

# Cookie Mueller

## Amelia Stone & Witt Giannini

### in conversation

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**AIDS is Contemporary**

**Amelia Stone:** Today we're going to be discussing Cookie Mueller and her legacy, in the context of our AIDS Is Contemporary art history seminar. Let's start by talking about how we feel we're connected to Cookie Mueller. Who is she to you?

**Witt Giannini:** I want to start off with this quote by John Waters which I feel encapsulates her so much. He once said that Cookie Mueller is, “a writer, a mother, an outlaw, an actress, a fashion designer, a Go Go dancer, a witch doctor, an art hag, and above all, a goddess.” This is such a great quote that encapsulates how multifaceted of an artist and person she was. I first encountered her, probably, in *Female Trouble*, the John Waters film. She was one of the Dreamlanders. She was in so many of his films, like *Pink Flamingos*, *Polyester*, *Multiple Maniacs*. She really has a certain look and grungy chicness about her that you immediately gravitate to on screen. It's been great doing this project and learning about her more as an actual writer, visual artist, and advice columnist, because those were not sides of her I had fully known about before.

**AS:** That quote is really great, because it shows that she's such a jack of all trades. I like to imagine her as if I was on a college campus with her— she'd be that type of person that literally

everyone knows and has a story about. She is such an icon. She's someone that I aspire to be in my life. She seems like a really caring person and someone who left her legacy on every single person she met. That's drawn me into learning more about her, because she was a force. It seems like everyone around her really recognized that.

I was in this bookstore in Williamsburg called Spoonbill and Sugartown, and I saw this huge book of her works that had the best photo of her with signature heaps of black eyeliner on, and I was like, *I have to know who this person is*. I then realized she was in Waters' films. But this project has been a great way to get to know her beyond her iconic status. I feel like it's probably good now to talk about how she viewed herself—do you have anything that jumps out at you about who Cookie Mueller is to herself?

**WG:** Yeah. Looking at a few of her writings from before her unfortunate death, one thing that struck me was the candid cynicism she has about her own mortality. In some there is almost a helplessness that is conveyed. But she also once wrote, “Fortunately, I am not the first person to tell you that you will never die. You simply lose your body. You will be the same, except you won't have to worry about rent or mortgages

or fashionable clothes. You will be released from sexual obsessions. You will not have drug addictions. You will not need alcohol. You will not have to worry about cellulite or cigarettes or cancer or AIDS or venereal diseases. You will be free.”<sup>1</sup> What strikes me is despite the fact that, as John Waters said, she was a beloved artist and actress, there was an introspective darkness to her. That's a common thread among very creative people, and she even calls this out in the *Last Letter* she wrote in 1989 before she died. She writes about how gut wrenching it is to watch everyone around her, all these fellow creatives die off, to lose that light, that guiding force in the world around her. I can't even imagine how that would have felt, not only for someone losing everyone around them, but to be slowly losing themselves too.

**AS:** What strikes me about her writing, even before her diagnosis, is that she's always a really open person. She's writing a sex column called Ask Dr. Mueller. She's writing candidly about her experiences in Provincetown. There's the effervescence about her, but her writing has always been very honest about who she is. That's also what makes her a good

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<sup>1</sup> Christabel Stewart. “Putti’s Pudding A New Exhibition at London’s Studio Voltaire Showcases the Final Works of Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpatti.” Tank Magazine, February 20, 2024. <https://magazine.tank.tv/tank/2017/09/puttis-pudding>.

subject of conversation. She's willing to give herself to the page. It's heartbreaking because you feel like you know so much about her, but to know that we would one day lose her makes me really sad. She talks about death so openly, which I think is a common thread among a lot of the artists we've talked about this semester. Death just becomes like any subject, not something that has a stigma.

**WG:** Among the artists we're looking at today, there's a shared willingness to open yourself up and be intimate. We'll examine the different connotations of that word, but there's a gravitas that comes with entering these people's minds and seeing them deal with their own mortality and legacy in real-time. It's quite powerful and humbling.

