

Honoring the Sexual:
The Photographs of Barbara Nitke

by A. D. Coleman

Within the present generation of photographers, a distinct cohort – more numerous by far than any preceding it – has undertaken the exploration of what I’ve come to call the photo-erotic: not just the making of sexually provocative photographs, but the creation of images that explicitly observe our sexual lives, produced in collaboration with people willing to have their own sexual behaviors described, interpreted, and put on the public record by these photographers.

This represents a shift of no small proportions in cultural attitudes toward the representation of and discourse about human sexuality, a major leap forward in frankness about matters sexual and full disclosure of relevant particulars. At a time when varieties of sexual practice once considered marginal and taboo – gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, s/m, b&d, and more -- have moved from the periphery to the center, and from the closet into the open, the work of photographers such as Barbara Nitke has helped bring the discussion of these sexual alternatives into the mainstream.

These bodies of work collectively accomplish their normalizing of sexual diversity and sexuality itself in several ways:

- by providing incontrovertible evidence of what’s actually going in our bedrooms (and in the various other locales where we enact our erotic lives);
- by portraying for us a growing number of individuals who have discarded any lingering furtiveness related to their libidinous inclinations, in favor of a full-frontal approach to lust;
- and by rendering the sexual activity of these fellow citizens of ours in vivid, respectful images of such high quality that they clearly merit presentation alongside the work of those contemporary creative photographers who address other subjects – work that, in effect, demands consideration as art.

Which simply means that what the noted commentator David Steinberg calls “sexual photography” has come of age. If that’s the case, how does a specific instance, such as the work of Barbara Nitke, demonstrate this maturation?

Like other of her contemporaries, Nitke has undertaken this inquiry not briefly or

casually, but instead as a long-term project with no apparent end in sight. As this first monograph indicates, it began with commissions that took her inside the world of X-rated film and video production. That, in turn, evolved into her ongoing contemplation of present-day sexual life as practiced by people who aren't professional actors from the sex industry.

Certainly there's a relation between those two environments, if only in that a heightened sense of theater and ritual permeates much of the experimental-sex scene: costume, setting, props, lighting, even dialogue often result from careful planning, rehearsal, and practiced interaction. Some (though by no means all) of this does resolve as public behavior, in the sense that many of the people portrayed here regularly act out these rituals in front of others at private gatherings large and small. Whether performed in total privacy or before a select audience, this has obvious analogues in theater; no accident that such concepts as role-playing, staging, and "scenes" lie at the heart of much sex play.

But there are notable differences between such presentations, no matter how elaborate, and the market-driven output of the commercial triple-X industry. Most significantly, Nitke shows us people doing things they already do in private, by themselves and/or among friends, for their own pleasure and not for pay – things they would be doing even if she weren't on the spot with her camera and film. So these activities aren't feigned or pretended here. Nor are they orchestrated – at least not by Nitke. As a result, they don't represent her scripts, her scenarios, her fantasies; instead, they limn the sexual imaginations of her subjects, toward whose manifestations Nitke functions as a documentarian and translator.

Yet it would be simplistic to propose her position here as neutral, detached, and non-participatory. The mere presence of any person -- especially one with a camera -- in any social situation inevitably affects the behavior of others in that situation. Certainly the inclusion of a clearly empathetic and fascinated onlooker necessarily shifts the psychodynamics. "People do these scenes alone with me," Nitke has explained. "I don't participate when I take pictures, but it becomes a three-way emotionally. People let me in."¹ So the involvement of a photographer in these private events makes them more intricate, inevitably, thus adding to the complexity of interpreting the results.

At the same time, the illusion of transparency that photography makes possible – the sense that one is looking through a lens at the scene itself, in real (if suspended) time, with no interference from any intermediary – remains one of the medium's dependable strengths. In some photographs of people, one can discern immediately the photographer's impact on the dynamics of the event. In others, the photographer has somehow managed to "disappear." Nitke doesn't intrude herself into her images in any insistent way; the integration is seamless. This is no small accomplishment under these circumstances.

