

making difficult ideas accessible, which somehow implies diluting or transforming in a patronising way for the benefit of a supposedly less able audience, as one of appropriateness of strategy. It means discovering what specific functions this work can have as part of a wider collective strategy to transform the structures and conditions under which we live.

### Judith Williamson, 'Images of "Woman": The Photography of Cindy Sherman' (1983)

From *Screen*, 24(8) (1983): 102-106; reprinted in *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London: Marion Boyars, 1986).

When I rummage through my wardrobe in the morning I am not merely faced with a choice of what to wear. I am faced with a choice of images: the difference between a smart suit and a pair of overalls, a leather skirt and a cotton frock, is not just one of fabric and style, but one of identity. You know perfectly well that you will be seen differently for the whole day, depending on what you put on; you will appear as a particular kind of woman with one particular identity which excludes others. The black leather skirt rather rules out girlish innocence, oily overalls tend to exclude sophistication, ditto smart suit and radical feminism. Often I have wished I could put them all on together, or appear simultaneously in every possible outfit, just to say, Fuck you, for thinking any one of these is *me*. But also, See, I can be all of them.

This seems to me exactly what Cindy Sherman achieves in her series of 'Film Stills' and later 'Untitled' photographs. To present all those surfaces at once is such a superb way of flashing the images of 'Woman' back where they belong, in the recognition of the beholder. Sherman's pictures force upon the viewer that elision of image and identity which women experience all the time: as if the sexy black dress made you *be* a femme fatale, whereas 'femme fatale' is, precisely, an image; it needs a viewer to function at all. It's also just one splinter of the mirror, broken off from, for example, 'nice girl' or 'mother'. Cindy Sherman stretches this phenomenon in two directions at once – which makes the tension and sharpness of her work. *Within* each image, far from deconstructing the elision of image and identity, she very smartly leads the viewer to *construct* it; but by presenting a whole lexicon of feminine identities, all of them played by 'her', she undermines your little constructions as fast as you can build them up.

'Image' has a double sense, both as the kind of woman fantasised (is your 'image' aggressive, cute, femme fatale, dumb blonde etc.), and as the actual representation, the photograph. What Sherman does is to make you see the type of 'woman', of femininity, as inseparable from the literal presentation of the image – lighting, contrast, composition, photographic style. The 'Film Stills' are the most obvious example of this. The grainy print and ominous shadows in *Untitled Film Still No. 4* are part of what makes up our idea of the woman shown leaning against the door. The low angle, crisp focus and sharp contrasts of *Untitled Film Still No. 16* are part of the woman's

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sophisticated yet fragile image, just as the slightly soft focus and low contrast of *No. 40* are part of *her* more pastoral, Renoiresque femininity. The composition of the recognisably 'New Wave Art Movie' still *No. 63*, the smallness of the figure in the harshly geometric architecture, is part of the little-girl-lostness that we feel as coming from the woman. In the 'Untitled Film Stills' we are constantly forced to recognise a visual style (often you could name the director) simultaneously with a type of femininity. The two cannot be pulled apart. The image suggests that there is a particular kind of femininity in the *woman* we see, whereas in fact the femininity is in the image itself, it *is* the image – 'a surface which suggests nothing but itself, and yet in so far as it suggests there is something behind it, prevents us from considering it as a surface'.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the interest of this for anyone analysing how film and photographic representations work, it is, as I have tried to suggest, particularly important for women. I find the recognition of this process, that the 'woman' is constructed in the image, very liberating; I want to say yah boo sucks to any man standing next to me looking at the photos in the exhibition. Because the viewer is forced into complicity with the way these 'women' are constructed: you recognise the styles, the 'films', the 'stars', and at that moment when you recognise the picture, your reading *is* the picture. In a way, 'it' is innocent: *you* are guilty, you supply the femininity simply through social and cultural knowledge. As one reviewer says, 'she shows us that, in a sense, we've bought the goods.'<sup>2</sup> The stereotypes and assumptions necessary to 'get' each picture are found in our own heads. Yet, at the risk of being attacked as 'essentialist', I really do think the complicity of viewing is different for women and men. For women, I feel it shows us that we needn't buy the goods, or at least, we needn't buy them as being our 'true selves'. But in a discussion at the first Cindy Sherman retrospective in this country, at Bristol's Watershed Gallery in May, I remember a man getting incredibly worked up about how sexist the images were, and furious at Cindy Sherman. He kept saying there were enough images of women as sexual objects, passive, doll-like, all tarted up. Although his rhetoric sounded Right On, I was certain his anger must have come from a sense of his own involvement, the way those images speak not only *to* him but *from* him – and he kept blaming Sherman herself for it, deflecting his sexism onto her, as if she really were a bit of a whore. This idea of what she 'really is' I'll return to later. But the way we are forced to supply the femininity 'behind' the photos through *recognition* is part of their power in showing how an ideology works – not by undoing it, but by *doing* it. The moment we recognise a 'character', it is as if she must already exist.

