PUBLIC
IMAGES

BY KIKU ADATTO

THE IDEALS OF CHILDHOOD that we take for granted have been centuries in the making. In the medieval world, children ate, worked, played and dressed like adults. In the seventeenth century, a new idea arose; childhood became a special province of life, protected from the adult world and its corruptions. As Philippe Ariés shows in his classic study, *Centuries of Childhood,* there was a revolution in manners from "immodesty to innocence." The ribald jokes and sexual behavior of an earlier epoch gave way to strict prohibitions against sexual allusions in front of children. Children began to be dressed differently than adults, and became the subjects of portrait painting, educational reform, and a growing body of advice books. As these ideals took hold, so did the view of the child as being our most authentic and natural self. Christian theology and Enlightenment thinking merged to form a view of the child as embodying the soul of humanity, without dissimulation or artifice. Ariés cites a caption to an engraving of children's toys that sums up this new view of childhood: "This is the age of innocence... the golden age of human life... the age when life is easy and death holds no terrors, the age to which the heavens are open.

Childhood
THE LAST OUTPOST OF THE SOUL

Editor's note: *The nature of childhood in contemporary society has become a point of contention. Issues that once were considered relegated to the adult world—sexual exploitation, drug abuse, homelessness and violence—now have become the domain of the child as well. If childhood no longer is an uncorrupted phase of human existence, what then characterizes it today? The answers often are as complicated as childhood itself. While politicians bandy about ubiquitous notions of "family values," social and cultural institutions have chimed in with alternate definitions. Two recent exhibitions at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, California*—The New Child: British Art and the Origins of Modern Childhood, 1730-1830 *and its photographic companion,* We Look and See—*charted sources for our attitudes about childhood, and illustrated many of its contemporary manifestations through photographs.* see *has extended the dialogue with a recent look at the work of Sally Mann (Issue 1:3), which Andy Grundberg characterized as being "brazen enough to ask us to shed the scales of our own skepticism about the possibility of innocent experience." (Grundberg furthers this discussion in this issue's "State of the Art" column.) Now, Kiku Adatto asks us to look at representative images from photography to consider whether the notion of childhood innocence has become an oxymoron. —Michael Read*

Southworth and Hawes, *Young Girl,* ca. 1845.

Let tender and gentle respect be shown to these young plants of the Church. Heaven is full of anger for whosoever scandalizes them."[1]

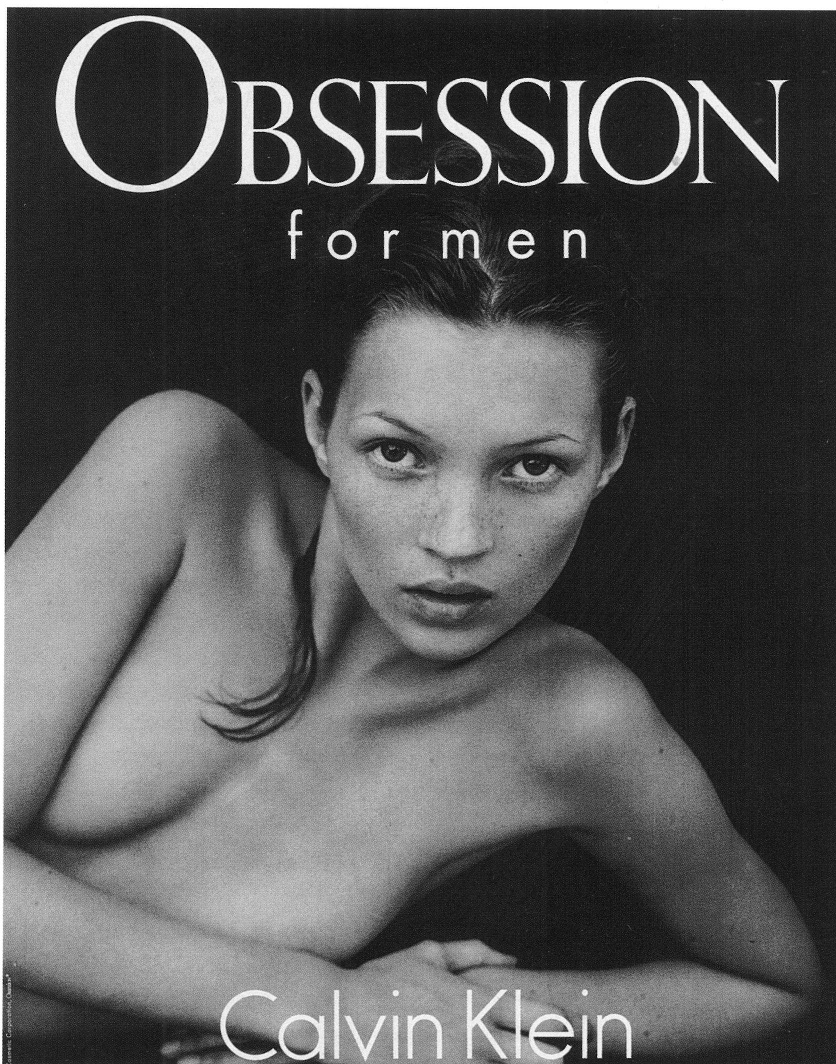
Today, we still hold these ideals dear, yet if we look closely at the images of children in photography, we see the soul of the child under siege. There has been a hollowing out of the belief in the innocence and moral agency of the child. As the boundaries that separate adulthood and childhood have eroded, children become subjected to the same forces that have eviscerated the soul from the rest of our moral landscape.

