

# MEET 33

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# LETITIA

## BY LEIGH LEDARE

MARCH 7, 2015

I wrote the following letter from an internet café on what was an extremely hot summer's day in Marseille. This document intended to introduce the first large-scale exhibition of my work, *Pretend You're Actually Alive*. Numerous projects and nearly six years later, when asked to represent examples from this project, I thought it might be illuminating to reprise these earlier reflections, reprinted here in their original form. Paradoxically, it strikes me that one of the most repetitive things is the desire for constant newness. While it's hardly possible to reconstitute in print the complexity of a project such as *Pretend*, let alone the form of its exhibition, I wanted to return to these thoughts in the hopes of producing not only a deeper focus than might typically be found in the context of a magazine, but also to draw attention to disjunctions between the work, my own thoughts around the work, and the initial context in which it appeared.

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JULY 3, 2009 MARSEILLE, FRANCE

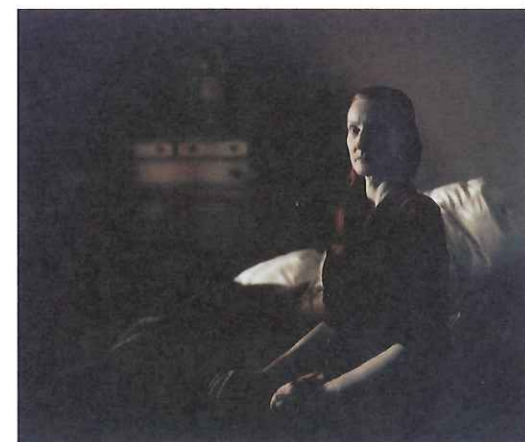
I've been asked to write a statement to lend context to the exhibition I've displayed at Les Rencontres d'Arles. The work in this show is comprised primarily from materials that relate to my book, *Pretend You're Actually Alive*, published in 2008 by Andrew Roth. While this is ostensibly a portrait of my mother, I more precisely regard it as an archive of our relationship as it was continuously formed – and reformed – over a period of nine years and stretching back much further.

I decided one Christmas to make a visit home after not having seen my mother for 18 months. I knocked on the door of her apartment at the time we had arranged. After a couple of minutes the door swung open and she stood there naked, smiling at me with her hands on her hips. She asked me to follow her to her room while she got dressed. As we moved down the hallway to her room she began speaking to someone. On her bed, a young man, almost exactly my age, was sprawled out naked. He rolled over to see me, saying hello before rolling back over on his side and returning to sleep. I saw this as her announcement to me of what she was up to at this period in her life, almost as though to say "take it or leave it."

I began making pictures as my way of dealing at the time with being present in this situation. Continually, it has been important for me to ask myself why I was making these images and why she was displaying herself to me in a way that so fiercely transgressed the authorized boundaries between mother and son. My sense is that her sexuality served multiple purposes: shielding herself from her own sense of ageing; attempting to trade on her beauty before her looks waned; procuring an intimacy with me, often through a substitute figure; laying claim to posterity; and in a very poignant way, as an attempt to undermine her father's expectations of her, both as his daughter and as the mother of my brother and me.

She had never wanted to be normal. Most people who've known her have thought that she was creating problems. Still, creating problems constitutes a definitive act of creativity, and undeniably my mother as an artist was capable of great effect. I was immensely attracted to her sense of play and the urgency she exhibited in the many roles between which she shifted effortlessly: her precocious youth as a professional ballerina performing with the New York City Ballet; a

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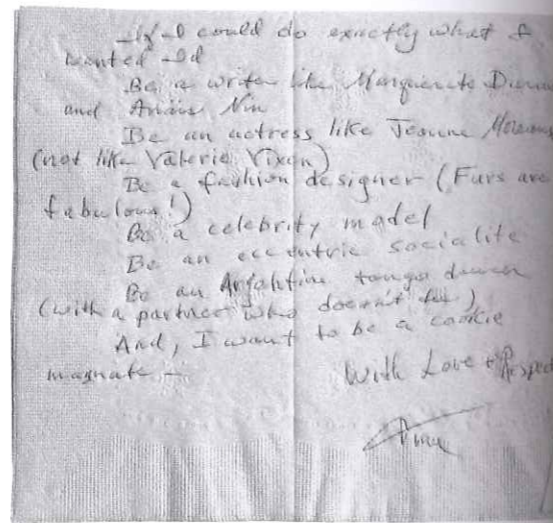
rials that have consequence as they circulate in the world; that hold traces of the attitudes of their making. Photographs are extremely powerful in how they construct meaning and in the diverse uses to which one can put them. Their meanings shift dramatically depending on the context in which they appear, and the subtle details of the participants and the circumstances at play. Often images are containers of very ambivalent meanings, implying ideals through elements that remain absent.