**AS:** It reminds me of how much privilege I have that I'm even able to access this openness in our current era. We're still relating to it, but perhaps without the darkness and deepness that someone from the 70s or 80s might have been. It reminds me to be really grateful for, like, the life that I lead. Maybe we can move to talking more about her interactions with her partner, Vittorio Scarpatti, who was an Italian artist who made the *Putti's Puddings* series. They were an expression of his experience in the hospital as a person with AIDS, and he

collaborated with Cookie on them; sometimes she was the subject of them. We know that many artists use their partners as their muses, so we can read that into his works as well. My first question is, how do we feel Mueller is represented in these works?

**WG:** What's interesting is that throughout most of the creation of the series, Scarpatti was, if I'm not mistaken, hospitalized and bed-bound. He physically could not speak and could barely move, so, in a sense, these drawings were the only agency he had. It's interesting because even though some are written in Italian, they're being transcribed by Mueller. She kind of becomes a conduit for his voice. With all the text in the works, even if the drawing is not directly about Cookie, you still feel her. The works are quick, quippy, and irreverent — one of them reads, "I want to get the hell out of here! Basta! [Enough!] I want to get out!" (Figure 1).

**AS:** The same work reads: "The I want to get out club." You can feel how intense and loving their relationship was, but also how tragic it was. You can imagine the closeness of two people in a hospital bed. One person is bogged down by their illness in bed, and the other person is sitting beside them. We've either been there or seen media depictions of what that's like, and



Figure 1. Vittorio Scarpatti and Cookie Mueller, *Untitled*, 1989.

that's an extremely intimate place. Especially for two people experiencing the same condition, it's got to be so tragic to watch someone else go through something that you might go through. But the fact that Scarpatti wants Mueller to be a part of his legacy as he's dying shows how connected these two people were.

**WG:** One thing I love about this series is that it represents not only the mundanity of hospitalizations, of intubations, of waiting and wanting to get out of being stuck in a sterile, white room, but also a sense of whimsy. It feels like a reclamation of their final moments together. If we look at this drawing (Figure 2) where, I don't even know how to describe what's going on, but it seems like there's two pig tanks that are attached with tubes to his nipples, and there's a peninsula with boats and a crashing plane. This drawing presents a space of adventure and openness that is totally contrasted to the claustrophobic images of his hospital bed. I love how the series is not only aiming to show the suffocation of the hospital space, but it also explores the imagination, the surreality and bizarreness of these last moments.

**AS:** Scarpatti and Mueller, even when they're not talking about each other directly, are so connected. She has that quote where



she's talking about how death is a pathway to freedom in a certain respect. She says it's liberating you from all the things that you're tied to on earth, which is inherently tragic, but it's also very idyllic. And in the "So I'm all ready to go" drawing, we have a person who is drawn very gaunt. He's lacking a lot of muscle. He's tied up to these dead pigs, which are very grotesque. It's blurring the boundary of what a human body is like at the end of life.

**WG:** [jokingly] It's a cyborg.

**AS:** Exactly. You have this fun flying plane in the background. You have ships that are sailing, you have a whale jumping into the water, you have the moon, you have green grass and flowers. The art in Cookie's world traces a thin line between the grotesque, deep darkness of death, and also the liberatory state that, perhaps, death could bring out of someone.

**WG:** There can be whimsy in death, right? It's sad and moving, thinking back to her earlier quote about losing your fashionable clothes, your drugs, your addictions, all of the things we cherish and we do, no matter how much they possibly lead us down roads of destruction. They are things that we fill our time with.



Figure 2. Vittorio Scarpati and Cookie Mueller, *Untitled*, 1989.

