

Ways of Perceiving

ADAD4019

Essay: Imagined Exhibition

The Voices of Dependency: Testimony, Intimacy, and the Self.

AI ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Basic Acknowledgement format of AI tool use

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT <https://chatgpt.com/> on 20 April 2026 to create a blueprint of my exhibition. I used the prompt: Please make a vintage-style blueprint of an imagined exhibition, the walls being in a large half circle, presented for use outdoors.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work.

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The concept for my exhibition is rooted in personal testimonies and storytelling that empathically invoke sonder, which recognises that each person has complexity and emotional experiences of their own-- drawing inspiration from both indirect and direct communication with people, known and unknown. The exhibition guides the observer through the individual's intimate perspectives, revealing elements of identity, vulnerability, and emotional reliance and dependency.

The exhibition presents work from the United States of America and the United Kingdom during 1980s and 1990s. The art shown does not attempt to define the subjects through revealing their vulnerability, it is to lean into a new territory that is abject art, that defies our natural imposed sense of cleanliness and decorum. Here, we witness raw, unfiltered cases of the human experience.

Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham and Jim Goldberg are key elements to this exhibition's concept, each representing different versions of dependency. Goldin's imagery explores this theme through vulnerable depictions of members of her family surrounding the "struggle between autonomy and dependency" (Goldin, n.d.). In addition, Tracy Emin's installation of *My Bed* (1998) pushes the existing testimonies into a space with representing the physical aftermath of her lived experience.

This exhibition aims to encourage empathy and understanding from the observer through the personal perspectives of those who refuse to be reduced. They force us to look and listen, encouraging an inner reflection on how dependency is represented and understood.

Photography has a certain authority that creates a tension between a hard reality and interpretation. Roland Barthes states in *Camera Lucida* that each photo holds a studium, a shared understanding and a sense of punctum, "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes, 1993, p.27). This concept is key throughout, as it not only depicts dependency but also fragility and psychological entrapment.

Susan Sontag says, "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed" (Sontag, 2003, p.4), which explains that an image can easily control meaning, so there is an important role as an artist of not misleading the observer, as it may be misinterpreted, especially within a sensitive subject. An ethical outlook is key to approaching testimonial art as documenting vulnerable people in susceptible moments "there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture" (Sontag, 2003, p.14). Whilst she highlights the risk of objectification, Goldberg's imagery complicates this by giving the subjects a voice to give them a chance to control their narrative in a way that challenges traditional documentary photography.

As you enter the exhibition space, *Dave, San Francisco*, from 'Raised by Wolves' project by Jim Goldberg, is displayed on the left-hand side of the semi-circular wall. The photos appear disjointed but connect with one another, whether it's the handwritten testimonies giving us a deeper emotional engagement with the subjects or the arm photographed separately from the man's torso but placed beside each other. This ties back to the idea of identity being fragmented, imperfect, and not fixed. This disjointed composition consists of partial figures and details of the body, yet there is no portrait showing a clear face; this may hint at the observer not being allowed the full picture, to avoid being fully identified. Some text includes "I'm Dave who the fuck are you", confronting not only Goldberg at the time, but the observer, instead of simply looking, we are faced with a power dynamic that we do not always see in documentary photography. This challenges the idea of photography presenting reality but builds a version of it through different perspectives. The text gives the subject agency, but the fragmented visuals suggest that this control remains

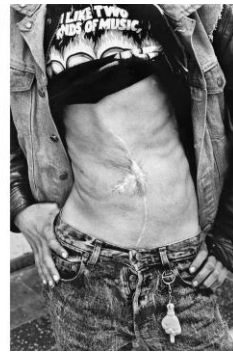
unstable. Judith Butler suggests, “We are, from the start, given over to the other” (Butler, 2004, p.31), explaining that dependency is a part of the condition of human life rather than being seen as a weakness. Dependency is not always obvious to see, but it is visible through physical experiences that create narratives of vulnerability and instincts of survival. *Dave* shows his scarred torso, this moment of vulnerability shows a glimpse into his hardships, yet paired with his strong tone from his testimony, creates empathy and discomfort.