For what we construct from the surface of each picture is an interior, a mixture of emotions. Each setting, pose and facial expression seems literally to express an almost immeasurable interior which is at once mysteriously deep, and totally impenetrable: a feminine identity. Obviously this is what acting is about, but these still images are like frozen moments of performance and so the sense of personality seems more trapped in the image itself. It is both so flat, and so full (it seems) of feeling. But what links the emotions portrayed in the pictures is that they are all emotional *responses*. The woman's expression is like an imprint of a situation, there is some action and her face registers a *reaction*. Certain photos make this very explicit: *Untitled No. 96*, where a girl holds a scrap of newspaper in her hand, shows precisely the way that we read into her fundamentally 'unreadable' face some emotional response which is both very definite, and

entirely ambiguous. She is or perfectly all right, newspaper cutting and seems inevitable (it's a photo from the same series in her expression, call? (It's just like the model looking both a way, her expression is about but which ever index, as a footprint i look as if they were tr telephone, or the letter to two things – the letter as a snippet to represent what happens in all of between a 'woman' and a story to the cutting.

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entirely ambiguous. She looks thoughtful, but whether she is happy or unhappy, worried or perfectly all right, we have no clue. She looks, exactly, uncertain. Yet between the newspaper cutting and her face there is an endless production of significance which seems inevitable (it's always already started) and almost clear in its vagueness. Another photo from the same group, *Untitled No. 90*, shows a teenager lying, equally ambiguously in her expression, by a telephone. Is she happily dreaming, or anxiously awaiting a call? (It's just like the ads for home pregnancy testing kits which manage to get the model looking both as if she's hopefully waiting for the good news of having a baby, and as if she can't wait to be put out of her fear that she might be pregnant.) Either way, her expression is an index of something or someone else, something we don't know about but which everything in the frame points to. (In semiotic terms it literally is an index, as a footprint is to a foot – a relevant metaphor since so many Sherman women look as if they were trodden on by men, fate, or a B-movie plot.) With the cutting, the telephone, or the letter in *Untitled Film Still No. 5* (where there seems to be a response to two things – the letter, and someone else off screen left) something is put in the image as a snippet to represent the unknown narrative; but these images simply make explicit what happens in all of them, which is that meaning is thrown endlessly back and forth between a 'woman' and a story. The cutting gives expression to the face, the face gives a story to the cutting.

This is exactly what happens in films, news-photos, adverts and media generally. An image of a woman's face in tears will be used by a paper or magazine to show by *impresion* the tragedy of a war, or the intensity of, say, a wedding. From the face we are supposed to read the emotion of the event. But conversely, it is the event that gives the emotion to the face; we have to know whether it is a war or a wedding to interpret correctly its well of meaning. Similarly in films the use of close-ups – woman screaming, woman weeping, woman watching, woman terrified, woman impressed(!) – function as an imprint of the action, like a thermometer constantly held to the narrative. And no matter what the nature or content of the imprint, it is this imprint-edness itself which seems to constitute femininity.

In Sherman's 'Film Stills' the very reference to film invites this interpretation. Film stills are by definition a moment in a narrative. In every still, the woman suggests something other than herself, she is never complete: a narrative has to be invoked. Who, or what, is the dark-haired woman in *No. 16* responding to? What is troubling the Hitchcockian heroine in *No. 21*? What is that young girl in *No. 40* looking sideways at? But in the later works simply called 'Untitled', the questions are perhaps more interesting and subtle, precisely because they aren't presented as 'film stills'. *Something* is worrying, not to say frightening, the women in photos like *Untitled No. 80* – at least 90 minutes worth of something. In this group, back-projection is used to create the setting, the backdrop scenario which interacts with the woman's face to produce the story, and the visual effect stays quite close to film. The next series, from which *Untitled No. 90* and *No. 96* were selected, comes closer in to the woman's body than many of the earlier works, but still adds a prop, a clue to the story. However, the most recent work uses no props and a less 'filmy' style, so we seem to be nearer an actual woman, presented more 'neutrally'. These photos are closer to adverts than films; they still rely on clothes, lighting and a facial expression which is evocative of something outside the frame. Here we don't get *any* of the story, only the response.