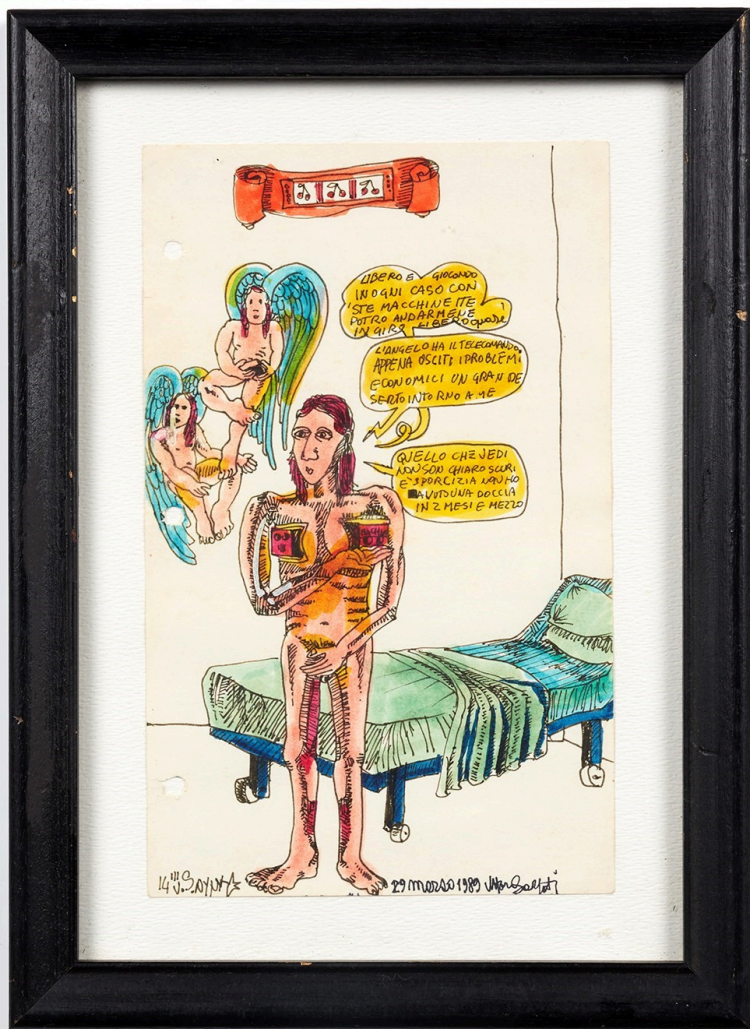


Figure 3. Vittorio Scarpatti and Cookie Mueller, *Untitled*, 1989.

**AS:** There is this whimsy in letting go that I think is so beautifully captured in this series. I thought the one with the three cherries at the top was interesting (Figure 3). He's speaking in Italian, so I'm not exactly sure what he's saying, but there's two angels at the side of his hospital bed. He's fully standing up. It seems to me that the way that Mueller and Scarpatti are viewing their own world is in between life and death. He has this strength to get out of bed where he's been lying sick, but then he's halfway into this post-Earth space with these angels. When he's depicting himself and Mueller it's almost beyond the Earth. They're in this angelic space.

**WG:** The name of the series itself, *Putti's Puddings*, comes from these cherubs. I really love the juxtaposition between these very traditional Catholic images and unserious doodles. There's one where you can see the holes and tears of the paper; it's not the venerated medium of the canvas that we traditionally associate with images of the afterlife. It's very diaristic.

**AS:** What's super interesting, too, is that when Cookie is being described by other people, they see her as this godly figure. This is an angel. And it seems to me that what Scarpatti is trying to do— since Mueller was taking care of him in this time

period— with all these angels surrounding his bed is to suggest that Mueller is an angel. We're still able to feel that. I get these warm, angelic feelings when I see these old photos of her. I feel connected to her because she feels like someone who transcends time and is very otherworldly.

Switching gears a bit, in class, we've talked a lot about the Leonilson and Dzubilo drawings— what does it mean to use drawing and sketches and doodling as a medium for this type of art?

