

Photography and Transgression

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Transgression is, of course, about boundaries. The word comes from the Latin *trans*, across, plus *grad*, to step, and a dictionary definition identifies transgression as going beyond the limits prescribed by (a law, command, etc.). Limits, therefore, must be set before they can be transgressed, but then, setting limits is one of the major tasks of civilization and society hence they are never wanting. The word must be elastically defined - boundaries shift, laws change, commands vary under different Rulers. Violation is sometimes defined by circumstance: taking a photographic portrait, for example, of a strict Muslim woman who is always veiled when outside the house would be the kind of violation that most non-Muslims would consider an occasion for narcissistic pride.

A number of critics have said, or implied, that photography is transgressive by its very nature, which could be taken to mean that current photographic investigations of sex, perversity, violence, disfigurement, the ravages of age and death are one logical consequence of an invention of 1839. Sometimes critics use the medium as a whipping boy for a sense of unease with the modern world-mediated, distanced, mechanical, specular, spectacular, constantly under surveillance.

Susan Sontag, in *On Photography* (1977), is quite blunt: "There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera." "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they can never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have." Print seems a less treacherous form of leaching out the world, of turning it into a mental object, than photographic images. "The camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed."

Whether the medium is inherently transgressive or not, it is clearly capable of being so. In several recent instances still and television photographers in Asia Minor and Africa have suspected that executions were carried out because they were there, if true, that makes the camera-or the media it works for-an accessory to crime. More commonly, photographs breach, or are thought to breach, accepted conventions and shared sensibilities. John Thompson was stoned and attacked in China in the 1870's because people thought he was casting spells. Early in this century Arnold Genthe photographed San Francisco's Chinatown with a concealed camera because the Chinese objected to being photographed. He thought they had the foolish idea that he was stealing their souls, but in fact some were there illegally and he could have unknowingly caused them to be deported. F. Holland Day's photographs of himself reenacting Christ's crucifixion at the end of the last century offended many on religious grounds.

Invasion of privacy became a public issue around the same time with the introduction of the small hand camera capable of taking pictures without the subject's knowledge, publication of such pictures without the subject's consent was the spur for the first right to privacy laws in New York state. In the 1970's, Jackie Kennedy Onassis won a law suit against the "paparazzo" photographer Ron Galella for intrusion of privacy at the level of hiding in bushes and jumping out into her path only a few feet away.

In a curious indication of where the lines of decency are drawn, the British press published every kind of photograph of Princess Diana while she was alive, including photographs taken in her gym with a concealed camera, but refused to publish photographs of her mortally wounded in an automobile accident. Evidently this was not merely a question of transgressing on the privacy of pain and death, if such privacy exists, but a sense that the public would be repulsed by both the sensationalistic horror of the images and the press's exploitation of a truly helpless celebrity.

Then there is breach of trust: portrait subjects traditionally tended to believe that a kind of compact existed between themselves and photographers taking their portraits, but photographers have the advantage over their subjects, and some take it. Diane Arbus did so regularly, Irving Penn sometimes, Richard Avedon often (and quite consciously).

The issues we care most about, of course, are life and death. Yeats said that only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind - sex and death. Sex and violence, especially in photographic and photographically derived images, have become nexes of public outrage, anxiety and legal maneuvering. From the outset, photography dealt with these matters so expertly that one might assume it was as perfectly suited to them as to any of the uses predicted for it in 1839 when the daguerreotype was introduced to the French parliament.

That year, Hippolyte Bayard photographed his own mock-death, and by about 1840, American photographers were advertising their services as portraitists of the dead. Post-mortem images, however, were reverent rather than transgressive at a time when death was more readily acknowledged as a fact of life, though some objected to extensive photography of Abraham Lincoln lying in state, complaining that it would "desecrate the dead" - perhaps a forerunner of the response to photographs of Princess Diana's accident. Ideas about death have changed, and America has lived a long history of trying to deny that life could ever end. Once AIDS made denial impossible, photographers like Sue Fox, Diana Michener, and Andres Serrano took frank and close-up images of the dead and dissected that trespassed on once-restricted areas. (Nineteenth-century medical photographs, such as the archive of American Civil War wounded, were not originally offensive because they were never intended for the public. They acquired a measure of shock value only when published out of context, context being a major determinant of the meaning and emotional effect of a photograph.)

