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# Minor Threat

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*They say that we Photographers are a blind race at best; that we learn to look at even the prettiest faces as so much light and shade; that we seldom admire, and never love. This is a delusion I long to break through—if I could only find a young lady to photograph, realizing my ideal of beauty... I feel sure that I could shake off this cold, philosophic lethargy.* —from “A Photographer’s Day Out” by Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), 1860

## THOUGHT POLICE

How does a photographer begin to discuss his or her approach to minors as a photographic subject? How does anyone enter a discussion about minors and photography when the words alone have been wired to jolt us into considering—if not concluding outright—that there is a problem in the very interests and intentions of an artist pursuing this subject matter? This essay will look at some of the more controversial examples of such photography and examine the issues that they provoke.

The exact manner in which an individual broaches such a discussion greatly effects how the idea is received. The subject is a cognitive minefield, with every dimension playing a critical role: the writer’s gender, sexual orientation, and age all contribute to how a discussion of photographing minors is perceived in relation to the current moral, ethical, and cultural ethos. Any writer might be well advised to avoid a polemical approach toward the subject and to instead remain in a conceptual gray zone, toggling forever between the leftist emphasis on retaining certain liberties and conservative concerns about the possible exploitation of these same freedoms. However, the stakes are raised even further by the inherent volatility of this type of photography and its unique reception. The viewer, confronted with an image of youth, must ask a series of questions: under what circumstances has this image been produced, why has it been produced, and how does it make me feel? As a result, youth as a photographic subject has the power to invert consumer culture’s hierarchal order between the static and the dynamic image. By engaging and challenging the viewer’s moral and aesthetic positions, such images return primacy to active looking over passive watching. Therefore, to

consider the complexities of photographing a minor is to consider photography’s inherent power as well as the forces external to photography, which can work to use this power for cultural and political manipulation.

When formulating my starting point for this essay, I chose to focus on commercial photographer Gary Gross’s 1975 nudes of ten-year-old child-star Brooke Shields, and the subsequent re-photographing of this work by the artist Richard Prince. Before I could move forward, however, I found myself presented with three separate introductions, each of which seemed to point an accusatory finger in a particular direction. These opening sentences read as follows:

- 1) When Gary Gross photographed the ten-year-old Brooke Shields nude in 1975, his images set in motion a complex and layered series of events related to the photographing of minors and the right to display such images publicly.
- 2) When Teri Shields signed a consent form to have her ten-year-old daughter, Brooke Shields, photographed nude by commercial photographer Gary Gross in 1975, her action set in motion a complex and layered series of events regarding a parent or guardian’s right to give consent for the photographing of a minor, as well as the limitations of these photographs’ distribution and reproduction.
- 3) In 1976, when Playboy Press published *Sugar and Spice*, an art photography book featuring the work of fourteen photographers, including Gary Gross’s nude photographs of ten-year-old Brooke Shields, it set in motion a complex and layered series of debates regarding a publisher’s right to reproduce and distribute such images.

Recognizing the problems inherent in any attempt to recontextualize language that reads as unquestionably criminal, I was hard pressed to form an objective starting point for such a complicated chronology. The very act of writing “nude photographs of ten-year-old Brooke Shields” in our current moral-political climate resulted in an auto-Orwellian invocation of the thought police—which made perfectly clear just how far we are from the historical moment when America could accept the existence of a now all-but-unimaginable series of photographs. It seemed most logical, then, to begin with Brooke Shields’s career as a backdrop for this history.

## SHIELDED

The evolution of Brooke Shields's career from mid-seventies child star to mid-eighties teen supermodel ratified the notions of public maturation and sexual commodification of youth in America. The milestones of this career were either the result of carefully orchestrated efforts by her mother, Teri Shields, to sell off and buy back her daughter's sexual commodity to the American public, or else they were the unplanned result of an "innocent" image of youth and beauty being repeatedly misread by the masses until it was fully realized, in the 1980s, through the selling of Brooke Shields as virgin spokes-teenager for the Calvin Klein Company. However these steps came about, they mark a major shift in the popular understanding of the pre-teen and teen photographic subject, as well as of how we confront such images through the medium of photography.

Critical to Shields's early success was an initially lesser-known series of nude portraits taken by commercial photographer Gary Gross in 1975. Gross defined his goal in the series as that of "find[ing] the woman within the child." He placed the naked Shields in a steamy bathroom, her body glossed with oil and posed erotically toward the camera. Her face is made up to look like that of an adult, so that the body of the child is eerily complicated by the face of a woman and the prepubescent form is charged with a fully mature gaze.