**WG:** Yeah. Between the four, Scarpati, Mueller, Leonilson and Dzubilo, one thing that was really striking was how all of them are trying to use their work to highlight oppression, bureaucratic disenfranchisement, or death and disease. None of them are choosing this form to depict a lighthearted topic. They all assume this comic form to talk about hard things. Dzubilo's comics talk about her identity as a trans woman within the US healthcare system and all of the roadblocks and injustices she had to face because of that. Leonilson talks a lot about government inaction. A lot of his drawings came from a newspaper in São Paulo, criticizing his government and the globalized US economy too. They're very hard topics to articulate. Dzubilo, Mueller, and Scarpati are working around

the same time in the same city, but they're still from very different contexts and speaking to different things.

**AS:** In his essay *Psychic Body, Visible Body, Revisited*, Ivo Mesquita describes Leonilson's drawings as being common in terms of subject matter.<sup>2</sup> In the “In Her Own Words” section of *DUETS*, Dzubilo says, “I used to draw pictures of things that were happening that would really upset me.”<sup>3</sup> This style is being used by two people who are drawing things that are very real to them. There's something to be said about the common person— maybe not just the common person, but specifically someone of a marginalized experience— the only way to represent that struggle is humor, or a medium such as drawing that breaks down the seriousness of the subject and brings it to an interpretive place, or a playful place, so they can have more agency over their life.

**WG:** Which goes back to Cookie. Linda Yablonsky, a friend of Mueller's, wrote about how it was hard for Cookie as a cis

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<sup>2</sup> Ivo Mesquita. “Psychic Body, Visible Body, Revisited.” Essay. In Leonilson: Drawn: 1975 1993, edited by Krist Gruijthuisen, 219–35. Berlin, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Chloe Dzubilo, *DUETS*: Che Gossett & Alice O'Malley Reichel In Conversation on Chloe Dzubilo, ed. Nelson Santos (New York, NY: Visual AIDS, 2016), 12.





Figure 4. José Leonilson, *Com o anjo da gaurda* [*With the Guardian Angel*], ca. 1991.

woman to get medical care for AIDS in New York.<sup>4</sup> A lot of times if a woman came in, they would just assume you were a prostitute or a junkie. She would have to sit in waiting rooms for hours and hours and never see doctors. This is an experience that isn't always indexed when we talk about AIDS. There were so many men who never got the care they deserved or needed, but for women, cis women like Cookie or trans women like Chloe, the system did not see them at all.

**AS:** That's the common thread of what's drawing these people to this earnest and honest representation of themselves, with a cheeky flare to it. They want to be seen. When you wheatpaste a drawing around the city, or you place a drawing in a newspaper, or you start up a column in a newspaper or magazine, that's visibility. We'll get more into this later, but with *Witnesses Against our Vanishing*, there was a lot of trouble with getting the artists in that exhibition seen. It was very difficult to have PWAs represented in a gallery space at that time. It is easier to put something in a zine or on the sidewalk that gets people's attention. The not-so-fine art

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Yablonsky. "The AIDS Crisis as Drawn by Cookie Mueller's Artist Husband." *DAZED*, December 1, 2017. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/38237/1/cookie-mueller-vittorio-scarpati-puttis-pudding-aids>.

category of all of these works brings them to a more public space.

**WG:** On the topic of visibility, another thing I thought was interesting between all these works is the intimacy required to view them. For example, with *Putti's Puddings*, they were displayed within a white cubicle built within an exhibition space. The works themselves, being of a small size with delicate, fine handwriting, require you to get up close and personal. Same with Leonilson. You would have to hold the newspaper up or flash a light onto them. I'm not sure how Dzubilo's works would have been disseminated, but I do know she herself talked about scale and how she wishes she could make bigger works, but was limited by studio space, her materials, and by the end of her life, the constraints of her own body. She wasn't able to move her hands over large canvases. That scale requires you to level yourself with, to force yourself up close and personal with the works. It's a completely different viewing experience than what we're used to, like the duratrans or billboards of Times Square. Even in the art world, we're so used to everything being large or projected, towering over you. With these works, you almost feel a diminished presence that you have to lower yourself to.