What were the different reasons for each of these photographs to be taken? What ethical dimensions are at play between the creator of the image, the subject, and the viewer? What does it mean for the private to be made public? What is it as a book that circulates? As a show? And, in this particular context, beside the work of Nan Goldin and her colleagues? The overriding job to interpret the work is the reader's concern, and they must do this according to their own experiences, ethics and values.

Of the 64 works in my portion of the show, a number of these are texts written in English. Les Rencontres have asked me to speak about these. I present them here because they are necessary in conveying the texture of the entire project. Whether they are understood or not, it is understood that something is happening. They point to a context in which the images circulate, and that is part and parcel of the work as a whole. They also point to this not being a project exclusively about photography. For all the formidable strengths of photography, there are many things it cannot do. As stressed earlier, I do not see this as a portrait of one woman's eccentricity but as a temporal mapping of reactions to realities in the world: psychological realities we carry with us from situation to situation; positions we must negotiate; subtexts within which we find ourselves living.

To quickly summarize a number of these: an interview printed on the book's cover where my mother discusses the inter-dependency of the photographer and subject from the point of view of the muse as author, conspicuously leaving out mention of our relationship as mother and son.

A 17 Magazine profile of my mother when she was 16: "I've had dancing scholarships since I was 13 years old... I make my own clothes and raise St. Bernard dogs too. Without all of this I



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1. *Pretend You're Actually Alive* (Installation, Les Rencontres d'Arles), 2009
2. *Mom and Mom in Photobooth*, 2008
3. *Mom as Baby Jane*, 2005
4. *Glossy*, 2002
5. *Grama and Me in Hospital*, 2002
6. *Mom in New Home*, 2007
7. *Mom and Catch 22*, 2002
8. *Brother High*, 2002
9. *Pretend You're Actually Alive* (Installation, Les Rencontres d'Arles), 2009
10. *Mom Fucking in Mirror*, 2002
11. *Mom with Hand on Bed*, 2006
12. *Mother's Napkin*, 2002
13. *Mom's Profile in Seventeen Magazine*, 1966



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would feel incomplete." A collage containing advertisements where she described herself in the personals section of various newspapers: "Exotic dancer and former ballerina seeks wealthy husband, not someone else's." My grandmother's collecting and her relationship both with my mother and with my grandfather. My grandmother's illness and impending death, and my mother's reaction. A letter from my mother to my family insisting on letting bygones be bygones after taking out \$48,000 on my brother's credit cards, buying what she claimed were gifts from men, and after she felt considerably victimized by the circumstances of my brother's life. Lists of role models and girls I had desired when I was younger. An image of my ex-wife and me photographed on our wedding night. An image of my brother high, taken on his birthday. Larry Clark's photograph of me holding a gun from when I lived with him in my early 20s. Men my mother dated, as described to me by her. A view from a collection of grave plots in Idaho that my grandfather gifted each member of my family for Christmas. A letter that reveals my brother having pressed charges against my mother for identity theft. Smoked salmon, TVs, panties and other gifts "showered" on my mother. The uncanny likeness of one of

my mother's boyfriends to my brother, and my brother's irritation. My mother's expressed desires, written on a napkin, of who she would be in an ideal life: "A writer like Marguerite Duras; an actress like Jean Moreau, not Valerie Vixen;" a tango dancer with a partner who doesn't die." An inventory of my mother's possessions in the form of a will, asking me to administer these precious things of hers to people who will appreciate them and appreciate her for who she was. A grid of photographs containing all 36 images from an entire role of film.

Lastly, the video... One day a package arrived in the mail at my door. Inside were two tapes and a small note from my mother telling me these were a gift and that it was now my responsibility to make something out of them. Her and two family friends had set out to make a soft-core fetish spanking film with every intention of selling it for a profit; however, the footage was so flawed that the tapes sat for two years without being made into anything. Editing this footage, I removed the failed story the initial artists had attempted to film and left my mother playing to the direction of these two men, leaving what can be seen as a real armature for the missing narrative. This video, and this show, are my gift to her. LL

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