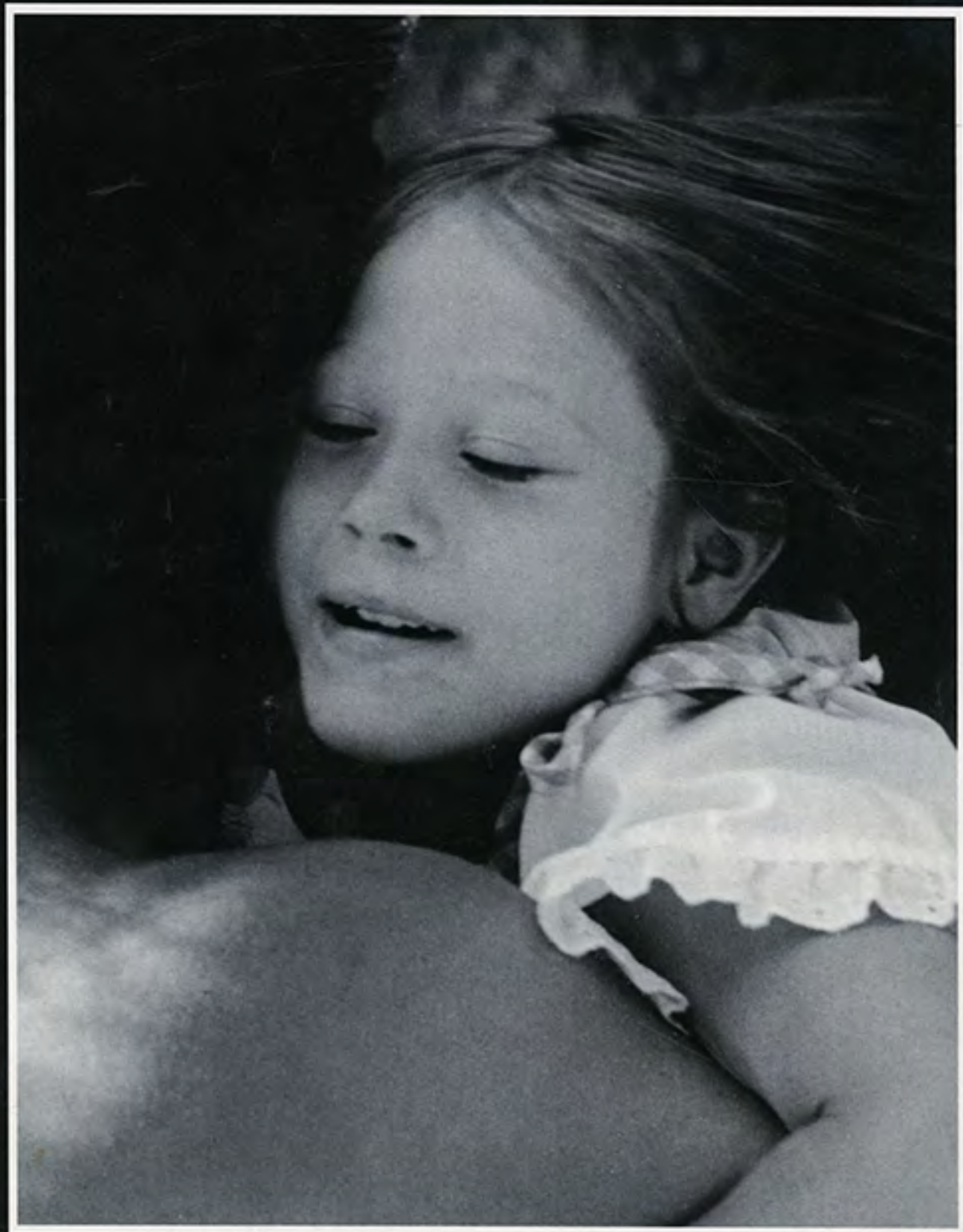


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Talking Pictures: Family Photos

by Dick Blau

With: Tom Bamberger, photographer,
Dick Blau, Cecelia Condit, video artist,
and Jane Gallop, theorist

Dick: Here's one version of the story. I was living with Heide in Buffalo where I was working in the theater, something I had done since I was young. Dissatisfied with the photographic record of my productions—at least this is how I explained it at the time—I got a grant and bought a camera and immediately became a photographer. I knew that if you got the needle between the plus and the minus something would come out. It allowed me entrance into a human drama that was much more powerful than the work I had been doing on the stage.