Violence in photographs evidently began as news and therefore has had a highly public and uninterrupted career. No doubt violent imagery secured a private niche among S&M devotees as well, before it found any kind of welcome in artistic circles, but art photographers considered violence the exclusive property of photojournalists for a very long while. The degree of what was publicly acceptable in the news oscillated, and continues to oscillate, along a path of gradual increase. Roger Fenton's pictures of the Crimean War, essentially propaganda, showed almost nothing untoward. Less than a decade later, when Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan photographed bloated corpses during the Civil War (the first time most civilians had seen war dead), the pictures were exhibited in New York and sold nationally.

In the Spanish-American War of 1898, a picture of two heroic American dead covered with blankets was one of the most widely reproduced pictures of the war, but a picture of the same two bodies with officers and correspondents nonchalantly conferring just a few feet away was never published. Death for a cause was not transgressive but praiseworthy, so long as evidence of pain and damage was hidden. Wartime disregard for the dead was not acceptable.

Photographs of violence got a firmer foothold in the mass media as tabloids came to the forefront, and in 1928, when Ruth Snyder was executed for murder in the electric chair and no photographs were permitted, a picture snapped from a camera hidden on a reporter's ankle was published on the front page of the New York Daily News. This was death all right, and violent, and an illicit image to boot. What's more, the "victim" was a woman. Several boundaries had been crossed. It is never so easy to go back, but art, other than political propaganda like John Heartfield's, did not yet feel free to play with such subject matter. Even today, newspaper realities and film fictions outdo anything an art photographer can come up with in the line of physical damage to the body.

Sex and violence took opposite paths to a wide audience: sex via art, violence via the mass media. Sex struck up an alliance with photography in the very beginning, before the media felt free to welcome it. Artists and entrepreneurs had no hesitation. Nineteenth-century literature and satire frequently connect photography to sex and portray photographers as seducers. Daguerreotypists were taking pictures of female nudes by 1840 and styling them Academies, studies for artists. For the rest of the century the commerce in pornographic pictures was probably exceeded only by portraiture. (In an 1874 raid on a single London studio, 130,248 obscene photographs and 5,000 negative slides were destroyed.) Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes that all the contemporary conventions of erotic photography were already fully established by the mid-nineteenth century “as if these ritual displays are invented for the camera, in relation to its technical abilities and technical deficiencies.”

Male nudes doubtless lagged behind female in number as well as distribution. Even in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, few of George Platt Lynes's homoerotic images were published but they were produced in quantity nonetheless. Wilhelm von Gloeden, the most famous of several photographers of homosexual subjects late in the nineteenth century when the culture of homosexuality was firmly established, slipped past the censors under a veil of classicism. Imogen Cunningham was not so clever in the second decade of this century, her photographs of her naked husband as himself caused a scandal. For whatever predilection, each new technical advance in photography, from stereoscopy to the *carte de visite* to the slyly named S-X 70 Polaroid camera (ideal for home consumption), was swiftly adapted to the pursuit of sexual pleasure.

Photographic images of the naked body troubled some nineteenth-century viewers in a way that paintings never did. (Sometimes they do so still. Had Robert Mapplethorpe or Jock Sturges been painters, their work would have been much less likely to have provoked attacks in the judicial system.) Shortly after the middle of the last century in France, the propriety of nude photographs in general was a matter of some debate, and the Société Française de Photographie refused to exhibit them. The mere fact of nakedness in a photograph was (is, under some circumstances) transgressive, although once film and fashion began to bare all, the onus began shifting toward images of naked children, childhood being the only state that liberals and conservatives can agree is threatened by sexual freedom, pornography, violent imagery, and the internet.

In the 1950s, when Playboy was founded, the territory of acceptable, non-pornographic nudity began to widen in America. Fame defined the new boundary and was soon transgressed. Once Marilyn Monroe had attained stardom, a man threatened to blackmail her by revealing that she had posed nude for a calendar. Monroe herself changed the rules. She confessed before he could break the news, saying she had been so broke back then she had accepted fifty dollars to pose. The public, which might have been expected to break off its love affair with Monroe, sympathized instead: poor girl, having to put herself on view like that for a mere fifty bucks.

Nudity soon lost its anonymity. A naked Janet Leigh, actually a stand-in, was stabbed repeatedly in Psycho, Vanessa Redgrave took off her blouse in Blow-Up, Rudi Gernreich invited anonymous women to do the same in topless bathing suits. (Most of them didn't.) In 1961, Avedon photographed Countessa Christina Paolozzi nude for Vogue, with a caption giving her name - a countess no less. Fashion photography has often tweaked limits before most other mass media did so (and sometimes before art photography that putative center of rebellion and daring): Avedon's threesomes on the beach, Guy Bourdin's accidental death in a shoe advertisement, Helmut Newton's lesbian couple dancing.