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But the point is, the story is *her*. As we piece together, or guess, or assume, some meaning in the narrative, we find that the meaning is the woman. She appears to express the meaning of events. How like every narrative and photographic medium this is, and also how like actual life, the 'they've got it, she wears it' of personal relations. In tapping the relation between women and meaningfulness Sherman's work resonates through many other areas. Certainly it also illuminates the process of reading all still images, especially adverts, in the way objects, details, arrangements and settings construct a story and an identity simultaneously. Women are not always necessarily a part of this visual and ideological process. But in Sherman's work, what comes out of the imagined narratives is, specifically, femininity. It is not just a range of feminine expressions that are shown but the *process* of the 'feminine' as an effect, something acted upon.

However this femininity is not all form and no content. The emotions that bounce between the narrative and the woman in each picture, though unclear, are nearly all suggestive of fear, suspicion, vulnerability, anxiety, or at best, uncertainty. And Sherman brilliantly shows how this vulnerability is linked with eroticism, not always through explicitly 'sexual' poses – as in *Untitled No. 103* and some of the earlier 'Film Stills' [...] – but through performing femininity at their intersection. In the earlier work, particularly, there always seems to be a sense of menace, the woman is under threat. And her vulnerability is always erotic, rather in the way that many horror movies which involve no explicit sex at all give an erotic spin-off just through having a terrified woman constantly in vulnerable positions. So strongly is femininity evoked in these situations that they have to be *sexual* – is there any definition of femininity that isn't? That's why, in so many of Sherman's images, simply the distress or passivity of the women figures feels faintly pornographic – I say that to be descriptive rather than pejorative. I feel Sherman simply brings to the surface very clearly that same whiff of the pornographic that I personally feel about so many of Hitchcock's heroines, frightened, blonde and vulnerable, or Godard's use of Anna Karina and other women stars as fathomless icons of femininity, passive repositories of desire. Sherman's women with their parted lips and their stories in their eyes (very Bob Dylan) are something to get off on in their very uncertainty. And in linking the erotic and the vulnerable she has hit a raw nerve of 'femininity'. I don't by this mean women (though we do experience it) but the *image* of women, an imaginary, fragmentary identity found not only in photos and films but the social fabric of our thoughts and feelings.

It is so important to stress the difference not because 'femininity' is just a bad, false, two-dimensional construct that is forced upon us (even if it feels that way) but precisely because, ultimately, it isn't any one thing at all. It can only exist in opposition to something else, like one half of a see-saw. In Sherman's pictures, the way the woman is *affected by* something makes her like an *effect*, her face stamped by events, and I have tried to argue that this produces the feminine sexual identity which comes across. But what is crucial to the reading of Sherman's work is also the opposition between the images. 'Essentially feminine' as they all are, they are all different. This not only rules out the idea that any one of them is the 'essentially feminine', but also shows, since each *seems* to be it, that there can be no such thing. Yet so tenacious is the wish for this set of psychic garments to turn out to be actual skin, that almost every time Sherman's

work is written about it has been thought of as *indecent*, posing as a sexy heroine, more glamorous follow-up. Glamour is not allowed.

The best example of this perspective at Bristol in the 1980s was a mouse from Buffalo, a mouse that doesn't always fit and he turns on! 'Behind the Mouse Does he know her?' 'Sure, intentionally as if it were he' she appears to be recoiling, trapped in a car's head, reads like a patently sexual were a man he would read the first paragraph; and the artist, in control of her was one of the most show that it is a possibility I think that this false leads people like Wal find the 'real' Cindy interesting is the obse

This comes out partly felt the recent work is introduced calls it 'feminine clothes . . . the(se) pornography herself'.<sup>24</sup> But in the m function in the same w reason most critics have *104*, which immediately next to the sexy Monr sexual but very boyish; tant, they are both he precisely what undern Cachet ad.: 'It won't b you are.' This promise of which is meant to be is that anyone can 'be'

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work is written about the issue of Cindy Sherman 'herself' comes into it. She has often been thought of as *indulging* in self-images, wishing secretly to be like Marilyn Monroe, posing as a sexy heroine. From the notion that her work springs from a desire to be more glamorous follows the idea that she is not 'really' as attractive as her heroines, the glamour is not allowed to be hers.