**AS:** Something I'm thinking about when looking at this Dzubilo work called *Behind Closed Doors* (Figure 5), is the importance of handwriting in these works. We are able to see her own handwriting here; this idea reminds me of second grade, when everyone would comment on your handwriting. Your handwriting is who you are. It's a one-to-one representation of who these people are, because we can see how they would write in a very intimate, diaristic setting. This isn't necessarily a work of fine art where you'd have a giant brush copying script in a clean way, like an Ed Ruscha work. It's very intimate and personal and messy. It feels a relic of who these people are. It feels like something that we would have excavated. You get the same thing from Cookie Mueller because her writing has that flavor, that sense of personality.

**WG:** I still have people commenting on my handwriting during class. What I love about these works is the way the messiness of the handwriting is the purpose. Through the scratches, the scribbles, the exed out words that were misspelled, rewritten, where she ran out of lines because everything's then crammed together, that is how you kind of see a person revealed. In the *So I Am All Ready to Go* drawing, I love how the "t" leans





Figure 5. Chloe Dzubilo, *Untitled (Behind Closed Doors)*, n.d.

over as if it had fallen, recalling a cross, tying into the overarching Christian imagery. The tiny idiosyncrasies add so much extra weight that you would not get if it was cleanly written or in a typed font.

**AS:** This is gonna sound so silly, but it reminds me of this John Mulaney joke about writing a big Happy Birthday sign for someone, and you get really into it with the big letters when you start, the H and the A are huge, the P and the P are huge, and then you shrink down all the rest of the letters because

you've already started so big at the beginning. There's a temporal aspect of these works too. The rushed script in the Scarpatti works, right before he's dying, feels like a time capsule of those last few days. He's kind of, he has to get everything in. He's not necessarily thinking how to space out this work so that everything that he wants to fit in has to fit in. In the work with the angels and Mary and Jesus behind him and the cross, he's writing around the frame of the work and you can feel him going, "Now, I need to move my writing to the side. I need to mess with the spacing and move it around so that I can get all of my words in."

**WG:** You can see how the cursive stretches at some points, like in the top right corner, you can feel the words being drawn out. But then in the top left corner, everything looks so squished together, almost to the point of illegibility. This deals with translation too. With Scarpatti being an Italian artist and many of his texts being in Italian, and Mueller being American and writing in English, maybe the point isn't that we can read. Maybe the point is the physicality of the text alone and how it looks on the page. It's not an explanation or caption for these drawings, but it's its own equally potent or powerful force in the overall composition.

**AS:** Wrapping up thinking about Scarpati, how do these works work as another way of representing Mueller? What does Mueller look like from her lover's perspective?

**WG:** What I immediately think of is the idea of a guardian angel, as someone who is there by his side, both literally and in spirit watching down on him and of helping him transition into this next phase. Yablonsky wrote: "It's ironic and telling that Cookie died on the day the Berlin wall came down. Germany was liberated, just like this free spirit. I'm not a magical thinker, but I can't help but think it's all connected."<sup>5</sup> To me this quote makes perfect sense when viewed with these drawings. Cookie was an emancipatory force not only aiding in this transition, but forcefully tearing down the walls that separate our mundane reality from this surreal afterlife.

**AS:** That's a good way to transition into thinking about Nan Goldin's description of Mueller as well. Cookie is someone who transcended the bounds of anything that the earth had. This is someone who, regardless of being dead or alive, ill or in good health, was a force. A lot of the time, people who are like that represent themselves in a very humble way. She did that. She writes about herself in a very nonchalant but open way,

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<sup>5</sup> Yablonsky. "The AIDS Crisis as Drawn by Cookie Mueller's Artist Husband." DAZED.

and one that doesn't glorify anything she was doing. It's very interesting to think about her being perceived as this angel, this godlike figure, because she sees herself as small. It's interesting to think about how Nan Goldin represents people, how a friend can represent a person with AIDS.

