

# Shooting the Family

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I IMAGINE THAT ANYONE reading this has, at one time or another, shot their family. Shooting photographs and home videos of our relatives and partners is one of our most pervasive and enduring social customs—one that, with the advent of digital photography and the e-mailing of pictures, has become ever more entangled in the fabric of our daily life. Like the rest of us, no doubt, most of the artists whose works have been selected for this exhibition have also taken part in these familiar rituals. But the photographs and videos presented in *Shoot the Family* bear little resemblance to the genres of the family snapshot or portrait, which are primarily concerned with preserving the likeness of loved ones. Instead, they demonstrate a wide range of motives and interests involved while exploring the split seams between our public and private lives. In these works, in other words, the familial image is not an end in itself so much as a conceptual starting point.

As this exhibition's title suggests, much of the art presented here reflects on the consequences and complexities of working with such a loaded subject. Though once an emblem of domestic order and tradition, the family has in recent decades assumed an increasingly unsettled status. Collective convictions about its internal makeup, social role, and durability have become uncertain, defined in radically diverse ways by different groups of people. To some extent, many of the works in this show are predicated on, or extrapolate from, a sense of this unstable significance—of the contemporary family's cultural position as a moving target too elusive to define in any single frame.

Yet the meaning of these works hinges on our awareness of the specific connection between artist and subject. Whether directly or indirectly, they comment on the charged relationship between the person taking the picture and those portrayed, while undermining, or at least significantly complicating, the voyeuristic allure with which photographs so often appeal to us. In fashioning images of their own relatives and partners, most of the artists confront ambivalent or double-edged attitudes that color their familial relationships. Some, in taking on this intimate enterprise, examine its potentially invasive aspects, while others address the contract of trust such work involves. Still others draw attention to the ambiguous effects of their position as "participant-observers" (to borrow an anthropological term). And more than a few of these artists highlight the risk that by making—and making public—pictures of their family members, they almost inevitably reveal intimate aspects of their own private lives.

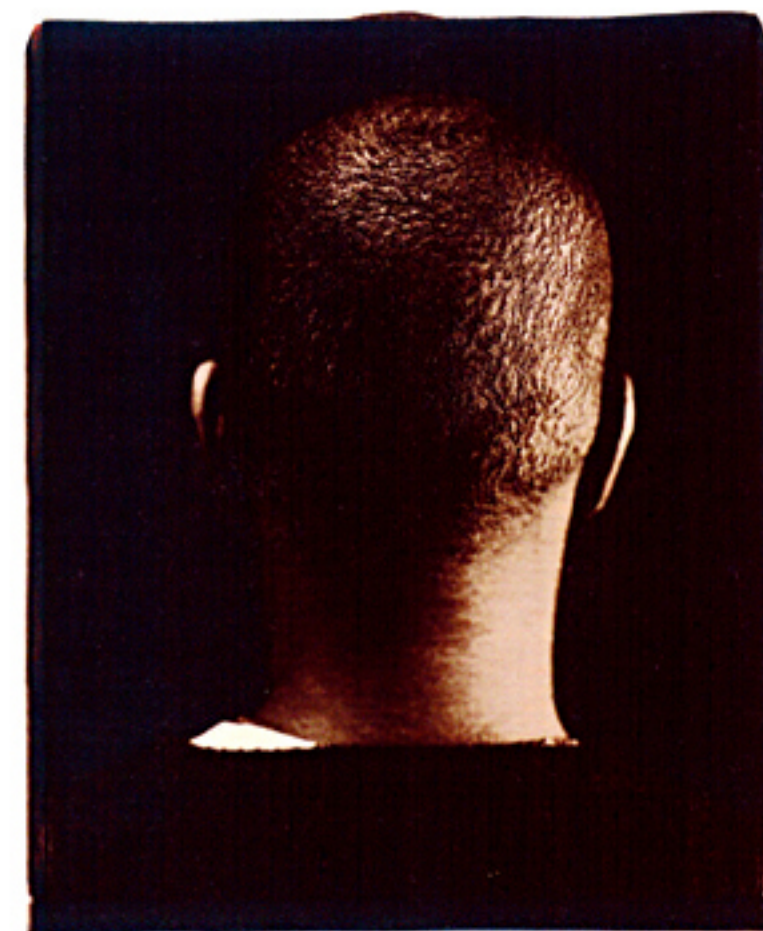
At the same time, the works in this exhibition insist that family matters are never simply personal. Indeed, most make reference to events and developments in the world at large, including economic and political realities that affect family life in myriad ways, and with regard to which the family often appears not as a refuge or safe harbor but as something extremely vulnerable, and even fragile. These works explore the porousness of families, how their character is shaped and altered, endangered and enriched, by powerful collective forces. They consider the family not just in biographical terms, but as an entity in which the personal and the social are deeply entangled.