Gross's series resides along a timeline of accepted and contested photographs of minors, spanning from Lewis Carroll's staged 1858 portrait of Alice Liddell as "The Beggar Maid," to Annie Leibovitz's recently debated portraits of celebrated teen actress Miley Cyrus. This 150-year-long history of minors photographed nude, partially nude, or in erotic stances ranges from the clinical to the pornographic in style, and includes the disparate fields of photojournalism, art, and commercial and industrial photography. A few key examples of these variations would be Bruce Davidson's 1959 exploration of urban youth in *Brooklyn Gangs*; Nick Ut's shattering 1972 image of Vietnamese children fleeing a napalmed village; Robert Mapplethorpe's 1976 portrait of a nude five-year-old boy (*Jesse McBride*); *Super Teen* magazine's 1980 images of a shirtless, 16-year-old Matt Dillon (published to promote the teen sex comedy *Little Darlings*); Rineke Dijkstra's portraits of Polish and Ukrainian beach-going youths (1992–94), and Collier Schorr's photographic response to Andrew Wyeth's *Helga* paintings in her 2001 *Jens F.* series.

Gary Gross's photographs of Brooke Shields reside at the symbolic center of this timeline due to their dual role as soft-core pornography trafficked within popular culture, and as the origin for Richard Prince's 1983 *Spiritual America*, in which the artist re-photographed a single image from the original 1975 series. It is crucial to consider simultaneously the roles of both the original Gross series and the Prince appropriation, as the two taken together create a critical conflation of how both popular and art images function in society, splicing together what had previously been perceived as high and low image types with profound implications for the reception of both. Prince's re-photographing of Gross's popular icon pierced the division between mass culture's commodification of youth, and art culture's investigation of youth. *Spiritual America* stakes claims on all representations of youth, no matter their cultural location, thus opening the doors between the gaze of art and the gaze of the masses. As such, *Spiritual America* is photography's *Brillo Box*, merging Alice Liddell, Sue Lyon, Brooke Shields, Tatum O'Neal, Matt Dillon, Jesse McBride, Traci Lords, Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen, Miley Cyrus, Sally Mann, Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, Jock Sturges, *Playboy*, *Hustler*, *Teen Beat*, *J-14*, and more within a single photographic expression. The resulting marriage of Gross the commercial photographer and Prince the artist reveals the latent, highly complicated, and very hypocritical desires of both the photographer/producer and the viewer/consumer, throwing into sharp relief what is at stake when looking at, and therefore thinking about, minors in American society.

In describing his relation to Gary Gross's photographs, Richard Prince wrote:

*My desires needed satisfaction...And satisfaction seems to come about by ingesting; perhaps "perceiving" the fiction her photograph imagined. I felt I was in partnership with the picture. There didn't seem to be any interruption between what was imagined by the picture and what was imagined by me. It had an oppressive effect, a glowing hallucinatory energy. There was a libidinal intensification and relief from possession and jealousy. I became infused with this picture, almost as if I was being x-rayed. And this came about when I finally re-photographed the image.<sup>1</sup>*

What *Spiritual America* makes suddenly transparent is that photographing a minor entails the acts of looking at and engaging with a young person and—as a result of this engagement—creating a record that

allows society to take part in the same activity. This transparency reveals that the decision to look at a minor—a child, a moppet, a junior-model, or however else the subject is defined—can be complicated to justify. Further, it underscores the complications of that gaze being fixed forever as a record for viewers to judge. I would argue that after *Spiritual America*, the intentions (and/or desires) of the photographer began to take on greater importance. By taking the acts of looking and photographing one step further, Prince implicated the viewer/consumer of the image (in this case, himself) on a more personal level, making the passive onlooker an active participant through the re-photographing of the consumed image. This shift from viewer/consumer to participant/producer is critical when acknowledging the layers and complexities that relate to looking at a photograph of a minor. In fact, as Prince's thoughts on *Spiritual America* suggest, the desire to possess or own the subject's fiction can be greater for the viewer than for the photographer.

## EXPOSED

The second phase of Brooke Shields's career involved highly risqué films such as *Baby Doll* (1978), in which she plays a child prostitute, and *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), in which she plays a teen Eve abandoned on an island with a boy with whom she has sexual relations. Following these popular successes, Shields stepped into global stardom as the fifteen-year-old spokesmodel for the Calvin Klein Jeans campaign, in which, among other antics, she wiggled into a pair of jeans in real time while quoting Darwin—famously launching the line “Want to know what gets between me and my Calvins? Nothing.”

The Gross images and their distribution by Playboy Press in the adult photography book *Sugar and Spice* facilitated these later, more complicated representations of sexuality. Only through their eroticizing of the child star in a fully adult manner could any possible notion of her as restricted or otherwise off-limits to the public eye be overcome. In a complicated inversion of what is commonly held to be a form of exploitation on the part of the photographer, Brooke Shields was an “adult” to society because Gross's camera had rendered her as such. However, from Gross onwards, Shields's representation would remain immune to criticism. It was at this point that Richard Prince capitalized on her unique position, making material the social-sexual anomaly that America had afforded itself, and forever shifting the landscape of the artist's relation

to the minor-as-subject.