TWO FACES: FROM GRACE TO SOULLESS GAZE

THE TALE OF OUR TRANSFORMED VIEW OF CHILDHOOD can be told in the contrast between two pictures: an 1845 daguerreotype of a young girl by Southworth and Hawes, and the child-like woman in Calvin Klein's recent advertising campaign for Obsession cologne. Placed side by side, these two faces—separated by 150 years—bear an eerie resemblance. It is as if the girl in the daguerreotype had shed her innocence and modest dress, turned her face to the camera and assumed the soulless gaze of the undressed model.

The daguerreotype expresses the triumph of the ideals of childhood innocence and education in nineteenth-century America. It also realizes photography's early aspiration to go beyond appearance and capture the soul of the subject, the character and inner life of the person. The young girl has a natural grace that transcends the pose. She is not the camera's object. She is a subject in her own right.

Kate Moss, the model in the Obsession ad, is the polar opposite. There is nothing soulful in her look, no innocence in her provocative stare. Her dead-on look at the camera says, "You can have me." There is a certain terrifying quality to her objectification. It is as if two transparencies were placed over each other, each representing an opposing belief. The first layer is innocence. The overlay is eroticism. Together, they form the dissonance that sells. The message is: "If you like little girls, you'll love our cologne."



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FASHION'S CHILD

THE COMMINGLING OF INNOCENCE AND CARNALITY in the Obsession ad, and in Calvin Klein's subsequent ad campaign using even younger models, illustrates two trends in fashion photography. The first is the hard-edged eroticism pioneered by the European fashion photographer Helmut Newton, who posed his high fashion models in settings that suggested illicit sex, violence and sadomasochism. The second is the emphasis on the child-woman as supermodel. The "youthquake," as *Vogue* fashion editor Diana Vreeland called it, was marked by the enormous success in the late 1960s of the teenage model Twiggy, whose anorexic body evoked a little girl and whose wide-eyed face graced the cover of all the major magazines, from *Vogue* to *Newsweek.*

A more explicit coupling of childhood and adult sexuality was evidenced by the early career and meteoric rise of child model Brooke Shields, who began as the Ivory Snow baby in the 1960s and later went on to stardom in Louis Malle's 1978 film, *Pretty Baby,* the story of a twelve-year-old girl's initiation into a life of prostitution. In a *Time* review, Frank Rich spoke of Shields' performance in *Pretty Baby* as "a volatile mixture of both innocence and carnality," noting that the child actress "makes the audience feel that anything can happen when she is around."[2] In 1980, Shields posed in tight-fitting jeans for a series of Calvin Klein television ads, in which she says in a confiding tone, "You know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing."

THE POSE AT THE EDGE OF THE SOUL

BY THE 1990s, the merging of childhood innocence and adult sexuality had extended beyond the borders of commerce to the realm of art photography. In the work of Sally Mann, fashion's face is recreated in the most intimate sphere, her own immediate family.