The best example of such an approach is Waldemar Januszczak reviewing her retrospective at Bristol in the *Guardian*: 'You see her as she sees herself, a small, scrawny girl from Buffalo, a mousey blond who dreams of becoming a peroxide starlet. Her wigs don't always fit and her bra has to be padded.' What a combination of put-down and turn-on! Behind the Marilyn Monroe character you finally find Cindy Sherman. 'How? Does he know her? She is at her best looking intense, staring into the distance as intently as if it were her own past - which of course it is . . . and finally, 'Several times she appears to be recoiling from the harsh stare of her own camera, like a scared animal trapped in a car's headlights. This too, you sense, is the real Cindy Sherman.' This all reads like a patently sexual fantasy, as if she were at somebody's mercy (his). If Sherman were a man he would not even continue using her first name as well as surname beyond the first paragraph; and this detail of language might make him have to treat her as an artist, in control of her work. As it was, even the image selected to illustrate the article was one of the most sexually provocative. I have quoted this review in detail first to show that it is a possible response to the work (basically for men) but secondly because I think that this false search for the 'real' her is exactly what the work is about, and it leads people like Waldemar Januszczak right up the garden path. The attempt to find the 'real' Cindy Sherman is unfulfillable, just as it is for anyone, but what's so interesting is the obsessive *drive* to find that identity.

This comes out particularly in comments on the later photos. Almost every critic has felt the recent work is in some way moving closer to Sherman 'herself'. The catalogue introduction calls it 'free of references to archetypes' and says that 'dressed in today's clothes . . . the(se) portraits seem more refined, natural and closer to Cindy Sherman herself'.<sup>4</sup> But in the more recent photos there seem to me to be sets of contrasts that function in the same way as the earlier 'Film Stills', only even more pointedly. For some reason most critics have seen *Untitled No. 103* but somehow gone blind to *Untitled No. 104*, which immediately follows it and would stand beside it in a gallery. There, right next to the sexy Monroe-type image is a different one - not necessarily unsexy or unsexual but very boyish, much more alert, wearing an old teshirt - and, most important, they are both her. The fact that it is Cindy Sherman performing each time is precisely what undermines the idea that any one image is 'her'. It reminds me of the Cachet ad: 'It won't be the same on any two women . . . the perfume as individual as you are.' This promise is followed by a bunch of images of different 'femininities', each of which is meant to be a different *woman* (using Cachet); whereas what Sherman shows is that anyone can 'be' all of them, and none.

In the recent photos the issue seems to be pushed still farther, beyond different femininities and across the border of femininity/masculinity. This is particularly powerful because the later images do appear more 'realistic', though of course they are nothing of the sort. *Untitled No. 116* and *No. 112* both seem very straightforward, 'natural' poses compared with the earlier set-ups. Both are 'dressed in today's clothes', yet it is the subtlety in the difference between the clothes that makes one image very feminine,

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the other masculine. In *No. 116* the lighting, pose, expression, gaze, hair, skin, all spell femininity, subtly, but as clearly as in *Film Still No. 40*. But *No. 112* is sharper: the pointed collar, the shorts, the 'harder' gaze, less unfixed than the other, all produce a 'masculine' reading. The way the later images move towards, not simply sexual ambiguity (as if that were an identity) but a juxtaposing of 'feminine' and 'masculine' identities, seems to demolish once and for all the idea that either of these is something that can be fully inhabited (and also the wet-dream of Sherman as frightened animal or girl in padded bra).

For the identities elusively suggested, and so obsessively sought, are trapped, not in a car's headlights (for goodness sake) but, literally, in the light of the photographic print: the lighting which makes the image possible on that surface which is ultimately nothing more than a flattened reaction to light. In *Untitled No. 110* no face is even visible in the darkness, all that the lighting lets us see is an arm, a sleeve, some soft fabric, glowing as golden as an advert. There is only just enough photographic information for us to recognise what the image is of at all, and here again we are forced to realise how these effects on their own (as in so many ads) conjure up a feminine presence. The viewer is pushed as far as possible, to search in shadows for what isn't there on the page, but which the few shapes of light suggest is there. Femininity is trapped in the image – but the viewer is snared too. A similar and very witty rebuffing of our 'reading in' is found in *Untitled Film Still No. 46*, where all that's visible of the woman is a diving mask looking up from the sea. We can't even see the face, and barely the eyes, yet the joke is, it *still* seems full of meaning.