In making the earlier images of the X-rated film sets, Nitke of course took her place among the clutter of people who inhabit those contexts: gaffers, cameramen, stylists, makeup artists, "fluffers." Becoming faceless in such a crowd isn't difficult, because everyone – including the actors – works hard at pretending they aren't there. Indeed, one of the recurrent themes of

those particular images is the interface between on-stage and back-stage, a Brechtian look at the mechanisms of erotic film-making. Though they offer fascinating glimpses of this component of the sex industry, these pictures bear less of a personal stamp than those to which Nitke would subsequently turn her attention.

The real challenge for a photographer lies in evaporating from an intimate situation in which, by definition, one is an outsider, even if one is there by invitation. Nitke achieves this to such an extent that the viewer can't discern any consequence of her presence in these more recent images. None of these people play to the camera, or even indicate any awareness of its existence; none display any level of the self-consciousness that could easily result from the inclusion of a relative stranger in situations of deep intimacy that have as their common goal the discarding of inhibition. Nitke's images convince the viewer that she has not (to use a term from physics) "perturbed" or otherwise interfered with what presented itself to her through the lens – that one is simply, suddenly, there as it unfolds.

In addition to achieving this illusion of invisibility, Nitke places a stylistic imprint – the mark of her own distinct sensibility – on these images in several identifiable ways. First, she consistently establishes a distance between her subjects and her lens that positions the viewer perceptually and psychologically not at voyeur's-eye distance but at a participant's proximity. Imagining oneself as the observer of these particular tiny slices of time and space, as photographs persuade one to do, almost always puts one in the thick of the action, close enough to touch the protagonists – making the viewer one of them, even if by proxy, not someone peeping from yards away. This carries with it a distinct erotic charge, as if one's surrogate persona suddenly found itself transported into a situation of emotional and erotic intensity in which it was deeply implicated.

The other quality I find here I can only describe as tenderness, and its evidence throughout Nitke's work has a two-fold aspect. Her attentiveness to the playful, deeply loving undercurrent of the human relationships she meditates on in her pictures is one of those manifestations. "What got me into it was the tremendous amount of love between the players," she has said.ⁱⁱ So her images address the tension between that affectional, humorous aspect of these lovers' games and what she describes as "the intense energy of ritual, passionate s/m." This blending of an alertness to emotional vulnerability and bonding with what she terms the "visceral" aspect of s/m constitutes one of the hallmarks of Nitke's vision.

The other is her own response to those relationships and these sexual components thereof, which is not a conventionally moralistic reaction but which it would be inaccurate to describe merely as nonjudgmental. Nitke does in fact weigh these people and their behaviors in her imagery, and she finds them good. "I wanted to photograph deep intimacy and trust, the two main concepts which underlie all s/m practices," she writes in an artist's statement. Elsewhere she has asserted, "What I see is people who really love each other who just have a different way of expressing it. . . . I think it should be honored. I think all sexual outlets should be honored."ⁱⁱⁱ Though tacit in its expression here, this favorable, supportive assessment of her subjects and the

ways they've chosen to live their sexual lives is palpable in her images and her evocative captions thereto.

"These people are my friends," Nitke told one interviewer. "To me they are ordinary people, and I mean that in the best sense."^{iv} In that spirit, she is currently suing U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, a benighted Comstockian embarrassed and offended by the bare breast of a statue of Justice, in order to combat the notorious Communications Decency Act -- yet another desperate and doomed fundamentalist effort to censor the Internet.^v That lawsuit stands as an act of citizenship, undertaken on behalf of all who agree with Nitke about the imperative of keeping the government out of whatever takes place between consenting adults.

It may overshadow -- at least for a time -- what Barbara Nitke has achieved in her remarkable photographs. But these two courses of action, the legal and the imagistic, do not represent separate concerns. To the contrary, they have exactly the same purpose: honoring the sexual in ourselves. However that case resolves, these photographs -- and the motives behind them on the parts of all involved in their making -- will endure.

-- Staten Island, New York
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ⁱ Quoted in Trebay, Guy, "Slap Happy: Two Photographers Document the S/M Life," *Village Voice*, November 24, 1998, p. 43.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Trebay, *op. cit.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Bowman, David, "Ashcroft in Bondage," *Salon.com/Premium*.

^{iv} Quoted in Bowman, *op. cit.*

^v Filed preemptively on December 11, 2001, this case, *Nitke v. Ashcroft*, is a test case sponsored by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (www.ncsfreedom.org). As of this writing, it is working its way through the legal system.