In Mann's photograph, *Jessie at 5,* the pose is familiar, but it is not the stance of a child. It is the Obsession ad with the overlay of innocence and eroticism reversed. Here, the subject is a real child, the photographer's own daughter. Naked from the waste up, dressed in beads and earrings, she has assumed the provocative pose of a fashion model, her eyes the cultivated vacancy of commercial art. This image is far from the world of childhood make-believe, far from the whimsy of putting on mom's high-heel shoes and hat. Instead, it represents the crossing of a boundary, the erasure of innocence, the subsuming of childhood within an erotic framework.

Mann's 1992 book, *Immediate Family,* turns our expectations of the intimate sphere inside out. In many of Mann's images, childhood is not a haven or shelter, but a simulacra of adult life. The languid look that Mann elicits from her daughter Jesse in photographs like *Candy Cigarette* or *The New Mothers* is a pure act of cultural imitation. We have seen that face, that dangled cigarette in countless incarnations in the movies: in the women played by Jeanne Moreau, Simone Signoret, Lauren Bacall and Sharon Stone; in scenes from *The Big Sleep, Double Indemnity, Body Heat* and *Fatal Attraction;* in the performances of Madonna; in the acts of female impersonators; and, with a postmodern twist, in Cindy Sherman's impersonations of movie actresses in her self-portrait series, *Untitled Film Stills.* There is enormous cultural capital in the pose, and Mann's images draw their potency and appeal from it.

In other photographs, Mann poses her children in scenes which further challenge the boundary between childhood innocence and adult eroticism. Compare, for example, the photographs *Virginia at 3* and *Jessie at 5* in *Immediate Family.* Jesse's portrait evokes the stylized distance of fashion. She is on display, yet aloof, still partially clothed. But with Virginia, even this barrier has fallen. She stands facing the camera fully naked in the seductive stance of an adult, her hand on her hip, leaning against a bed. If you isolate Virginia's face from the pose Mann has constructed, she could be one of Juliet Margaret Cameron's angels, a child from *The Family of Man,* or a treasured portrait in your family album. But Virginia's innocence is transfigured by the pose that Mann has constructed, and the camera has become a voyeur of her nakedness.

By the 1960s, however, the nineteenth-century ideals of childhood that had held a privileged place in American culture for more than a century began to unravel in the art world and in the culture in general. The "youthquake" in fashion photography and the eroticism found in the work of Helmut Newton and other fashion photographers exploited different tendencies within the counterculture. But the deeper paradox was that even at its most idealistic, the celebration of youth played an unwitting role in the demise of the old ideal of childhood.

William Klein, *Dance In Brooklyn,* 1955.

THE DEMISE OF AN OLD IDEAL

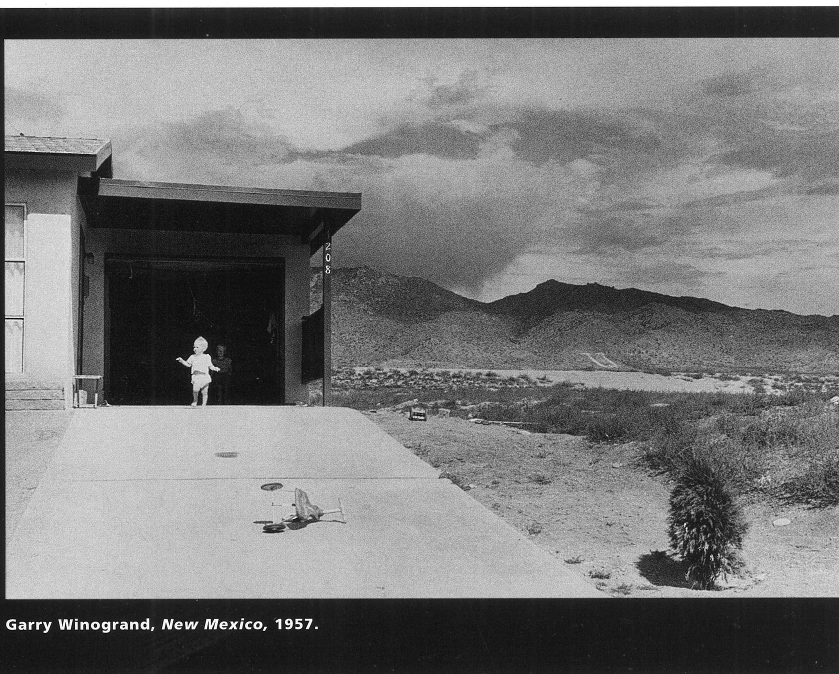
THE EROSION OF THE BOUNDARY between adult eroticism and the innocence of the naked child represents a departure from the cultural ideals that shaped art photography of nude children from the nineteenth century through the 1950s. In the Victorian pictorialism of Juliet Margaret Cameron, the nude child is part of sacred or mythic tableaus. In the 1920s and '30s, Edward Weston drew exquisite equivalencies between the nude bodies of his young models and forms of nature. In the 1950s, Wynn Bullock portrayed the nude images of mother and child to explore the themes of communion and isolation, bonding and loss, within an abstract symbolic framework that never challenged the belief in childhood innocence.