In images like this one, in the whole range of work, in the juxtapositions made, there seems to me an enormous amount of wit. The conflation of Cindy Sherman as the imagined character in her performance, and Sherman as the artist, always ends up with some idea of 'her' as her heroines, frightened, vulnerable, threatened and uncertain. But clearly as an artist Sherman is sharp, controlled, intelligent, witty. Couldn't these qualities of the work itself, rather than being swamped by that femininity she exposes, reflect back on it as a biting comment? Obviously the dialectic between Sherman as performer and photographer is important, after all, she *does* choose to present *herself* (in disguise) in her pictures. The identities she acts out may be passive and fearful. But look what she *does* with them, what she *makes*: she is in control. In its very last line, the catalogue blurb turns on some of Sherman's critics: 'the women she represents, they say, are too artificial to be experienced as real people' and ends by asking poignantly, 'Is vulnerability as unreal as all that?'<sup>15</sup> Well no, obviously not. But both the critics referred to, and the writer of the commentary, are opposing 'artificial' and 'real' in a way that has no meaning where femininity is concerned, which is why I started this piece with the wardrobe syndrome. Femininity is multiple, fractured, and yet each of its infinite surfaces gives the illusion of depth and wholeness. Realising this means that we as women don't have to get trapped trying to 'be' the depth behind a *surface*, and men just might bang their heads up against it and stop believing in that reflected space. Sherman's work is more than either a witty parody of media images of women, or a series of self-portraits in a search for identity. The two are completely mixed up, as are the imagery and experience of femininity for all of us. Others might try to break open that web of mirrors, but Sherman's way of revealing it is just to keep on skilfully turning the kaleidoscope where a few fragments of fantasy go a long way.

- 1 Jean-Louis Baudry, 'T
- 2 Michael Starenko, 'W
- 3 Waldemar Januszczak,
- 4 Els Barents, 'Introduc
- 5 Ibid., p. 14.

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From *Difference*, ed.

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## Notes

- 1 Jean-Louis Baudry, 'The mask', *Afterimage* (UK), 5 (Spring 1974): 27.
- 2 Michael Shteyn, 'What's an artist to do?', *Afterimage* (US) (January 1983).
- 3 Waldemar Januszczak, 'Here's looking at you, kid', *Guardian* (19 May 1983).
- 4 Els Barents, 'Introduction', in *Cindy Sherman* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1982), p. 10.
- 5 Ibid., p. 14.

Lisa Tickner, 'Sexuality and/in Representation:  
Five British Artists' (1985)

From *Difference*, ed. Kate Linker (London: ICA, 1985), pp. 19-30.

This exhibition draws together work from both sides of the Atlantic, with shared concerns but different aesthetic, theoretical, and political trajectories. It includes work by women and men on sexual difference that is devoted neither to 'image-scavenging' alone (as the theft and deployment of representational codes), nor to 'sexuality' (as a pre-given entity), but to the theoretical questions of their interrelation: sexuality and/in representation.

These questions have been rehearsed by American critics, largely under the diverse influences of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, and the Frankfurt School. A comparable body of writing in England has drawn more pointedly on the work of Bertolt Brecht, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, and tendencies in European Marxism, poststructuralism, feminism, and psychoanalysis.

The crucial European component in the debate has been the theorization of the gendered subject in ideology – a development made possible, first, by Althusser's reworking of base/superstructure definitions of ideology in favor of the ideological as a complex of practices and representations and, second, by the decisive influence of psychoanalysis (chiefly Lacan's rereading of Freud).

It was psychoanalysis that permitted an understanding of the psycho-social construction of sexual difference in the conscious/unconscious subject. The result was a shift in emphasis from equal rights struggles in the sexual division of labor and a cultural feminism founded on the revaluation of an existing biological or social femininity to a recognition of the processes of sexual *differentiation*, the instability of gender positions, and the hopelessness of excavating a free or original femininity beneath the layers of patriarchal oppression. 'Pure masculinity and femininity,' as Freud remarked, 'remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content.'<sup>1</sup>

My concern here is with the work of the British-based artists and the priming influence of material produced over the past ten years. This work has its own history, but that history is bound up with the development of associated debates on the left and within feminism: debates on the nature of subjectivity, ideology, representation, sexuality, pleasure, and the contribution made by psychoanalysis to the unravelling of

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▶ :E-MAIL: BOOZER@LL.CSC.PEACHNET.EDU ¶  
▶ :BORROWING NOTES: GOLD; SOLINE/SO6; UNIVERSITY CENTER; UNIVERSITY SYSTEM. WE  
NOW HAVE ARIEL. OUR ARIEL ADDRESS IS 168.28.242.170 ¶