of postwar domestic mores are the stories of their lives. The point is particularly relevant to the work of Anne Turyn (page 46), Larry Sultan (pages 106–7), Neil Winokur (pages 110–11), and Lorie Novak (page 115), each of whom has reexamined, reinvented, or otherwise revisited the family past. The interplay of social and personal history is an essential element in this work, and it yields a complex tension



Pages from the book *I'm So Happy*, by Jeffery Leiferman and Carole Kismaric (1990)

between irony and nostalgia. That tension is present also in the suburban elegies of Ken Botto (page 85) and James Casebere (page 88), and in the way that the sylvan hideaway of Ellen Brooks evokes both the peril and the enchantment of a tale by the brothers Grimm (page 29).

ONE REASON THE BABY BOOMERS MAY BE INTERESTED in their childhoods is that they themselves have reached the age of parenthood. Many have children of their own, which doubtless is partly why children play an important role in the pictures collected here. But that role is reasonable in any case, not because children figure prominently in every home, but because the home figures so prominently in the life of every child.

Like Robert Coles, and perhaps partly thanks to him, the photographers here have paid attention to children. They have recognized in childhood the drama and complexity of adult life, without transforming it into a version of adult life. Essential to this achievement is a talent for adopting the viewpoint of the child—literally, as in Abelardo Morell's portrait of his son (page 76), or metaphorically, as in Melissa Ann Pinney's picture of a girl who savors the secret she has not yet shared, and perhaps will not share, with her affectionate mother (page 79). In Wolf Von dem Bussche's photograph a seven-week-old baby knows that his bath holds certain death (page 76).

Since Freud (at least) we have known that the garden of childhood innocence is also the scene of a crime. The work assembled in this book is impressive for its candor on this point, and for the subtlety with which it explores the depth of childhood feeling. There is an affinity here with the mute gravity of Robert Gober's household sculptures, especially his *X Playpen* (ill. 12). The playpen is at once reassuring: solid, handmade, familiar; and terrifying: the embodiment of unanswered wants and fears. I think also of Mike Kelley's sculptures made of stuffed animals, which often show signs of prior use and neglect (ill. 13). Like children themselves Kelley invests the toys with personalities and stories, not all of them sweet, excavating the heart-wrenching battlefield of childhood that later we bury under a thick blanket of sentimentality.

The project of emotional archaeology that Kelley and Gober share with many photographers is shared also by Mary Gaitskill in her recent novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*. The fat girl tells the story:

Whenever I think of the house I grew up in, in Painesville, Pennsylvania, I think of the entire structure enveloped by, oppressed by, and exuding a dark, dank purple. Even when I don't think of it, it lurks in miniature form, a malignant doll house, tumbling weightless through the horror movie of my subconscious, waiting to tumble into conscious thought and sit there exuding darkness.

Objectively it was a nice little house. It was a good size for three people;

11. DIANE

*A Family on Their Lawn One Su
Westchester, New Yo*



it had a slanting roof, cunning shutters, lovable old door knobs that came off in your hands, a breakfast nook, an ache of dingy carpets and faded wall-paper. It was our fifth house, the one we collapsed in after a series of frantic moves which were the result of my father's belief that wherever he lived was hell.⁴

Gaitskill makes good on the intimation of evil; the fat girl's father will have sex with her, and the thin one, too, will be abused. But that is only half of it. The inexorable logic of Gaitskill's story is that the wound of sexual abuse, deep as it is, is of a piece with the traumas the two girls suffer daily not only from adults but also—especially—from their peers.

FAMILIAR THOUGH IT NOW IS, the dark side of domestic life remains an essential theme. As he sought to re-create for painting its abandoned psycho-theater of domestic drama, Eric Fischl was drawn to the unmentionable; even his least provocative pictures are carnal, full of allusion to unresolved desires (ill. 14). In David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* (ill. 15) the perverse evil of the villain is the distilled embodiment of forces that lurk inarticulate in the young hero. Photographers rarely have attempted the voyeuristic shock of Fischl and Lynch perhaps because in the frozen immediacy of still photography, shock too easily displaces deeper emotions. In its original and most effective form—as a slide show with music—Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* weaves explicit documents of sex and violence into a complex fabric.⁵ As still frames on the wall or in a book,