**WG:** Going back to the idea of the intimacy of viewing— I was very lucky, I got to go see the exhibit *Vanishing Intimacy: Surrounding Nan Goldin*, which was a collection of many of Goldin's photographs, along with some accompanying works by artists engaging with similar themes as her. One of the things I took away from that show was how small her photographs are as actual prints. Being art history students of a digital age, we lose a good sense of scale. I've always seen her photos blown up on huge projection lecture screens. When I was in the museum face to face with her works, I was struck by how, again, you had to lower yourself, to squat a little bit and bring yourself up close to see these photographs. I was interested in the word intimacy. It's in the title of the exhibition, and we've brought up the idea of what it necessarily means to be intimate or show an intimate act, because so many Goldin works show what we typically associate with intimacy, showing people naked and having sex or masturbating in their

beds. There's also another layer of intimacy, which is what we get from Mueller's writings, an intimacy of being yourself when no one else is around you, behind the closed door. Seeing someone showering or coming down from a high. There is a beauty of seeing what is not shown to everyone.

**AS:** My first reaction when I look at these photos, and I know this is very typical of Goldin's photography, but the warmth that comes from the photos is what I noticed across all of them. It feels like... Mueller has this halo around her. There's that one photo (Figure 6) of her sitting in a diner by herself, and she's gazing off into the distance. Even in such a mundane, daily act, she has an angelic aura around her. Even when I saw Cookie for the first time on the cover of a book of hers, it was a Nan Goldin photo of her, and I immediately was like, *Who is this person? I have to get to know who this person is*. That's what Goldin does really well about representing Cookie Mueller, is she captures the fact that everyone wanted to get to know her and was so drawn to her, and everyone felt warm when they were around her.

**WG:** I also really see that comfort; you can tell that Nan and Cookie are friends, which is not true for all of Goldin's



Figure 6. Nan Goldin, *Cookie Mueller*, 1990.

subjects. She photographed many of her other friends and sometimes strangers— maybe this comes from Cookie being one of the Dreamlanders and having that history in front of John Waters' film camera. She seems authentically herself, unstaged, unposed through all of it. A lot of times this type of photography can come off as voyeuristic, almost like Diane Arbus's freaks. That's never the case with Cookie. They always show Cookie as a fully realized person who is integrated into Nan's life.

**AS:** It reminds of the reading that we did on *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. There was a quote about Goldin and how she represented people in that exhibition in the Sophie Junge essay saying that Goldin is not just someone who is interested in creating an exhibition about, for, and featuring people with AIDS.<sup>6</sup> This is someone who is a part of that community. While she may not have had disease herself, Nan Goldin lost so many friends to complications with AIDS. She was an advocate. She was a part of ACT UP. This was her community that she was losing. That's why she created the exhibition and why she put so much care into creating the exhibition. This was not just an explanatory exhibition asking *what is AIDS? What is it like to have AIDS?* This is someone who wants to show the world who these artists are beyond, but also including, their HIV/AIDS status. This is something greater than defining people by their status.

**WG:** Because they were looking for explanations themselves at the end of the day. Throughout all these works, what's so haunting about them is it's not just people trying to explain their health, their situation, their place in society to the audience. It's them trying to figure that out for themselves, and

perhaps coming to the conclusion that that's something that can never be easily understood or described.

**AS:** What's so powerful about *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* is even the title in itself. I learned about this exhibition last year in a curatorial history class, and it's always stuck with me, because the title is so powerful. I've been doing a lot of thinking about what art history is, as I get towards graduation. What does this mean to me? What's really special to me about art history is that it is a witness to things that could potentially vanish. Art history is so much about remembering as much as anything else. It is a testament to things that have happened. Goldin outright titling her exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* is calling out the idea that we have to do something. When things vanish, we have to be the ones to witness and document what's going on. She does a great job of that with Cookie Mueller. She's witnessing someone that is potentially vanishing, but she steps in and she says, “No, I won't let these people vanish. These are my people. I have to stand in for them when they can't be here.”