Many of the works in this exhibition also shoot holes in our conventional assumptions about family portraiture. Given the sense of personal closeness that imbues so many of them, it is perhaps surprising that these photographs and videos are equally engaged with the rhetoric of image-making. But in drawing on approaches influenced by the legacy of Conceptual art, they challenge and expand our notions of how familial pictures communicate and what they can tell us—including what they reveal about the process of making, and reading, images. At the same time, many of these works comprise an extended form of social portraiture that seeks to make visible the blurred boundaries and intersecting relationships among individual, family, and society. Along the way, they hint at an exploded field of identity where our sense of self is always profoundly and inextricably entangled in our connections with the world around us.

DESPITE THE UNIVERSALITY of the subject of this show, the focus on relatives and domestic partners in contemporary art did not become widely established until the 1980s. In photography, this development was first significantly surveyed in 1991, in the exhibition *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* at the Museum of Modern Art, which included pictures by Tina Barney, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, and Larry Sultan, among many others. Inflected with a carefully calibrated ambiguity, most of these works conveyed a “postmodern” ambivalence toward family life that distinguished them from conventional domestic imagery. In contrast, the exhibition’s curator, Peter Galassi, noted that previous generations of photographers and artists, when making pictures of family members, had either created portraits so aesthetically refined as to be “drained of domesticity,” or had made images that were “essentially snapshots, quarantined from the demands and opportunities of the photographer’s art.”<sup>1</sup>

Though overlooking substantial contributions to this area made in the 1970s by artists as diverse as photographer Robert Frank and Conceptual artist Adrian Piper,<sup>2</sup> Galassi’s comments call attention to a curiously widespread lack of interest among earlier contemporary artists in making art using images of their own families. Even as traditional family structures were being challenged and remodeled throughout Western societies during the 1960s and ’70s, contemporary artists produced few memorable works that intimately explored this subject. This may be partly attributable to the more abstract concerns driving many artists during those years, as well as to their suspicion of emotionally charged, biographical content in art. Such potentially manipulative subject matter could only undermine (or so it then seemed) the ideal of ideological transparency that informed much of the innovative art from that period.

Yet the groundwork for developments to come was already being laid in the 1970s by artists whose practices incorporated socially oriented modes of self-investigation. Piper, Vito Acconci, Mary Kelly, and Joan Jonas, among others, made works that questioned how cultural conventions form and frame our subjectivity and self-image. By the 1980s, a growing number of artists, working in a broad range of mediums, were critically exploring the familial arena, many of them drawing on approaches that emphasized the ways in which notions of



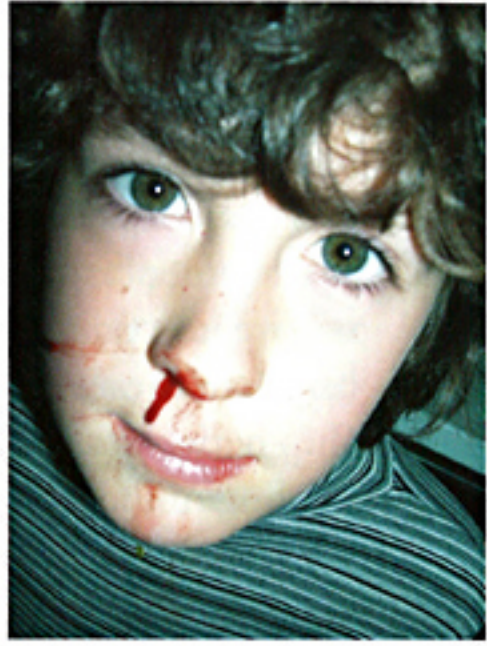
Lyle Ashton Harris  
*Untitled (Back #56 Thomas)*,  
1998  
Polaroid print

FOLLOWING SPREAD  
Ari Marcopoulos  
Digital montage of inkjet  
prints, 2000–2004  
See pages 62–63 for  
individual titles

<sup>1</sup> Peter Galassi, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Frank used his relationships with both his son and daughter as primary subjects in his work, depicting them in photographs and also in seminal videos such as *Conversations in Vermont*, 1969, and

*Home Improvements*, 1983–85; Piper first employed images of her relatives in her painting *Multibruine Mom and Dad*, 1966, which was based on a family photograph.