Central to this celebration was the impulse to universalize childhood and extend its ideals into adult life. There was a romantic desire to capture the child within, to return to naturalness and spontaneity, to bodies free from adult dress, to a selfhood without dissimulation. This trend did not seem to signal the demise of childhood ideals, but rather of their vigorous reassertion against the conventionality, conformism and repression associated with the 1950s. But it was a reassertion with a difference.

Once the aspiration to innocence spilled into the adult world, it washed away the boundary between childhood and adulthood that was a central tenet of nineteenth-century ideals. Immodesty no longer was distinguished from innocence; it had become a sign of sexual

repression. Eros and innocence merged in the celebration of the public display of nudity as an act of personal and political liberation.

The celebration of youth and the assault on convention produced a host of contrary images and impulses: the desire to be a "flower child" and a "freak;" the innocent lyricism of the Beatles and the hedonism of the Rolling Stones; young people dancing naked in the mud at Woodstock; and young people throwing themselves at the voyeurist fashion photographer in Antonioni's cult film *Blow Up.*



Garry Winogrand, *New Mexico*, 1957.

The blurring of old boundaries provided new openings and possibilities for subsequent generations of art and fashion photographers, such as Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jock Sturges, and Sally Mann. Their work was forged on the shifting ground of a new cultural paradigm that reconciled old polarities: innocence and eroticism; the intimate and public spheres; the personal and the political. The voyeurist potential of the camera and its ability to transgress the boundary between private and public life was not seen as an anathema, but was positively affirmed.

Some artists and photographers have acknowledged the eroticism and commercialism of their work. "I like and look for reactions," Helmut Newton told an interviewer during the 1980s. "I don't like kindness or gentleness. I want to provoke."[3] Mann, on the other hand, like Jock Sturges, insists on the innocence of her images: "I don't think of my children, and I don't think anyone else should think of them, with any sexual thoughts," she told a reporter from the *New York Times.* "I think childhood sexuality is an oxymoron."[4]

On the one hand, Sally Mann's protestations could be seen as a form of dishonesty, a refusal to acknowledge the cultural sources of the images she so carefully constructs. On the other hand, it is a culturally accepted duplicity, an indication that a new view of childhood has gained acceptance, and innocence has lost its old meaning.

CHILDREN AS FREAKS AND FRAGMENTED SELVES

IF ONE PHOTOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE TO CHILDHOOD innocence affirms the soul of the child even as it merges eroticism and innocence, another challenge abandons the nineteenth-century concern with the soul of the subject altogether. One of the main missions of art photography since World War II has been to explore identity as a social construction in which the camera plays a vital role in shaping as well as recording. Since the 1950s, photographers have depicted a social landscape in which the relation between self and society is askew. The individual is shown exposed, obscured, fragmented and deformed. Through the framing of their images, photographers ask us to reflect on the formlessness of mass society, in which the problem is "not the number of people involved," as the philosopher Hannah Arendt observed, "but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and separate them."[5]

