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INTIMACY, PHOTOGRAPHY, SHAME
1969–1992

HARRISON ADAMS

Intimacy, Photography, Shame

This study argues that intimacy requires an overcoming of shame, and each of these artists, in their own way, uses photography to frame moments that can be shameful to some and intimate others, leaving it to the viewer to navigate this affectively perilous terrain.

From the cancellation of Mapplethorpe's retrospective The Perfect Moment to the obscenity trial in Cincinnati shortly thereafter, to Hujar's lesser-known but equally "hardcore" imagery, to Goldin's gritty depictions of domestic violence and substance abuse, to the accusations of child pornography thrown at Mann's photographs of her own children, the photographers at the heart of this book have probed the limits of acceptability. But there is more to their work than merely controversy; it's what causes the controversy that matters. The notion of intimacy is at stake in some of our most important human relationships, and thus a great deal hinges on both achieving and preserving intimacy.

This book will be of interest to scholars working in art history, photography and gender studies.

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Intimacy, Photography, Shame

1969–1992

Harrison Adams

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Contents

List of Illustrations *viii*
Acknowledgments *xii*

Introduction: The Avoidance of Shame 1

1 Robert Mapplethorpe: Toilet Water 34

2 Peter Hujar: The Naked and the Nude 73

3 Nan Goldin: Indecent Exposure 98

4 Sally Mann: A High Wind in Virginia 135

Bibliography *159*
Index *169*

Illustrations

0.1 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Man in a Polyester Suit*, 1980. Gelatin silver print. 45.5 × 35.4 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. 1

0.2 Peter Hujar, *Fran Lebowitz at Home in Morristown*, New Jersey, 1974. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 2

0.3 Nan Goldin, *Nan on Brian's lap, Nan's Birthday, New York City*, 1981. Silver-dye bleach print. 65.7 × 97.8 cm. © Nan Goldin. 3

0.4 Andreas Gursky, *Singapore Stock Exchange*, 1997. Chromogenic print. 132.1 × 235.6 cm. © Andreas Gursky/Courtesy Sprüth Magers/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation/Art Resource, NY/Scala, Florence. 14

0.5 Thomas Ruff, *Portrait (P. Lappat)*, 1988. Chromogenic print. 210.8 × 165.1 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Anthony Meier © 2024 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Photograph: Katherine du Tiel. 15

0.6 Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Earliest Human Relatives*, 1994. Gelatin silver print. 65.2 × 83.2 cm. © Hiroshi Sugimoto, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. 16

0.7 Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978. Transparency in light box. 168 × 258.4 × 7 cm. © Jeff Wall, courtesy the artist. 16

0.8 Richard Prince, Untitled (Cowboy), 1991–1992. Ektacolor photograph. 155.3 × 224.2 cm. Edition of 2 + 1AP. © Richard Prince, courtesy Gagosian. 17

0.9 Still from Vincent Meessen, *Vita Nova*, 2009. © Vincent Meessen. Courtesy Jubilee Platform for Artistic Research. 22

0.10 Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, 1970. Gelatin silver print. 40.6 × 40.6 cm. Documentation Photo Credit: Rosemary Mayer. Generali Foundation Collection—Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg © Generali Foundation and Adrian Piper Research Archive (APRA) Foundation Berlin. 25

0.11 Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, 1972. Gelatin silver print. 20.1 x 29.7 cm. © Vito Acconci / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, courtesy Maria Acconci. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 26

1.1 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Lou, N.Y.C.*, 1978. Selenium-toned gelatin silver print. 19.5 × 19.5 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. 36

1.2 Robert Giard, *Douglas Crimp*, 1986. Gelatin silver print. © Estate of Robert Giard. 42

1.3 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Jesse McBride*, 1976. Gelatin silver print. 36 × 36 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. 43

1.4 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait, N.Y.C.*, 1978. Gelatin silver print. 19.5 × 19.5 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. 45

1.5 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Helmut and Brooks, N.Y.C.*, 1978. Gelatin silver print. 19.5 × 19.5 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. 46

1.6 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter, N.Y.C.*, 1979. Gelatin silver print. 35.56 × 35.56 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. 48