When comparing Shields's career from 1975 through 1980 with those of more recent teen icons (all of whom seem branded under the aegis of some corporate identity and social conservatism) Shields's freedom of expression arguably forms a leftist, dare I say feminist, argument for (not against) a minor's right to express him- or herself as sexual commodity. Times have changed to the point where accusations of obscenity by offended onlookers can instantly replace debate over an artwork's intentions with a fait accompli guilty verdict. From the controversy over Mapplethorpe's *Jesse McBride*, to the FBI raid on Jock Sturges's studio, to the seizing of Nan Goldin's *Klara And Edda Belly Dancing at the Baltic*, to the recent outrage and attempted discrediting of Miley Cyrus (along with Annie Leibovitz) over her photographs in *Vanity Fair*, it is clear that society's unease with photographs depicting or alluding to nudity or erotic characterization of minors has become far more conservative.

A visual comparison from the aforementioned timeline might offer some insight into society's current degree of response. By paralleling the outward gaze of Alice Liddell in “The Beggar Maid” with Shields's in *Spiritual America* and that of Miley Cyrus in the exposed-shoulder portrait from the *Vanity Fair* pictorial, what becomes clear is the similarities of their come-hither looks, their seduction of the viewer, and their engagement with the adult photographer. Perhaps this gaze—more so than any occurrence of exposed flesh—is what viewers find so alluring and problematic in these photographs, and is what triggered the quite virulent response to the tepid photographs of Miley Cyrus.

When the act of looking at a minor (and encouraging the minor to return the gaze) is seen as an inherently inappropriate activity, then any representation of a minor risks being perceived as exploitation even when it is something else. Looking at young people is critical to a society's understanding of itself, and the recording of generations of adolescence is perhaps one of the most viable means of doing this. A photographer's interests in the pubescent subject is not limited to the libidinal, as can be seen in the work of Rineke Dijkstra, whose contrapposto, beach-going teen subjects transcend the erotic through their blank gazes and classical poses. Similarly, the portrayal of flesh is not limited to the sexual; consider the work of Collier Schorr, whose male wrestlers resist being reduced to fetish through the artist's careful examination of their athletic culture. Nor is the

young subject always a sexual object, as evidenced by Sharon Lockhart's cataloging of a community of youths in her *Pine Flat* series. These examples, none of which has been contested in the manner of the others addressed earlier in this essay, are nevertheless part of the same exploration of youth—an exploration that requires a broad spectrum of representation to fulfill its meaning.

However, despite the clear divergences among the above-mentioned practices, these works also hold the potential of summoning, to some degree, a latent sexual tension as a result of their very use of the minor as a subject of contemplation. This tension is generated from one of the most basic components at work between the photographer and his or her subject: the exercise of control. Consider Prince's confessional statement in relation to how perception and desire actively define the image: "There didn't seem to be any interruption between what was imagined by the picture and what was imagined by me." In admitting to this fantasy, Prince invokes the viewer's heightened role in relation to the photograph of the minor, suggesting that even the most neutral representations still bear the stamp of the artist's directive—*Stand still so I can look at you carefully*. From the viewer's standpoint, the complications of this dynamic are as layered as the subject matter, and it is that complication that we no longer seem willing, or prepared, to grapple with.

In closing, it is important to acknowledge a new layer in this fraught and uncomfortable history: the recent shift toward teens representing themselves through the advent of the internet, which has empowered a generation of minors to actively publish their own images through communal sites such as Flickr and YouTube, personal blogs, and networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. This authorial shift has radically changed the manner in which the adult can view minors, as well as how minors view themselves and their peers. Never before have minors had such opportunity to represent and regard themselves. Once limited to a specialized zone of magazines and books, the distribution of photographic imagery has become an ocean of online self-representation and self-styling, densely populated by teens and pre-teens in a constant state of self-recording. The full implications of this shift are yet to be fully realized. However, this new authorship already serves to highlight the adult gaze in cases when a photograph is not of a minor's own making. When pre-teens and teens are able to represent themselves, it becomes uncomfortably clear that an adult photographer exercises two forms of control simultaneously:

that enacted by a photographer on a subject, and that enacted by an adult upon a minor.

## WORDS WITHOUT PICTURES

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### Notes

1. Richard Prince, "Media is Feminine. Medium is Neutered." [http://www.richardprinceart.com/write\\_spiritual.html](http://www.richardprinceart.com/write_spiritual.html)