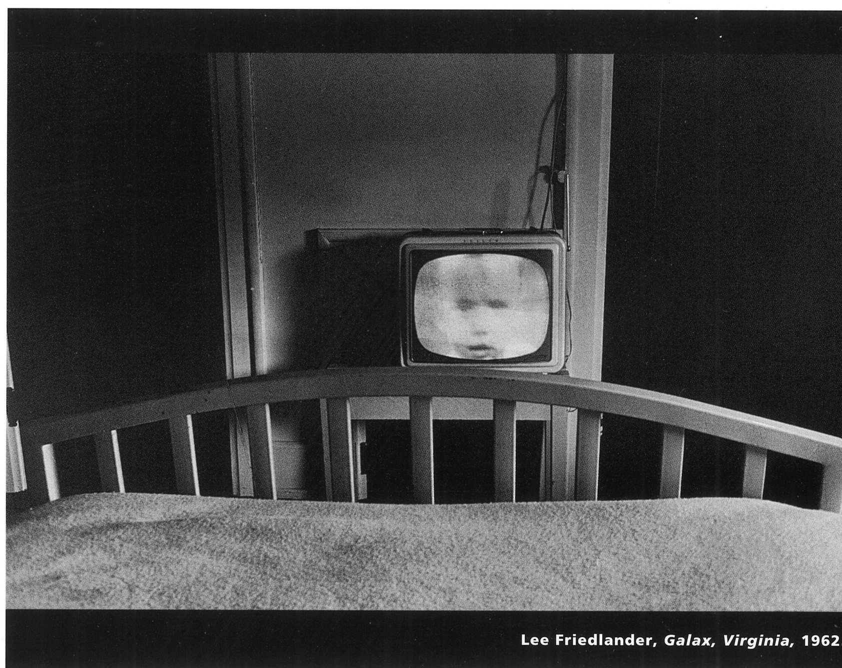
In the dissonant social landscapes of Robert Frank's seminal series, *The Americans,* childhood has no special status. Not once is a child caught smiling or even in the act of play. On the rare occasions when an adult looks lovingly at a child, the child does not look back. Bereft of a world of their own, children assume the worn and weary eyes of their parents. The expectant mother in Detroit, the nanny in Charleston, and even the baby she carries all share the same remoteness as the elevator operator in Miami Beach, the waitress in Hollywood, the old man waiting on a bench as the students march by at the Yale commencement.

These themes are reiterated in William Klein's depiction of New York in the 1950s. A young boy points his toy gun at the lens of Klein's camera, while his face assumes the contorted expression of a thug. In *Dance,* Klein intentionally blurs the faces and gestures of a young boy and girl who pose for his camera, rendering them into parodies of deformity.

In Diane Arbus' photographs, this theme is carried even further. Children and adults alike are portrayed as "freaks." Arbus actively sought out freaks, deviants and the physically deformed. But she also specialized in portraits that accentuated the deformities and abnormalities in the commonplace. The mundane subjects of family snapshots and photo albums—babies, children, and family groupings—are transformed into bizarre caricatures. In the universe Arbus creates, no one is innocent and no one escapes the indignity of exposure.

In contrast to Arbus, Garry Winogrand rarely asked his subjects to pose for the camera. Instead, the children in his photographs are depicted as lonely figures in a

stark and uncertain world. In Albuquerque, an unattended child is pictured standing at the threshold of the family garage, a small illuminated figure framed by the dark opening. The child's isolation is reiterated by the isolation of the house, which is poised at the edge of a desolate landscape. This same desolation is portrayed by Lee Friedlander in a series of photographs of television sets turned on in otherwise empty rooms. In one photograph, a baby's face appears on the screen at the foot of an empty bed. The interior of the room is as barren and bleak as Winogrand's suburban landscape. The television that frames the child is framed in turn by two darkened doorways and the curved footboard of the bed. The blurred image of the child is an indecipherable presence, a simulation of selfhood.



Lee Friedlander, *Galax, Virginia,* 1962.

THE ORPHAN AS AGENT, THE CHILD AS VICTIM

THE LOSS OF CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE is bound up with another prevalent theme of our time: victimization. Like innocence, the meaning of childhood victimization gradually has been altered. This is vividly illustrated by comparing the way Helen Levitt frames childhood in the 1940s with Friedlander's vision in the early 1960s. In Friedlander's photograph *Galax, Virginia,* the child is trapped within the frame, reduced to a media image. In Levitt's photograph *Broken Mirror,* children create their own world. Levitt uses the frame of her camera to let us enter the children's world without imposing on it, or recasting it as a metaphor of adult life.

Where Friedlander expresses the lost soul of childhood, Levitt reveals a moment when the soul of childhood was yet triumphant. Her work reflects a tradition that includes Lewis Hine's portraits of immigrant and working children, and the work of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee and other photographers of the Depression. Their photographs of children—in sweatshops and shacks, dust bowls and breadlines, on the streets and at play—do not flinch from the harsh realities of poverty and exploitation. But the children are not defined by their social circumstances. They transcend their victimhood because their selfhood is ennobled. They are bearers of larger meanings and ideals, and the photographs argue that the world should be reformed for their sake.