1.7 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Rosie*, 1976. Gelatin silver print. 35.5 × 35.5 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. 49

1.8 Edward Weston, *Shells*, 1927. Gelatin silver print. 23 × 19 cm. © 2023 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. 55

1.9 Edward Weston, *Pepper*, 1929. Gelatin silver print. 12.8 × 18.7 cm. © 2023 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. 58

1.10 Edward Weston, *Excusado*, 1925. Gelatin silver print. 24 × 19 cm. © 2023 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. 59

1.11 Edward Weston, *Nude, Charis Wilson*, 1936. Gelatin silver print. 24 × 19 cm. © 2023 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. 61

1.12 Auguste Rodin, *The Hand of God*, 1907. Marble. 73.7 × 60.3 × 64.1 cm. © 2023 Photo Scala, Florence/DeAgostini Picture Library. 62

1.13 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Richard, N.Y.C.*, 1977. Gelatin silver print. 19.5 × 19.7 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. 65

1.14 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Tulips*, 1977. Gelatin silver print. 19.5 × 19.7 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. 67

2.1 Peter Hujar, *Come Out!!*, 1969. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 74

2.2 Peter Hujar, *John Waters*, 1975. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 76

2.3 Peter Hujar, *Ann Wilson*, 1975. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 78

2.4 Peter Hujar, *James Waring*, 1975. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 79

2.5 Peter Hujar, *Orgasmic Man*, 1969. Gelatin silver print. 35.6 × 27.9 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 82
2.6 Peter Hujar, *Orgasmic Man (I–III)*, 1969. Gelatin silver print. Each 35.6 × 27.9. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 83
2.7 Peter Hujar, *David Wojnarowicz Reclining*, 1981. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 84
2.8 Peter Hujar, *John McClellan*, 1981. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 87
2.9 Peter Hujar, *Rabbit, Westtown*, New York, 1978. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 88
2.10 Peter Hujar, *Duck*, *Germantown*, 1982. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 90
2.11 Peter Hujar, *Fanny*, 1978. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 91
2.12 Peter Hujar, *Face of a Dog* [*Clarissa Dalrymple's Dog, Kirstin*] 1984. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco. 92
3.1 Nan Goldin, *Cover of the Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 1986. © Nan Goldin. 99
3.2 Nan Goldin, *Self-portrait in Bed, New York City*, 1981. Dye destruction print. 22.9 × 34.7 cm. © Nan Goldin. 108
3.3 Nan Goldin, *Ectopic Pregnancy Scar,* 1980. Dye destruction print. 22.9 × 34.7 cm. © Nan Goldin. 109
3.4 Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man*, 1955. 2023 © Photo Scala, Florence/Museum of Modern Art, New York. 110
3.5 Nan Goldin, *Barbara in Front of Family House, Silver Spring, MD*, 1964. © Nan Goldin. 111
3.6 Nan Goldin, *Suzanne with Mona Lisa, Mexico City*, 1981. Dye destruction print. 22.9 × 34.7 cm. © Nan Goldin. 114
3.7 Nan Goldin, *The Parents at the French Restaurant*, Cambridge, MA, 1985. Dye destruction print. 22.9 × 34.7 cm. © Nan Goldin. 115
3.8 Nan Goldin, *The Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Coney Island Wax Museum*, 1981. Dye destruction print. 22.9 × 34.7 cm. © Nan Goldin. 116
3.9 Nan Goldin, *Naomi, Marlene and Colette on the Street*, Boston, MA, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 51 × 41 cm. © Nan Goldin. 118

3.10 Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *Charles Sodokoff and Arthur Webber Using Their Top Hats to Hide Their Faces*, 1942. Gelatin silver print. 26.2 × 33.5 cm. 2023 © Photo Scala, Florence/Museum of Modern Art, New York. 119
3.11 Nan Goldin, *Heart-Shaped Bruise, New York City*, 1980. Dye destruction print. 22.9 × 34.7 cm. © Nan Goldin. 121
3.12 Nan Goldin, *Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City*, 1983. Dye destruction print. 22.9 × 34.7 cm. © Nan Goldin. 123
3.13 Nan Goldin, *Brian with the Flintstones, New York City*, 1981. Dye destruction print. 22.9 × 34.7 cm. © Nan Goldin. 123
3.14 Richard Prince, *Can You Imagine*, 1989. Acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas. 190.5 × 121.9 cm. © Richard Prince. Courtesy Gagosian. 126
3.15 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #30*, 1979. Gelatin silver print. 17.3 × 24.1 cm. © Cindy Sherman. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. 127
4.1 Dorothea Lange, *Damaged Child, Shacktown, Elm Grove, Oklahoma*, 1936. Contact gelatin silver print of original negative. 4 × 5 in. © Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress). 150