identity are informed by stereotypes relating to gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. A decade later, meanwhile, in the wake of *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, several family-focused photography exhibitions sought to further explore both the inner dynamics of familial relations and the unexamined ideological underpinnings of traditional family portraits.<sup>3</sup>

BUILDING ON THESE EARLIER HISTORIES, the works in *Shoot the Family* probe an expanded social landscape. In doing so, they draw on elements of documentary and diaristic photography as well as narrative and performative practices. No matter what their aesthetic or conceptual approach, however, these artists inevitably direct our attention to the unseen relationship between the person taking the picture and those portrayed, and our reading of their images is filtered through our knowledge of that familial connection. When someone gazes back at the camera in one of these images, we have to take into account that they are exchanging a look with a specific partner or relative that may tell us about their respective roles and reveal crucial information about their relationship. In place of the photograph's patina of objective observation, then, these works reveal various ways in which they are implicated within, and structured by, a web of interpersonal relationships and desires. As Sultan has suggested, photography tends to make this state of affairs more evident than other visual art forms, as its production is more likely to influence, and in turn be influenced by, social relationships. (In the text to his landmark 1992 book *Pictures from Home*, Sultan relates how his project of photographing his parents involved constant back-and-forth discussions about the direction and nature of the work he was making.)<sup>4</sup>

Thus, these pictures function as intersubjective documents and, on occasion, as the medium through which familial bonds are negotiated and made visible. This is especially evident in several of Ari Marcopoulos's photographs of his wife and two sons, which, as though an antidote to the happy moments commemorated in most family albums, chronicle traumas of injury and illness. *Nosebleed*, 2003 (COVER), presents a tight close-up of a young boy's face, his upper lip and cheek bearing traces of blood. With wide-eyed and unquestioning trust, he peers straight up into the camera, as

if finding comfort in its invasive hovering. Most parents, I imagine, would find the idea of shooting pictures of their wounded or sick children to be "inappropriate"; and in doing just that, Marcopoulos would seem to trade in a "good father" role for something darker and more ambiguous. Yet, more than anything else, *Nosebleed* (along with other photos in this series) conveys a strong feeling of familial connection. An equally intense intimacy runs through the visual exchanges captured in Marcopoulos's portraits of his wife. In the work *Hospital Diptych*, 2002 (PAGE 13), she appears in a hospital bed with an I.V. attached to one arm, raising her gown to reveal a bandage on her lower belly. Although she seems utterly drained, her quietly stoic gaze—aimed directly at the camera—conveys an implicit acknowledgment and acceptance of the person looking at her, including his need to make pictures such as this one.

In contrast, Richard Billingham's video projection *Ray in Bed*, 2000 (PAGES 16–17), which portrays his elderly father, conjures a chilling sense of disconnection. Billingham appears to have unlimited physical access to his subject: the camera scrutinizes him in his bedroom as he wakes up and, in detailed close-ups, scans his wrinkled visage and clouded eyes and records his unsteady breathing. All the while, Ray remains remarkably oblivious to the fact that he is being filmed; indeed, he never seems to recognize the presence of either the camera or his son behind it. This apparent unresponsiveness speaks volumes about the relationship between father and son, and it transforms a portrait whose subtext might otherwise have been an old man's mortality into a harrowing reflection on the difference between physical proximity and emotional intimacy.

In bringing attention to the unseen context surrounding their production, works such as these depart from conventional portraiture, which typically solicits our identification with a "neutral" point of view that gives us unfettered access to the picture's meaning. In the process, they subvert the voyeuristic mechanisms of photography and engage us in a three-way transaction where meaning is suspended among the perspectives of subject, artist, and viewer.

These concerns converge in interlocking layers in British artist Darren Almond's three-screen DVD projection *Traction*, 1999 (PAGES 18–19). The screen at the right shows Almond's father, ensconced in his local pub, as he engages in a real-time dialogue with his son (behind the camera) about an extraordinary series of physical accidents, sustained mainly through his work as a laborer, that have befallen him over the course of his life. The screen at the left shows the artist's mother in her kitchen as she listens

<sup>3</sup> Two of the more influential of these exhibitions were *Who's Looking at the Family?* at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, 1994, curated by Val Williams, Carol Brown, and Brigitte Lardinois;

and *The Familial Gaze* at the Hood Museum, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, 1996, curated by Marianne Hirsch.

<sup>4</sup> See Larry Sultan, *Pictures from Home* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992).



Richard Billingham  
*Ray in Bed*, 2000 (video stills)  
Single-channel video with sound