Jane: Everybody takes photographs. It is an art form with a real function in life.

Tom: That's also what makes it hard.

Dick: You can just pick up the camera.

Jane: Everyone can do it. Sometimes I think the photograph is more real than the reality. You can make a photo and see what is going on—things you can't necessarily register in daily life.

Tom: I would have another take on that. I think that photography is about alienation. It's about not being close to someone.

Dick: It puts you more in touch with something than you usually experience and yet it also allows you a certain abstraction.

Cecelia: You once said that this marriage produced a great body of work, and that was one reason why it kept going when things were not so good. It seems to have tapped a source which was more than the marriage. Maybe it tapped a childhood source. Released a whole chain of issues in your life that had to be broken down.

Tom: When you look at a picture, you inherit the photographer's position. Avedon, for example, is in absolute control.



No matter how weird an Avedon picture is, you never feel uncomfortable. It's kind of a lark. But here it's more like Arbus, who never really separated herself from her subjects: the relationship is charged, complex, convoluted.

Jane: There is a kind of vulnerability in all of the pictures of Heide. I guess I would say that her effect is childlike in the sense that she isn't stand offish.

Tom: Heide takes on the camera but basically she wants you to feel sorry for her. But you don't feel sorry the way you might feel sorry for an adult. It's heroic, and yet there is also something unheroic in the vulnerability.

Jane: I don't think it's so much that she's like a child, but there's something precious here, exposed in a way that it's not in adults. Children's emotions are less processed by civilization. I think that is part of what was attractive about making pictures of Heide.

Tom: Let's take another husband and wife team, Stieglitz and O'Keefe. In every one of their pictures you sense a certain kind of game plan, certain rules they both know. What's disconcerting about Dick's pictures is that he and Heide are not playing by the same rules.

Jane: She's obviously a reluctant subject, but clearly not in the classic way we think of reluctance. There's a collaboration in these pictures: She's performing reluctance for the camera.

Cecelia: And she's the victim. That's what makes you uncomfortable.

Jane: Photography has been called aggression. Especially if you go up to strangers and take pictures of them. There's some of that here, but the difference is that these are pictures of somebody

who knows what's going to happen, who knows the photographer, and who is getting something—an image of herself as victim—from the exchange.

Tom: You're saying that these are taken with her permission.

Cecelia: Oh, they're ugly, and she's a pretty lady. Her hair's not clean.

Tom: She certainly could have stopped you from doing it.

Jane: Blurred herself, for example.

Cecelia: She was tremendously generous. I think the pictures are strangely respectful too.

Tom: They admire this person. They never rule out admiration. That is easily done in a photograph.

Tom: Unlike Stieglitz and O'Keefe, who were both very clear about what they were doing, this collaboration works at a less obvious level.

Jane: This is a collaboration that doesn't look like collaboration. They were working together to produce the same thing: an image of a discord between two people. They shared the perception and the activity. She was performing pain, and you were picking it up with your camera.

Tom: I look at these pictures, and one question arises. What are you the photographer doing about it? How are you implicated in the suffering? Are you causing it?

Jane: Are you getting off on it?

Cecelia: Or was he simply taking pictures of how HE felt. You both were suffering. Really: somebody looking at somebody who's clearly not smiling back at him.

Jane: Sometimes when a person does not admit that he's suffering, what he sees is the suffering in somebody else.

Dick: I knew I was suffering. And I thought that's what art was all about.

Cecelia: What life was all about.

Dick: The pictures we've begun to look at now are part of a series that I shot nearly a decade later. The project involved two families, my own and my friend Jake's.

Tom: They're the extension of the Heide pictures.

Jane: But turned into narrative. They are very different formally, a different genre, but the feeling and tone are somehow the same. These pictures bespeak some sort of tragic event.

Dick: In fact there was no event.

Cecelia: More at the breakfast table than anywhere else.

Tom: Something begins in the Heide series, and now it's getting played out more visibly. In the Summer pictures your relation to Heide seems to have broken off. In the Heide series it didn't have to break. I'm not suggesting that you can tell from these pictures that Dick's literally made up his mind to leave, but something has happened.

Cecelia: Heide's not in that many of these pictures.