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Introduction
The Avoidance of Shame

This book is about four photographers who explore how and when we do not feel shame. The four photographers, Robert Mapplethorpe (Figure 0.1), Peter Hujar (Figure 0.2), and Nan Goldin (Figure 0.3), are invested, each in their own way, in the problem of how to overcome shame. Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar were gay men who came of age during the social upheaval and Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and made art that addressed the taboos of same-sex desire with homoerotic imagery. Nan Goldin's work in part documents a physically abusive relationship with her boyfriend, as well as the

Figure 0.1 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Man in a Polyester Suit*, 1980. Gelatin silver print. 45.5 × 35.4 cm. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission.

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Figure 0.2 Peter Hujar, *Fran Lebowitz at Home in Morristown*, New Jersey, 1974. Gelatin silver print. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © 1987 the Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery San Francisco.

bona-fide unrespectable bohemian existence of her larger community of friends and lovers. Sally Mann made sexually provocative photographs of her own children. In each case, the shame of homosexual desire, the shame of codependency and domestic violence and the shame of child exploitation are brought both into focus and into question. Each of these photographers transmutes what would ordinarily be a source of shame into one of intimacy.

As this is an academic study, it behooves me to be more explicit about what I mean by shame and intimacy. There are several approaches to this question, all of which will factor significantly into the argument to come. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault famously argues that contrary to popular belief, the era of sexual repression, in other words the time before the movements of sexual and gender liberation of the twentieth century, was marked as much by a wholesale repression of sexuality as it

Figure 0.3 Nan Goldin, *Nan on Brian's lap, Nan's Birthday, New York City*, 1981. Silver-dye bleach print. 65.7 × 97.8 cm. © Nan Goldin.

was by a full-fledged interrogation of it—a need to speak and talk about sex constantly. Sexuality became an object of knowledge, a thing to be studied and regulated, an essence. It went from an activity, subject to its own rules and prohibitions, yet hypothetically available to everyone, to an identity to be shaped, classified and controlled.[1]

Foucault marks this shift in the way sexuality is thought about by noting a parallel between the sacrament of confession and the so-called "talking cure" of psychiatry. In the former, one confesses in order to be forgiven for one's sins; in the latter, one discovers one's most disturbing desires in order to alleviate psychic pathology. In both cases, something ostensibly wrong with one's self is corrected through revealing something hidden and disreputable. The work of Mapplethorpe, Hujar, Goldin and Mann can be thought of as confessional insofar as it puts some aspect of themselves on display, either as self-portraiture or in the form of portraits of their primary attachments, friends, lovers and families. Their work is also confessional in the sense that something ordinarily compromising, indecorous, not-quite-respectable-in-mixed-company is being exposed. The most obvious instance of this would be the fact that the nude features prominently in each one of their oeuvres—though the stability of this genre will come under significant pressure in the pages to come. These artists share aspects of their lives most people would only share with those closest to them (if even then): a wet bed, a black eye, tears, drug use, sadomasochistic sex. More subtly, in the case of Goldin and Mann, their work deals with themes like motherhood, family and romance in ways that could be called "maudlin." While these feelings might be acceptable in private life, art that traffics in them is frequently derided and dismissed as kitsch.[2]