One of the major fall-outs of the change in cultural temperature in the 1960s was the looser of limits on visual imagery. Fashion photography quickly consolidated these changes and made them chic. In America in the early 1970s, Bourdin, Newton, and Chris von Wangenheim, principally Vogue, lent sex and violence the cachet of beautiful models in expensive clothes and settings, in magazines whose readership included large numbers of upper-middle-class suburban women. And in respectable newspapers all over the world, not just tabloids, a Vietcong suspect was seen at the moment his brains were being blown out by the chief of the South Vietnamese national police. The bad guys in films like Bullitt and Bonnie and Clyde were slammed backwards by gun shots with movie blood gushing from a newly devised plastic bag.

Art broke through other kinds of prohibitions during that decade, and photographers like Robert Heineken played with both pornography and violence, notably in his guerilla tactic of secretly including pictures of a Vietnamese soldier holding up two severed heads on an advertisement in Vogue.

In the modern world, transgressive subject matter had already been rewritten as art for a long while, beginning at least as early as Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* and *Olympia*, the difference now being that such material probably has a weaker impact, a less enduring echo, less chance of causing a scandal, because it is so common. But the bourgeoisie in the 1960s outsmarted the artistic community by accepting anything, everything. It's devilish hard to shock anyone these days.

If Diana Thorneycroft's photographs have an aura of transgression, the question is, what borders has she crossed? At some level she confronts all the major prohibitions: violence, sex, privacy, areas that may no longer be altogether prohibited but are still strewn with unexploded mines. The semi-medical settings redolent of torture in a number of her images, especially resonant in light of contemporary distrust of extreme measures of maintaining life at its end, plus Thorneycroft's all-too-richly inventive methods of restraint, play on common fears, as no doubt they are meant to. The self as victim is particularly easy to identify with.

The combination of nakedness, bondage, and torture is by no means new, but its home has been principally in science fiction, horror stories, and pornography where impossibly beautiful young women are constantly being tied up or chained and threatened with unspeakable acts, not infrequently of the Dr. Frankenstein variety, by men or aliens or demons. The covers of an endless number of paperback novels and comic books repeat this theme with women scantily clad or wearing such clinging fabrics they might as well be naked. (Such images are seldom photographic, aliens and creatures from hell being notoriously unwilling to sit for their portraits.)

When a theme is so popular in adolescent or low-brow entertainment it clearly speaks to a deep rooted fantasy. One of the major shifts in permissiveness and subject matter in this century - even, to a degree, in the last - has been the absorption of low-class and marginal themes into the mainstream, in both art and entertainment.

In the 1930s, William Mortensen did try to put an art spin on the subject of women threatened with violence, sometimes by adding mythic or metaphorical titles, and Pierre Molinier took more playful but more overtly perverse pictures. The new photographic history then being formulated, and social conventions of the time, were not yet ready to admit such subjects. Today S&M and fetish photographs are edging into the mainstream, occasionally even in advertisements, so that the subject is no longer altogether foreign, and photographers with other aims may skirt the territory more openly.

Sometimes Thorneycroft engages violence and sexuality through the distancing mechanism of dolls. It is surely safer to transgress against dolls than people, and photographers have featured them as torture victims, children, and surrogates at least since the days when surrealists were fascinated with the almost-human nature of mannequins. Hans Bellmer is the obvious example, with his mutilated, bound, humiliated dolls, it is hard to avoid the assumption that he feared, disliked, hated (choose one or more) women.

More recently, M. Richard Kirstel photographed dismembered dolls and dolls with large heads and blank faces, or, in an image rather similar to one of Thorneycroft's, a nude woman surrounded by dolls and apparently giving birth to one. Then there are Sandy Skoglund's baby dolls raining down, the plastic figurines of Ellen Brooks and Laurie Simmons and Simmons's ventriloquists' dummies, Jane Greer's photographs of injured dolls in a doll hospital, and in the non-photographic world, Beth B's actual dolls being subjected to uncommon sadistic practices.

