

Ana-Maria Gavrilă (University of Bucharest): **Private/Public Moments of Vulnerability: Writing and Performing the Self in the Works of ANNIE LEIBOVITZ and SALLY MANN**

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**ABSTRACT:** What happens when photography, lived experience and life-writing become intertwined? In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the genre of autobiography was undergoing radical changes, as the “canonical affirmation of unique selfhood” gave way to a more splintered subjectivity, altogether questioning identity, memory, referentiality and “authenticity.” Autobiography has been further probing its boundaries and shifting dynamics since documentary photography and self-portraiture sparked a new relation with the narrative of the self. At the same time, photographers have been experimenting with writing, in the beginning simply on the nature of their art, and later moving into autobiographical practices, bringing additional complications through the unsettling juxtaposition of the two media.

In this presentation, I consider two contemporary photographers, Annie Leibovitz (1949- ) and Sally Mann (1951- ), who have surrendered themselves to varieties of verbal and visual autobiographical exposition, allowing moments of vulnerability to the public scrutiny by creating organized breaches into their intimate family life. From Mann’s photographs of her three children, published under the title *Immediate Family* (1992), and her photo-memoir, *Hold Still* (2016), to Leibovitz’s “personal reportage” on her big and exuberant family in *A Photographer’s Life, 1990-2005*, I argue that the anxieties surrounding their work, in a broader sense, are anxieties about the way the photographic image and life-writing often refuse, or perhaps obscure, the division between private and public. It may be the case that the two photographers put forward a fragmented experience that is very personal, the relationship between textual and visual elements making its interpretation harder. Through their recourse to fragments of their lives (the artists’ black and white pictures), it is quite possible that the use of visual media could ultimately be the best way of representing women’s experience, in general, and motherhood, love, illness, death, and birth, in particular, since neither of them feels that narrative alone is a sufficient means of representing the self in text.

**Keywords:** Annie Leibovitz (1949- ), Sally Mann (1951- ), autobiographical practice, photographs of children, memoir, women autobiographers, motherhood and vulnerability, privacy, immediate family.

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