Superficially, one could also call the art of Mapplethorpe, Hujar, Goldin and Mann "intimate," because they take something ordinarily deemed private and expose it to public view, but this approach misses what is at stake in intimacy. Intimacy entails risk: the risk of rejection, disapproval, misunderstanding and shame. Intimacy means putting one's sense of self on the line, a self that is dependent for its coherence and stability upon the salutary views of others. Mapplethorpe, Hujar, Goldin and Mann put their vulnerabilities on full display. And much of their art homes in on this initial boundary crossing that results in doubt, discomfort, anxiety, shame, embarrassment and prejudice. Are these just pictures a mother took of her children (Mann)? Is this just someone's sappy photo-diary (Goldin)? Are these just flattering editorial photos of friends (Hujar)? Is this just high-brow porn (Mapplethorpe et al.)? Is this just high-brow child porn (Mann)? Is this just racial fetishism (Mapplethorpe, again)? Indeed, there's always something disrespectable, or at least "unserious," in their work waiting in the wings—something that threatens to be a source of shame.

In this study, I define intimacy as shamelessness without shame. Since we can feel shame for doing the wrong thing, since we can feel shame for someone who lacks shame, and since we can be shamed for lacking shame, to be shamelessly shameless suggests moving beyond the trap of feeling shame no matter what. Shame is frequently attached to acts of misplaced intimacy, of being too familiar, vulnerable, honest or loving at the wrong place and time and/or to the wrong person. More generally, shame is a loss of approval in the eyes of others, including one's self. It marks a psycho-social separation of the individual from the group. Thus, intimacy must entail an act of shamelessness that does not result in more shame, ergo my definition that intimacy is shamelessness without shame, a shamelessness that does not lead to a loss of approval.[3]

Intimacy, or shamelessness without shame, requires accepting the potential for danger and harm while also not succumbing to that potential. To be vulnerable can—though not always—rob power of its pleasure. When someone without coercion confesses to a transgression, when someone deliberately shows weakness, too much emotion, or the wrong kind of it (for example, crying at a funeral is acceptable, crying at work is not) the someone else, *ourself*, is often put in a position of too much power—or of having power but not being able to use it, because to do so would be cruel. We perceive this as cruel not only because we feel we should be more sympathetic, but also because we identify with this instantiation of vulnerability. In the case studies that comprise this book, each one dedicated to a particular artist, I try to tease out this affective dimension of Mapplethorpe, Hujar, Goldin and Mann's photography, and how their work can both elicit and dispel shame. Shame can be individual and idiosyncratic, but it can also be a powerful barometer of cultural expectation and prejudices. This study only considers the broader social determinants of shame. It is impossible to account for the diversity of personal responses viewers might have to the art in question.

Theorizing Shame

More needs to be said about what shame is and what it means to refer to shame as an "affect." The sociologist Erving Goffman offers what is probably the most intuitive approach. In his 1963 study *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman posits that everyone has a virtual social identity. What he means by this is that whenever we encounter a stranger, this interaction is invariably informed by a set of expectations about who this person is, in terms of both their social status and their

character. Further interaction confirms or disconfirms these expectations. Stigma, according to Goffman, is that which "discredits" an individual's social identity and lowers his esteem in the eyes of others. Stigma is highly circumstantial. What might be a stigma to some might not be one to others. And yet still others might be cognizant of a stigma but also unaffected by it: Goffman explains, the stigmatized individual

> insulated by his alienation, protected by identity beliefs of his own…feels that he is a full-fledged normal human being, and that we are the ones who are not quite human…This possibility is celebrated in exemplary tales about Mennonites, Gypsies, shameless scoundrels, and very orthodox Jews.[4]

In most instances, however, stigma results in shame. The stigmatized individual frequently agrees with society's negative judgment of himself. He sees himself as deficient and blames himself for this failing. Goffman writes:

> The standards he has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing.[5]

The stigmatized individual will then either try to hide their stigma or find some means of eliminating it.