**WG:** On her series of photos of Cookie Mueller, Goldin says, “I had always thought that if I had photographed someone

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<sup>6</sup> Sophie Junge. *Art About AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against our Vanishing*. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 2016, 96.

enough, I would never lose them.”<sup>7</sup> But then she then kind of switches on this original belief, and later writes, “putting the pictures together had made me realize how much I lost. My photography, in the end, didn't do enough. It didn't save Cookie.”<sup>8</sup> That is also such an interesting contradiction to have to reconcile. Goldin's work and *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* did preserve these stories and these individual moments, and they're now bringing them to a whole new generation, for you and me right here, sitting and talking about that, feeling and understanding that so deeply. But then at the same time, there is then that futility that Goldin had to learn to accept. I can't even imagine the heartbreak of putting so much faith in the camera and thinking that, against the world, at least the lens and the printed image might still help us hold on to everyone that we're losing, and then realizing, at the end of the day, that we are just left with prints and not people.

**AS:** It's so tragic.

**WG:** You feel bad, because I understand that no image is ever going to replace the fully realized, vibrant, go-go dancing

junkie, art hag, goddess, that was Cookie Mueller. At the same time though, I do feel like the Goldin photographs capture her so well, it's never going to be the fully realized cookie that Nan had the privilege of knowing. It's a snapshot of her that preserves her in time, and we still feel her warmth and her power as a liberatory spirit, even through this digital screen we're looking at.

**AS:** That was very powerful. That's why we have to keep working on this. I was in my German class— there's so many random threads that I'm trying to pull together here, but in my German class, for example, as an exercise to practice certain grammar topics, my professor asked us to describe art. Let's talk about art. She asked the question, *do you guys like art?*, which was hilarious as the one art history major in the room. I was like, *Yeah, I wouldn't have a major if I didn't like art*. But one of my fellow students was like, *no, I find museums really boring. I find art really boring*. That was something that I never even thought was possible, but it did remind me that art history is such an important subject. I don't want to say this in a self-congratulatory way, but it showed me that what we are doing is very important, because these stories need art history, they need art, they need the work that Goldin is doing, and that

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<sup>7</sup> Nan Goldin. “Nan Goldin on Cookie Mueller (2001).” *AMERICAN SUBURB X*, April 10, 2012. <https://americansuburbx.com/2012/04/theory-nan-goldin-on-cookie-mueller.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



we now have to pick up on doing, to be remembered. And it is the work of art historians to continue to pick up on what was lost, and remind us of what was lost. That doesn't contend with or answer the question of how we solve issues that are happening right now, but at least with Mueller, we are now able to feel her spirit and her energy because of what we are doing. Goldin's words remind us that in addition to doing all of this work that's about remembering, we still have so much work to do in the present time with art history to solve issues that we care about.

**WG:** What a wild assertion.

**AS:** I know, it was crazy.

**WG:** I'm speaking as an art history major, but to me, art and art history can be so many things. Pretentious, a little overly complicated, sure, but boring? I never thought that, but maybe that's because I have been so lucky to have opportunities to pursue art like this. What is so powerful about art, and about art history as a discipline is the way it indexes and references so many other tangential strands of history. This class is about looking at these artists and understanding these great works. But even more so, it's about understanding queer history, and not just your standard, canonized version of queer history that's

textbook friendly, like learning about Harvey Milk or Marsha P. Johnson. This class is about learning about the realities and the nit and grit of queer existence in people like Cookie Mueller, people like Chloe Dzubilo or people like Lady Bunny and Lady Miss Kier and everyone else featured in Wigstock.