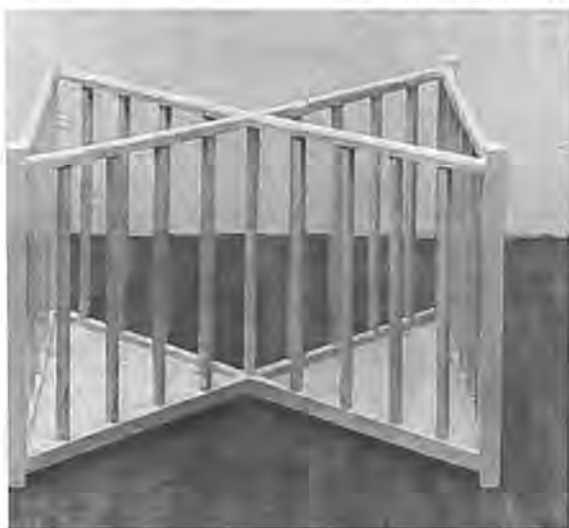
Goldin's pictures often are more compelling, more representative of the *Ballad* as a whole, when less explicit (page 86). For her essential subject is not sex *per se* but the psychological power of sexuality.

Taking stock of that power, Goldin tears the flowered patterns that paper over the turmoil of our domestic arrangements. But to read her work as social criticism is to read only its surface. Nor does Goldin present herself as a moralist; for her as for the poet Czeslaw Milosz, sexuality is neither good nor bad, it "neither redeems nor condemns us, it just is."¹⁰ The equanimity of this outlook is characteristic of other pictures here, too: of Judith Black's self-portrait with her husband (page 88); of Tom Bamberger's portrait of a mother and daughter

(page 99); of Sage Sohler's portrait of a mother, her son, and her son's lover (page 93). Together these pictures seem to say that true tenderness begins where sentimentality ends.

MARY GAITSKILL AND JANE SMILEY, ANNE TYLER AND MARY ROBISON (there are many others, and a few men, too): it is difficult to avoid invoking

ERT GOBER
n. 1987



these writers of stories and novels, not merely because they are preoccupied with domestic experience but because the paths by which they approach it have been traveled by photographers also.

Midway through Jane Smiley's novella *The Age of Grief* Dave Hurst, father of three, a dentist married to a dentist, reflects: "There is a lot of chit chat in the media about how things have changed since the 1950s and 1960s, but I think that is because nothing has really changed at all, except the details."¹¹ It is the author speaking, not so much to insist upon the point as to remind us of her interest in what does not change, to protect her story from the faddish concern of the newscaster. Smiley does not hide from us the social and economic status of her characters, or pretend that it has not molded them. But as she enters the home, a woman imagining herself into the heart of a man, she leaves the abstractions of sociology behind.

The novella spans six weeks, toward the end of which two crises merge to test, and delineate, the ties that bind. As Dave's wife, Dana, struggles to resolve an affair, a debilitating flu virus lays low each member of the family. At the story's close the affair and the illness have passed, but the ending is not a happy one in the conventional sense:

*Shall I say that I welcomed my wife back with great sadness, more sadness than I had felt at any other time? It seems to me that marriage is a small container, after all, barely large enough to hold some children. Two inner lives, two lifelong meditations of whatever complexity, burst out of it and out of it, cracking it, deforming it. Or maybe it is not a thing at all, nothing, something not present. I don't know, but I can't help thinking about it.*¹²

Unlike Updike's Rabbit Angstrom, whose passage through four decades assesses the state of a nation, Dave Hurst's passage through six weeks assesses the state of a marriage. But it is the narrowness of scope that yields the aching intimacy of perspective. For Smiley the depths of domestic experience can be charted only from within.

In this respect and in others Smiley's story is like a photographic story by Doug DuBois. In the spring of 1985 DuBois's father fell from a commuter train. His severe injuries would require a long and painful recovery, painful also for his wife and children. On the last day of December DuBois's mother suffered a nervous collapse, which kept her in the hospital for a month. Through the breaking and mending of his family DuBois photographed, eventually assembling a sequence of thirty-one photographs. Like a well-crafted short story the sequence cannot be compressed, and the excerpts presented here lamentably are changed by being lifted from the ebb and flow of the narrative (pages 64–65, 70, 96–97). But the pictures here do suggest the welcome frankness that accompanies the intimacy of the story. Remarkable is the completeness with which DuBois has shed both the temptations of melodrama and the impulse to judge.

13. MIKE
Fruit of Thy Lo



The first-person voice of prose fiction places the narrator at the center of the story, while photography generally requires that the photographer be absent from his or her pictures. Writing about his story, DuBois reminds us that this absence is only literal:

In my most intimate photographs there is a detachment that speaks of my isolation. I no longer see my family as an assured source of comfort but as part of the confusion of my adult life. In the conflict between intimacy and detachment, I feel the loss of my childhood family.¹³

OF COURSE THINGS HAVE CHANGED since the 1950s and 1960s. One recent statistic states that fifty-seven percent of all American high-school graduates in 1990 went on to attend college.¹⁴ Other statistics chart the decline of the traditional family—a husband who brings home the bacon, a wife who stays home with the kids—to perhaps as few as one in four of all American families.¹⁵ As our expectations continue to rise, the center continues not to hold.