As lucid as Goffman's formulation is, it has less to say about what shame actually is. It largely takes the feeling at face value. For a more systematic approach, we have to turn to a contemporary of Goffman, the psychologist Silvan Tomkins and his study *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, the first two and the most influential volumes of which were published between 1962 and 1963. Tomkins defined the affects as the "primary motivational system" of human beings.[6] His groundbreaking theory was meant to correct the neglect of affects in psychology and psychoanalysis, which had hitherto privileged biological drives like thirst, hunger, breathing, defecation, sleep and sex, as the primary motivators of human action. He sets the biological determinism of a self-preserving human subject posited by the sciences against the free will of a self-reflexive human subject, one who is not strictly circumscribed by biological impulses, posited by philosophy. Tomkins argues that both views are lopsided: "The distinction [between the affects and drives] is not between higher and lower, between spiritual and biological, but between *more general* and *more specific biological* motives."[7] Affects and drives, in terminology Tomkins borrows from systems theory and computer science, have varying degrees of freedom.[8] Both operate according to feedback systems with "self-punishing and self-rewarding characteristics."[9] Drives are highly limited by timing and object. For instance, thirst cannot be satisfied by sleep, and we must drink a certain amount every so often. But the intensity of the drives is largely determined by the affect system. Tomkins' centering of the affects was part of his intervention into psychological discourse that he thought placed too much emphasis on the drives and too little on the qualitative and quantitative experiences of those drives. Affects are freer and more complex. They can take anything as their object and can operate over any time scale, with varying intensity, depending on the person and the circumstance. For example, the affects fear and distress can make it harder to sleep,

and shame and embarrassment can make us confine our bowel movements to the bathroom. Thus, Tomkins writes:

> There is literally no kind of object which has not historically been linked to one or another of the affects. Positive affect has been invested in pain and every kind of human misery, and negative affect has been experienced as a consequence of pleasure and every kind of triumph of the human spirit. Masochism and puritanism are possible only for an animal capable of using his reason to govern his feelings. Thus he comes to be able to love death and hate life. The same mechanisms enable him to invest any and every aspect of existence with the magic of excitement and joy or with the dread of fear or shame or distress.[10]

This does not mean that the affects are randomly activated, but that they are highly context dependent.

In its original formulation, Tomkins' affect system has eight core affects, divided into three groups. The first group, the positive affects, includes interest-excitement—"interest" being the affect's low end of intensity and "excitement" its high end—and enjoyment-joy. The second group, called "resetting," only includes one affect, surprise-startle. The third group, the negative affects, is the largest: it comprises distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust and anger-rage. The affects that will be most important for our purposes are interest-excitement, surprise-startle and, of course, shame-humiliation. Tomkins defines interest-excitement as what "supports the necessary and the possible"; in order to accomplish anything, from quotidian minutiae to leading a meaningful life, we need to be interested, if not excited in our aims.[11] Surprise-startle is more unusual insofar as it is neither a negative nor a positive affect. Surprise-startle arrests and resets affective activity. Tomkins stresses that the affects and emotions that follow the interruption produced by surprise-startle should not be confused with the initial reaction. Surprise-startle behaves in some ways like a drive but that is still an affect, while sexuality, as we saw above, is a drive that behaves like an affect but is still a drive. Surprise-startle cannot be influenced by the other affects; in fact, it's unique insofar as it overpowers them. It is difficult if not impossible to suppress a startle. Interest-excitement, surprise-startle and shame-humiliation place an enormous emphasis on the sense of sight as part of their feedback mechanism. Tomkins attributes one or more gestures or facial expressions to each affect. Interest-excitement is paired with "eyebrows down, track, look, listen"; surprise-startle with "eyebrows up, eyes blink"; and shame-humiliation with "eyes down, head-down."[12]

Affect theory should not be confused with Fredric Jameson's oft-quoted characterization of postmodernism as "the waning of affect." By "affect," Jameson is referring generally to emotion and specifically expression, the idea that emotion is experienced as an inner state that is then signified outwardly.[13] Expression is precisely what these photographers are not interested in; viewers will have trouble finding outward signs of emotion in their work, with a few exceptions. These artists do not illustrate shame; they produce it. In other words, as opposed to a model that sequesters feeling inside of the subject only to let it "out" if provided the proper stimulus; in the photography of Mapplethorpe, Hujar, Goldin and Mann, the affects are what produce and transform the subject.

The approach to Tomkins pursued in these pages closely follows Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's adaptation of his work to address the issue of gay shame. One of the reasons Sedgwick's adaptation of Tomkins is valuable is *not* because she is trying to make literary criticism more like neuroscience and psychology, but rather because of enormous