**AS:** Great references, shout 'em out.

**WG:** In the DUETS piece about Chloe, Che Gossett says that part of what Chloe's works bring out is the idea that there is a past, and that we are part of this past, and that is inheritance.<sup>9</sup> As queer people, we don't have our parents, or many of us do not have parents or elders to kind of pass this history on to us, this is something that we have to go out and search for ourselves. It is such a privilege to have artists like Chloe Dzubilo, like Leonilson, like Cookie Mueller, like Vittorio Scarpati, to have an archive of their voices, their own words, of their queer ways of seeing, thinking and conceptualizing. That is something that could be lost to time, but we can begin to understand that through pieces of art like this. There's nothing like it. Art is such a liberatory, emancipatory vehicle, it's entirely unique, it bridges time, bridges boundaries, and

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<sup>9</sup> Che Gossett, DUETS: Che Gossett & Alice O'Malley Reichel In Conversation on Chloe Dzubilo, ed. Nelson Santos (New York, NY: Visual AIDS, 2016), 12.

transports us to the past, while reimagining our present and future.

**AS:** It makes me think of someone who says that they don't like art, I think it just that it is our job— it's not our job to tailor art history to people who think they don't like art, but maybe someone who says they don't like art just says that because maybe they haven't been, represented in the art history that they've looked at. It's through experiences where you learn about the representation of a really diverse group of people, or you challenge yourself to go beyond your boundaries and see different parts of the world that you're able to connect to art history. And I think it's our job to then create an art history that speaks to the importance of histories like Cookie Mueller's. What I'm realizing as we're having this conversation, too, is that another reason why I'm so drawn to Cookie is the fact that she was a queer person. When I see these pictures of her, I feel this connection to her that I feel towards so many queer people; so many people I see as queer angels. She's an angel, but she's *our* angel.

**WG:** She was fearlessly pioneering a new form of life. In New York in the 80s, there was a new opening of possibilities for an unpolished queer lifestyle totally against the grain. She was

pioneering that for all of us today. Today, we may live in the same (now gentrified) neighborhoods, or have the same aesthetics, even though they've been filtered down and stripped of all meaning, but through people like Cookie, we see this blazing force of someone simply living their life and opening the way for all of us.

**AS:** And we see that through so many different perspectives— her own perspective, her lover's perspective, the perspective of her friends. It's clear to me that this is someone who is an icon in her own right. She needs to be recognized as an icon. And maybe that's what we learn from this conversation, and our job as art historians, is that we need to raise people like Cookie Mueller up. We need to be teaching about these people, or learning about these people, because it's very clear from all those perspectives, she is the reason why so many people are able to express themselves in such a fun, silly, exciting, and dark and tragic way. It's because she was able to open herself up, and she had this warmth about her. We're still so drawn to her. We need to keep her spirit alive.

**WG:** I really love when in the Foreword for the *Dzubilo DUETS*, JP Borum write that we need to continually invoke her voice and spirit. They write, “you think I mean this

metaphorically, but I mean it literally. Read her words, look at her art, talk to her, and you'll get an answer if you listen. Then make up your own language and speak the unspeakable about being a PWA or trans or an abuse survivor, and then never shut up.”<sup>10</sup> It comes down to her voice, and we are so privileged to have preserved echoes of these people's voices, no matter how fractionary they are. To be able to go back and have the ability to read these people's words in our present day, that is, and will always be, the key to queer history, queer art history and queer survival, whatever you want to call it. Especially in the face of silencing, not only systematic and governmental silencing of voices, but also the physical loss of your voice that comes with diseases like AIDS or COVID, which affect your respiration and your throat. To be able to speak is a privilege, so I'm very grateful that we have the voices of these incredible trailblazers, and that we're using them to make our own language today. We'll never shut up.

**AS:** We'll never shut up.

**WG:** We'll keep screaming at the top of our lungs.



Figure 7. Nan Goldin, *Cookie Mueller*, 1990.

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<sup>10</sup> JP Borum, DUETS: Che Gossett & Alice O'Malley Reichel In Conversation on Chloe Dzubilo, ed. Nelson Santos (New York, NY: Visual AIDS, 2016), 16.