Jane: The tragedy here is her death as an interesting subject.

Tom: Part of what's odd about these pictures is that they're not landscapes. The sun's beating down on these people.



You don't see it, but you feel its oppression.

Jane: The water is threatening.

Cecelia: And they're standing in all these twigs.

Jane: The pictures are not really about the outside. They're about family, yet

none of them was taken in the house. That's why you call them *Scenes from a Wisconsin Summer*. Summer is the time when you take the family out. To nature not as a place away from culture but rather as the site for some kind of very primitive culture, a place where the only cultural roles are Father, Mother, Child.

Jane: Most of these pictures are sexy.



Cecelia: But it is the children who are sexy.

Tom: The adults cannot compete.

Cecelia: This poor tired looking lady. Look at those old hands. How old is she? Thirty five?

Jane: On the other hand, the girls' hair is beautiful and their skin is gorgeous. The girls have a mystery to show you, and that's what the camera loves. The only figures in this series that have the charge of those portraits of Heide are the girls. They're at a different stage in life and they're different people, but the girls also know that the camera is there and they are also engaged in a complicated performance.

Cecelia: But Dick's attitude seems different than in the earlier pictures of Heide. There it was identification and difference as they occur in a complex relationship. There's a sense of longing in these pictures. This stuff is sheer ache.

Cecelia: Take this picture of the child in the water with the woman in the back. It's as if even though the children are beautiful things, they still grow up to be like her.

Jane: Terrible thing about little girls. They turn out to be hags. The pictures are about repetition.

Tom: I don't see it like that. I see the child emerging from a primordial element. We think she's going to make it but we're not sure, and we know this person in the back can't help her. There she is on that little pedestal, so far removed. If anything happened to the child...

Jane: I can't imagine those figures interacting; I only think of them as symbolically related.

Jane: How does Jake function in the



pictures? Is he a figure for Dick?

Cecelia: I think so. He's the man, the silent man, he's your surrogate.

Jane: Everybody plays a primal role here. These are their jobs. We see families and family positions.

Cecelia: Look at Jake. There he is axing some tree. Cutting off his leg.

Jane: I just think of his violence. Then there are the two girls in the foreground. Look at the way their legs are locked, wrapped around one another. These are really sexy poses.

Cecelia: And the guy has no way out.

Tom: Except to exhaust himself. That looks like self-flagellation.

Jane: I just get a sense of the threat. Of this figure in the background that they're unaware of, with an ax.

Cecelia: It's growing up that's their biggest threat. That's why they look so vulnerable.

Jane: Look at those long legs. Suddenly they don't look like little girls anymore. They're about to spring into adolescence. That's part of what's sexy about it. It's not so much that I see Jake as literally threatening them. It's their innocent sexiness in combination with this image of violence.

Tom: When I first looked at these pictures I didn't really think about their sexuality so much. I picked up a mourning in the camera. The kids know this is no holiday. They're suffering along with everyone else. Dick's desire to offset the suffering is palpable. The pictures seem intended to make up for it in some way.

Jane: What makes these photographs so





moving is the cohabitation of suffering and something very desirable. When we look at pictures of suffering they're not desirable. We feel bad. There's something in this scene the photographer still desires. It's not the suffering, but it's linked with the suffering.

Tom: It seems like the only thing the kids can do is be sexual. That's what you've endowed them with to counter all this. That's the sense in which they're adult, the way in which they might possibly cope with all that's going on.

Jane: What's sexy about prepubescence is that something's about to happen. For the women all possibilities have been played out. If one were to read the wish of these pictures it is that the mothers should die and the fathers and daughters live happily ever after.

Tom: The kids are the real future, and they're good at it. They're already on their way. Ironically, their deliverance is going to come from rejecting their fathers.

Jane: Is it us? Or is it something about Dick's pictures that makes us end up talking so much about life rather than pictures?

Cecelia: I think it's the photographs.

Tom: There's a contact with something real here, something that would exist even if the camera wasn't there.

Jane: One can't imagine somebody staging these.

Cecelia: They are part of somebody's life. There's no doubt about it. This is tender stuff.

Tom: But the pictures are also symbolic, abstracted.

Jane: And there's the duplication, the



two families. It feels like the inevitable, archetypal drama of family.

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*Heaven knows, the other
doesn't*