As to sex, Thorneycroft repeatedly tries on cross-gender roles, wearing a realistic-looking penis, hiding her breasts, holding a gun or a toy airplane. Sometimes she also wears the mask of a male relative, furthering the illusion even though the mask remains unmistakably a mask - as if to say that all kinds of identity, even sexual ones, are merely play-acting. The protean nature of identity and the potential for gender slippage are common concerns of contemporary art and photography: think of Chris Makos's photograph of Andy Warhol in a long blond wig, Arthur Tress's picture of a man who is half groom, half bride, Robert Mapplethorpe's double self-portrait as a biker and as an extremely effeminate man wearing make-up, Yasumasa Morimura as Marilyn Monroe or Olympia (not to mention *Some Like It Hot*, *Tootsie*, *Victor/Victoria*, or the Dolce 813 Gabbana runway show in the 1990s with all the models made up to look like men).

Men pretending to be women far outnumber women striving to be men, in life as in art. Women like Claude Cahun in the 1930s and Cindy Sherman in her historical portraits have contributed to the genre. Helmut Newton put the theme into fashion magazines in the 1970s, but the most extravagant example was an advertisement Lynda Benglis took in *Artforum* at that time, in which she cavorted in the nude sporting an enormous dildo. Since that decade women have been deeply involved in exploring issues of the body sexuality, and identity through photographs.

Benglis and Sherman perform with a certain raffish bravado, Thorneycroft burrows farther into the territory of dreams and fantasy. Hard as it is to photograph dreams, photographers have been trying to do so since the mid-nineteenth century, decades before Freud, when O.J. Rejlander took a picture of a young man asleep with his hand between his legs and a vision of a hoop skirt with tiny women climbing over it by his bed. Making oneself the foundation upon which the fantasy is played out, as Thorneycroft does, is a more recent notion, one that was given great impetus by happenings and performance art in the 1960s.

Now photographers play out their fantasies all the time, most commonly with a modicum of disguise, which sometimes means nothing more than having a model enact them. Not Thorneycroft, she seems naked in more ways than one. In her own way she is as exhibitionistic as Mapplethorpe or Lucas Samaras or the performance artists Carolee Schneemann and Paul McCarthy.

Baring the soul is the frontier that followed baring the body. It has virtually become a fad - talk shows, confessions, spilling your guts, tell-all memoirs, revealing secrets in a chat room - but the breaching of one's own privacy and others' is still troubling. In literature it provokes controversy: Lillian Ross's account of her affair with William Shawn at *The New Yorker*, Joyce Maynard's publication of hers with J.D. Salinger, Paul Theroux's dissection of his one-time hero and friend, V.S. Naipaul, have all

raised ethical if not moral questions. Sally Mann's pictures of her children, Joel-Peter Witkin's of people with disabilities have occasioned similar criticism. The willingness to plumb such matters, especially to probe one's own fears and fantasies, is nonetheless fascinating, even if the fascination is sometimes tinged with guilt.

Thorneycroft is her own subject, but when she assumes the masks and fantasized personae of her father, sister, and brother, the issue of privacy hangs in the air. Perhaps the family is comfortable with being publicly implicated in her gender and oedipal quandaries, perhaps not, photographers (and writers) who use relatives and lovers as their material operate in a murky ethical area. Exploitation and privacy issues in photography today are particularly vexed - and unresolved in the wake of criticism of documentary practices.

When Les Krims took satirical pictures of his naked mother plastered with family photographs or in the tub with a burning toy boat, it was clear that she had fully cooperated. Larry Sultan's parents also cooperated for more serious pictures, his father was vocally unhappy with the results. William Wegman made a brief succession of photographs that turned him into his mother and father - no cooperation there, just subverted genetics, amusing and not entirely amusing at the same time. Janine Antoni made her mother and father up to look like one another, then photographed the results, obviously with their cooperation.

As to accepted conventions of display, prohibitions have become almost too pliable to break, but feelings (fortunately) are more durable and have greater tensile strength, and Thorneycroft's images retain a power to disturb in a time that has made that difficult. The conflation of medicine and torture, the repeated insistence on bondage, but I think most of all, the breach of Thorneycroft's own privacy give these pictures their dark aura. They invite us to enter places once prohibited, including the photographer's psyche.

The technical virtuosity of these photographs, and their uncommon lighting effects, make the invitation beguiling, leaving behind a certain ambivalence about admiring things that perhaps are not so admirable. (This is rather like enjoying one's own guilty fantasies.) These are seductive images, and they seduce the viewer into an experience that is likely to be uncomfortable. They softly rupture some ill-defined limit of viewing, of privacy and restricted zones of fantasy, both the photographer's privacy and fantasy and the viewer's.

Violating viewers' expectations of respect for privacy (their own and others), insisting that onlookers confront their own fantasies while they confront the photographers, trespassing on the spectators' comfort zone - I believe that's still called transgression, even today, when the meaning of the word has slipped its traces.