I'm DAVE who the FUCK ARE YOU
you need me 2 feel superior
I need you 2 laugh AT



MY MOM WAS LIKE YEAH JUNKIES BUT
WHO I HATE NEVER SEEN
MY OLD MAN IS A BIKER FROM HELL
HE FUCKED UP MY LIFE SPOT ME IN THE
MIDDLE OF THE STREET AND I WAS
FIRST GONE HOME SINCE OR HAD ONE



*Dave, San Francisco. Jim
Goldberg (c. 1993-1995)*

Positioned next to *Dave* are two emotionally evocative juxtaposed photographs by Richard Billingham as part of *Ray's a Laugh* (1996). The project documents Billingham's family life, particularly his father's alcoholism. Both photos are raw and poorly lit. However, these unpolished details make a recognisable style, creating an immediate and realistic scene. Billingham chose for the observer not to be guided or interrupted by added text; rather, it is a moment of quiet contemplation between a man's personal struggle and the observer's feeling empathy and wonderment at his state of mind. The first image presents *Ray* looking exhausted and upset, sitting on the turquoise carpeted floor of a bathroom, with his arm resting atop the toilet. The accompanying portrait displays a shift in his emotion, as he is shown through a mirror laughing with glee, but he is surrounded by dark and out-of-focus surroundings, which may suggest the looming fluctuations in his state of mind. The contrast of emotion shown in body language, facial expressions, compared to the photographs' presentation, black and white or saturated and bright, gives us further context for how unstable and uncertain Ray and his family's life is. John Berger suggests “the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled” (Berger, 1972, p.7). As there was no text to guide us, there is no further context, so the observer must interpret for themselves. This may form biased ideas from personal perceptions, which can create uncertainty and an uncomfortable experience. By placing *Ray's a Laugh* portraits between Goldberg and Goldin, it acts as a bridge to connecting public testimony to more sensitive domestic forms of subservience.



Ray's a Laugh, Richard Billingham. 1996



Ray's a Laugh, Richard Billingham. 1996

Presented in the middle of the exhibition is a dim but warmly lit intimate photo by Nan Goldin of *Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City (1983)* and *Heart-Shaped Bruise, NYC (1980)*. They are shown close together to keep the tone of deep emotional reliance that is both nurturing and destructive. Goldin focused her work on her own relationships and how they were forms of dependency. Firstly, we see *Nan* staring at her partner on the edge of the bed while he smokes a cigarette, unfazed.

Roland Barthes' idea of punctum, when a detail of a photo "pricks" the viewer emotionally (Barthes, 1993, p.27), can be understood through *Heart-Shaped Bruise (1980)* as the bruise is a visual mark of harm, but being heart-shaped, it can symbolise an attachment to harmful affection. Although there is no clear meaning as it is not paired with testimony, it suggests the instability of reliance in relationships.



Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City (1983) Nan Goldin.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that "the body is our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.146). This suggests that dependency can also be embodied, seen as physical marks left upon the

body. Goldin blurs the photographer's threshold of their role and takes on a journalistic approach by making herself the subject in the scenes. By her involvement and capturing real, personal experiences within that emotional part of her life, she brings to light that dependency is shaped through lived and shared experiences rather than only at a distance.



Heart-Shaped Bruise, NYC, 1980. Nan Goldin

Concluding the exhibition, *My Bed* (1998) by Tracey Emin, as the eyes shifts focus to the far side of the space, we meet with a physical piece consisting of an unmade bed surrounded by personal objects, two suitcases, empty bottles, newspaper, slippers, a bedside table, placed on top of a blue carpet acting as an entrance to the stained sheets. The space presents remnants of daily life with a physical trace of experiences, focusing on the absence afterwards instead of the presence of the experience. As Jacques Derrida suggests, meaning is not fixed but shaped through the presence and absence (Derrida, 1976), so the object functions as the trace of lived experience, where the absence of the body or bodies is still as significant as the visible. This allows deeper engagement, encouraging an emotional response and speculation. Positioned at the end of the exhibition, it combines themes that were explored throughout. It presents the lasting effects of dependency once the subject is no longer present, evoking a sense of sonder towards the people and experiences that have memories intertwined with the physical object.