The blurred image of the child is an indecipherable presence, a simulation of selfhood.

Levitt's children, though obviously poor, are not victims. They are agents, masters of a world of imagination and play, a world filled with creativity, improvisation and cooperation. Far from posing for the photographer, they are oblivious to her presence. Far from being "framed," they turn the frame of the broken mirror to their own purpose. Their play moves beyond and around the frame they have created, spilling out into the pulsating life of the street.

The modern child, on the other hand, is often defined by a victimhood he or she cannot escape. This theme is suggested in the portrayal of children as freakish and fragmented selves in the photographs of Frank, Arbus, Winogrand, and Friedlander, but finds its most explicit expression in the work of Sally Mann. There is nothing ennobling or redeeming in Mann's portrayals of child abuse, incest, drowning and death. Mann's simulations of victimization are not a call to reform the world. They fail to elicit the sympathy, compassion, or even the outrage we would feel if the children pictured were real victims, instead of her own children, carefully posed.

The shift in the portrayal of childhood and victimization in photography finds a striking parallel in fiction. Consider the children and young adults of nineteenth-century fiction—Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, David Copperfield and Oliver Twist, Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke, not to mention the boy heroes of Horatio Alger and the girl heroes of *The Wizard of Oz* books.

These children often are outcasts or orphans, but they are not portrayed as victims in the modern sense. They are agents like the children in Helen Levitt's photograph, imbued with independence, inventiveness, and vitality. They are self-possessed like the girl in Southworth's and Hawes' daguerreotype. They speak from the soul and do not parrot society's judgments. "People would call me call a low down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum," Huck Finn tells Jim. "but that don't make no difference. I ain't agoing to tell."

"Speak I must," the young orphan Jane Eyre tells her oppressive guardian. "You treated me with miserable cruelty." When her guardian retorts, "How dare you affirm that,

Helen Levitt, *Broken Mirror*, c. 1940. © Helen Levitt.

Jane Eyre," she responds, "How dare I, Mrs. Reed? How dare I? Because it is the *truth.* You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness, but I cannot live so."

The children in contemporary fiction, by contrast, are often passive and wearied by existence, unable to strike out on their own. When Ann, the young protagonist in Mona Simpson's best-selling novel *Anywhere But Here,* fulfills her mother's fantasy of becoming a television star, she feels only disempowered, much like the child on Friedlander's television screen. As Ann realizes, "It wasn't anything like I thought it would be, television . . . Nobody thought we were anywhere."

Similarly, in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping,* the river and road are never a source of freedom for the young protagonist but rather represent the death of dreams. It is as if all the imagery in *Huckleberry Finn* has been inverted, and the child, rather than being a force in the world, is lost in a limnal existence. As the novel's young protagonist admits, "It was a source of both terror and comfort to me then that I often seemed invisible—incompletely and minimally existent, in fact. It seemed to me that I made no impact on the world, and that in exchange I was privileged to watch it unawares."

CHILDHOOD IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

THE TRENDS IN FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY, art photography and fiction in post-war America suggest that childhood has lost its privileged place as a cultural ideal. Children no longer are exempt—not from the eroticism of adult life, the fragmentation of selfhood, or the politics of victimization that pervade American culture in the 1990s. In a modern twist on Ariés' description of medieval society, children and adults increasingly share the same world and are represented in the same way.

Despite these trends, we have not given up on the ideal of childhood innocence altogether. We still honor the documentary tradition that ennobles the victimized child in contemporary photojournalism. We still read the nineteenth-century novels and stories that celebrate the agency of the child. We still aspire to capture the innocence of childhood in our family photographs and videos. Indeed, public protest forced Calvin Klein to withdraw his recent, controversial ad campaign, which many critics felt had gone too far in eroticizing childhood.

We live with a deep unease about the fate of old ideals as we see them eroding around us. Even as the boundary that marks childhood as the last outpost of the soul is transgressed, we retain the concept of childhood innocence as a redemptive ideal.

NOTES

1 Philippe Ariés, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 110.
2 Frank Rich, *Time* (April 10, 1978).
3 Helmut Newton quoted in an interview by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel in *Artistes,* no. 7, January-February, 1981, translated by Karl Lagerfeld.
4 Sally Mann quoted in "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann," Richard B. Woodward, *New York Times* (September 27, 1992), 29.
5 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 52-53.