We have known for some time now that the center isn't holding, and it no longer seems adequate merely to applaud or deplore the fact. Perhaps we have learned to be skeptical of sweeping generalizations, especially those that pass judgment on more than three-quarters of the population. Perhaps it is more fruitful to consider particular cases. That seems to be the strategy of Mary Robison, whose stories and novels stick very close to home. Here is how she begins one story:

Stars were something, since I'd found out which was which. I was smiling at Epsilon Lyrae through the front windshield of my date's Honda Civic—my date, a much older man who, I would've bet, had washed his curly hair with Herbal Essence. Behind us, in the little back seat, my date's friend was kissing my mom.¹⁶

Robison doesn't shrink from the disintegration of the family unit or from the omnipresence of consumer culture; she gives us both right off the bat. But she doesn't let these inevitable themes keep her characters from gazing at and even learning about the stars, and she doesn't laugh at them when they do, even when what they learn doesn't solve all their problems. Michael Almereyda, who directed a movie (*Twister*) based on a Robison novel (*Oh!*), put his

finger on her achievement when he said that she managed to be ironic and affectionate at the same time.

It is a compliment that many of the photographers here also deserve, along with the acknowledgment that they, like Robison, have looked carefully. Often in their pictures life is unresolved, under stress, a mess of one sort or another; people are at loose ends, or awkward, or sad; very often they are alone if not also lonely. But the photographer's affection is abiding.

FISCHL
droom (*Her Master's Voice*). 1983



In Susan Kandel's picture a father's embrace nearly crushes his son, while a younger child lies unattended at the other end of the couch; but the embrace without question is loving (page 56). Gregory Crewdson's view from the bedroom window is deliciously creepy, a pastel fake from edge to edge; but, for all that, it is beautiful (page 38). The man in JoAnn Verburg's picture, no longer young, no longer slim, is greeted with her warm recognition that he is just who he is (page 37). She does not ennoble him, she appreciates him.

Still wary of the tidy plot of *The Family of Man*, finding irony a frequent necessity, the photographers assembled here nevertheless are unwilling to submit wholly to its rule. Eventually even the ironist must lay down the sword, go home, and have dinner. At home the candidates for blame are far fewer in number, and include oneself.



15. Kyle MacLachlan and Isabella Rossellini in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*

*BOOKS SAY: SHE DID THIS BECAUSE. Life says: She did this. Books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't. I'm not surprised some people prefer books. Books make sense of life. The only problem is that the lives they make sense of are other people's lives, never your own.*¹⁷

So complains the frustrated narrator of Julian Barnes's novel *Flaubert's Parrot*. As if in answer to the complaint, Mary Robison, Raymond Carver, and others have withheld the explanation, giving us only, "She did this." The strategy has earned them the label "minimalist" and sometimes also the objection that their stories are oblique, even opaque. At their best, however, these writers have been rewarded by—have rewarded us with—their confidence that our experience is entirely adequate to fill the gaps they have so carefully left.

Photography is even more minimal, reducing "She did this" to "She is this." It relies all the more deeply on the narratives we are able to imagine. The pictures collected here are full of delight and dilemma for the eye and the mind, full of wit and feeling, full of experience. But it would defeat them to claim that they make sense of life. Photography isn't perfect, but then life isn't either.