Tracy Emin, My Bed (1998)

The Voices of Dependency exhibition does not limit itself to being negative or fixed but recognises that subservience is complicated and a natural aspect of the human experience. Rather than presenting a singular way of representation, collectively they expose attachment as fragmented, embodied, and often

contradictory. This challenges the assumed photography role as a neutral medium and presents a constructed space where meaning is shaped through authorship, context and perspective.

Through the artworks of Jim Goldberg, Richard Billingham, Nan Goldin, and Tracey Emin we can visualise the progression from public testimony to intimate relationships finalising with physical traces left in absence of those experiences. Revealing that dependency is not simply observed, but something that "pricks" the viewer, disrupts passive looking, creates critical engagement and prompts us to reflect on how we perceive the lives of others.

Total word count: 1520

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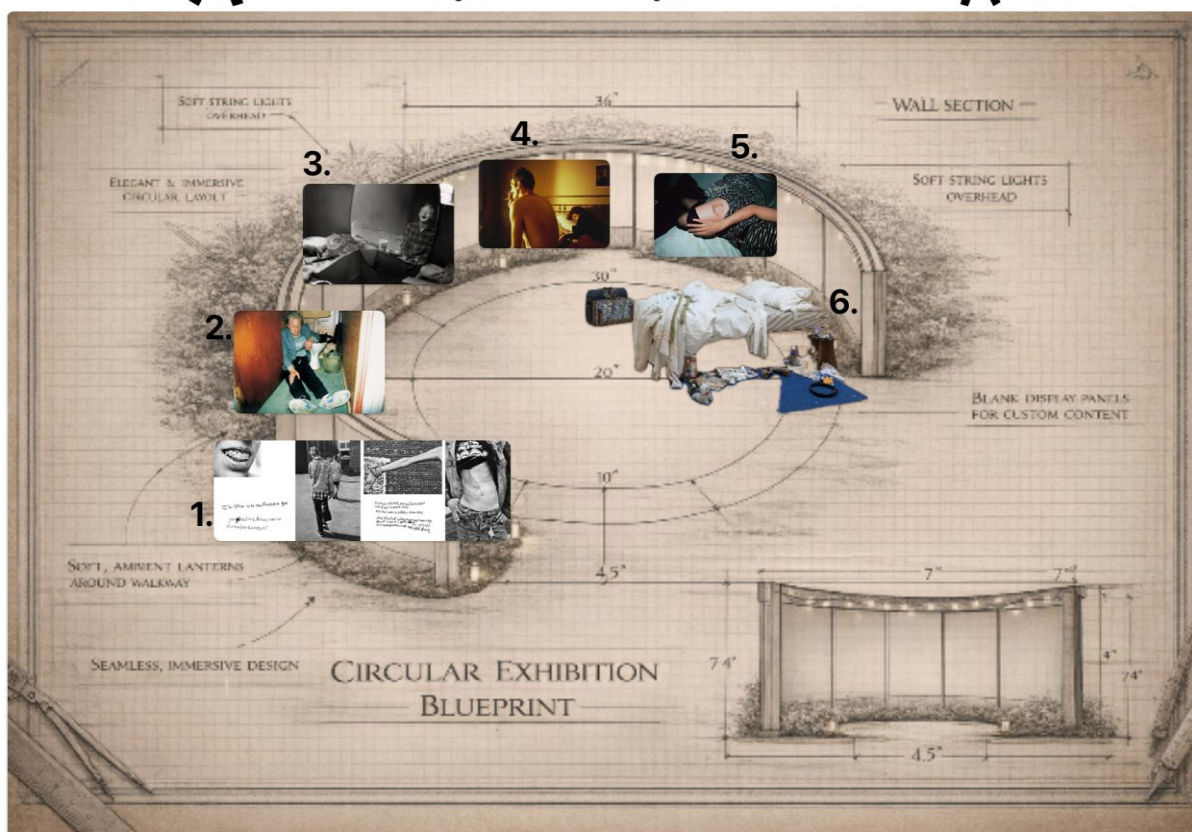
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