NOTES TO THE TEXT

1. In a review of *Malgudi Days* by R. K. Narayan, reprinted in John Updike, *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 722.
2. Andy Grundberg, "An Interview with John Szarkowski," *Afterimage*, vol. 12, no. 3 (October 1984), p. 13.
3. *William Eggleston's Guide*, essay by John Szarkowski (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 10.
4. Quoted in Nancy Newhall, "Controversy and the Creative Concepts," *Aperture*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1953), p. 6.
5. Quoted in Richard Marshall, ed., *Joel Shapiro* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982), p. 97.
6. John Szarkowski, ed., *From the Picture Press* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973); Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, *Evidence* (Greenbrae, California: Clatworthy Colorvues, 1977).
7. Diane Keaton and Marvin Heiferman, eds., *Still Life* (New York: Callaway, 1983); Marvin Heiferman and Carole Kismaric, *I'm So Happy: A Picture-Perfect Adventure Story* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). In 1984, in a similar spirit, Heiferman organized at P.S. 1, in Long Island City, New York, an exhibition titled "The Family of Man: 1955, 1984," which he described as "a casual reconsideration" of Steichen's exhibition. The show consisted of "photographs culled from magazines, packaging, newspapers, publicity files, pornography, and photographs by artists and photographers." There were wall texts by Lauren Shakely and Heiferman; there was no catalog. See Christopher Phillips, "In a Family Way," *Afterimage*, vol. 11, no. 10 (May 1984), pp. 10-11.
8. Mary Gaitskill, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991), p. 41.
9. The *Ballad*, which continues to evolve, began to take shape in the early 1980s and became widely known after it was shown at the Whitney Biennial in 1985. It appeared in book form as Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, edited with Marvin Heiferman, Mark Holborn, and Suzanne Fletcher (New York: Aperture, 1986).
10. Czeslaw Milosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*, Catherine S. Leach, trans. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1968), p. 195.
11. Jane Smiley, *The Age of Grief* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), p. 111.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
13. From Doug DuBois, "Family Photographs," in David Featherstone, ed., *Close to Home* (Untitled, no. 48) (San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1989), p. 48.
14. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1990.
15. Current debate over domestic mores has spawned an excellent illustration of the notorious malleability of statistics. In a recent essay Micki McGee states that "the traditional Caucasian-American family—Dad at work and Mom at home with the two kids—[has dwindled] to a mere 4 percent of the total U.S. population." ("The Overextended Family," in Connie Butler and Micki McGee, eds., *Reframing the Family* [New York: Artists Space, 1991], p. 21.) The source of the statistic is not cited, nor is it stated what the figure would be if non-Caucasians and families with only one child were not excluded. Leaning just as hard in the opposite direction, the Family Research Council in Washington, D.C., is able to claim that well over half of American families remain "traditional." The one-in-four figure presented here is based on a variety of interrelated statistics from the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, of which the most significant (because it charts a trend over time) is the following: "among married couples with the wife between 18 and 44 years old, the proportion with husband only employed and wife and child(ren) at home dropped from 43 percent in 1976 to 28 percent in 1987." From *Changes in American Family Life*, Current Population Reports, Special Studies, Series P-23, No. 163 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1989), p. 18.
16. Mary Robison, "An Amateur's Guide to the Night," in *An Amateur's Guide to the Night: Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 15.
17. Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 168.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS TO THE TEXT

1. Bruce Davidson. *Untitled*. 1967–68. From *East 100th Street*. Gelatin-silver print, 8 3/4 x 12 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase.
2. Sid Avery. *Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Beverly Hills*. 1958. Gelatin-silver print, 18 3/4 x 14 1/4 in. Courtesy Staley-Wise, New York.
3. Harry Callahan. *Eleanor, Chicago*. 1949. Gelatin-silver print, 7 7/16 x 9 9/16 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase.
4. Edward Weston. *Cole and Dorothy Weston*. 1945. Gelatin-silver print, 7 7/16 x 9 9/16 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Clark Winter Fund.
5. Emmet Gowin. *Barry and Dwayne, Danville*. 1969. Gelatin-silver print, 5 1/4 x 6 7/16 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Anonymous Fund.
6. Bill Owens. *We Are Really Happy*. 1972. Gelatin-silver print, 8 x 10 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the photographer.
7. Bernhard and Anna Blume. One part from the five-part work *Kitchen Frenzy (Küchenkoller)*. 1986. Gelatin-silver print, 66 13/16 x 42 1/2 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Contemporary Arts Council.
8. Joel Shapiro. *Untitled*. 1973–74. Cast iron, 5 1/2 x 6 2/8 x 5 in. Collection Gustav Douglas, Stockholm. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.
9. Barbara Kruger. *Untitled*. 1987. Photographic silkscreen on vinyl, 109 x 210 in. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.
10. Two pages from the book *I'm So Happy*, by Marvin Heiferman and Carole Kismaric (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).
11. Diane Arbus. *A Family on Their Lawn One Sunday in Westchester, New York*. 1968. Gelatin-silver print, 14 3/4 x 14 3/4 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase.
12. Robert Gober. *X Playpen*. 1987. Wood and enamel paint, 27 x 37 x 37 in. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Ostrow, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.
13. Mike Kelley. *Fruit of Thy Loins*. 1990. Stuffed animals, 39 x 21 x 12 in. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.
14. Eric Fischl. *Master Bedroom (Her Master's Voice)*. 1983. Oil on canvas, 84 x 108 in. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The Barry Lowen Collection.
15. Kyle MacLachlan and Isabella Rossellini in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. 1986. Courtesy De Laurentis Entertainment Group.