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A WOMAN'S 69 LOOKS
– CINDY SHERMAN'S *UNTITLED FILM STILLS* –

Abstract: The American photographer Cindy Sherman created a new form of *pictorialism*, using the film still as basis for a series of feminine portraits which confronted visual arts' world with the social pressure's recurrences on women's stereotyped imagery during some decades of the 20th century. Sherman's critical perspective offers a fresh view on female's identity quest by exaggerating the features of a series of old common places as well as their absurdity in terms of natural human behavior. This article gathers various interpretations of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, explaining their impact and its sources, as balance between the artistic act and the simple documentation.

Key words: Feminine imagery, film still, surveillance, visual cliché, identity quest, antiphotography.

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Between 1977 and 1980, the American photographer Cindy Sherman revealed to the visual evolving stage a series of unexpected and peculiar feminine portraits, *The Complete Untitled Film Stills*. Combining the cinematic with the photographic approach, Sherman created 69 untitled unknown stories of herself, in a form that had not been treated by others before her: the film still. The series deal with the baroque theme of the *qui pro quo* and the everlasting quest of the wandering feminine look in the 20th century, not stopping to a particular one, as if none of them was the true one.

Even though the works are not filmed, if not shot with her camera, the entire staging of each one of them takes the viewer away in a deep movie atmosphere, in which the visual meaning of the still meets a powerful kinetic effect. Playing with film noir, 1950s B-movie melodrama or even TV soap operas *clichés*, Sherman reveals herself as the actress of the non-identity. In her black and white stills, gender is shown as a constructed and

unstable notion, suggesting the lack of innate biological female identity. The contradiction on which she puts the basis of her work cannot provoke indifference to any kind of public: the portraits are anonymous but at the same time they can be easily recognized by anyone belonging to the western culture.



Cindy Sherman is considered to be one of the world's best known conceptual photographers, mixing image making to social and gender analysis. Her techniques have been later on appropriated by other artists. Sherman has also worked as a film director; her first film was *Office Killer* in 1997, starring Jeanne Tripplehorn, Molly Ringwald and Carol Kane. She played a cameo role in John Waters' film, *Pecker*. A documentary, *Guest of Cindy Sherman* about the productions of artist/videographer Paul H-O and his

relationship with her was released in 2008. With unprecedented access, the documentary places us in the company of the artist (interpreted by herself) and offers a critique of the ever-inflated New York art market and the culture of celebrity. The feature documentary is directed by H-O and Tom Donahue.

In 1977, the art critic Douglas Crimp introduced the New York exhibition *Pictures*, gathering works by Sherrie Levine¹, Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo, Phillip Smith and Troy Brauntuch. A few years later, Crimp wrote *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism*, including Cindy Sherman among the *Pictures* group. In this essay, he observed the encounter between contemporary theory and photography, he related Walter Benjamin's notion of aura and originality to the works he commented on. Crimp remarked that Sherman's *faux film* fragments were opposed to the idea of invention and to that of genius, *playing up the notion of Postmodern copy*². Sherrie Levine confronted instead the art world with the re-photographed images made by already notorious photographers as

1 Sherrie Levine is an American photographer and conceptual artist. She studied at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She first gained critical attention in the early 1980s, when associated with Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, David Salle and others known as *Appropriationists* for drawing on existing imagery from "high" and "low" culture.

2 Warner Marien, Mary, *Photography: A Cultural History*. London: Laurence King, 2006, p.436

Edward Weston and Eliot Porter. Like Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine sidestepped the notion of originality by taking pictures of art examples rather than making them. Both artists' work rise the matter of disappearing, both existing by interfering in some way on other productions. Sherman denied taking pictures of her *self* – at least in the traditional sense – none of them representing but a vanishing act. She states that she is trying to make other people recognize themselves into her pictures. Photographing herself wearing wigs and costumes, she reminds the viewer of recognizable visual stereotypes, so that anyone could tell which images inspired her own. Evoking and imitating rather than building up new looks, Sherman's photographs point out that the unified conception of identity is torn apart, that the subject becomes fragmented and that originality is replaced by the art of remake.

The movie stereotyped images are also used in a particular way by another female artist: the Finn Salla Tykkä³, whose work is heavily influenced by mass-media imagery. In her film *Zoo* (2006), the camera follows a young woman as she walks through a deserted zoo, peering at the animals in different enclosures and sometimes taking pictures of them. The protagonist's look evokes feminine characters which can be seen in Hitchcock's movies: the old

fashioned hairstyle and the clothing are equally important in the reconstruction of the feeling Hitchcock's heroines used us to. But the remake there doesn't concern other thing that the technique of the rising suspense. The woman looks at the animals as they look back to her, slightly pointing to the situation of a beautiful woman in a male-dominated society. In Tykkä's films, the subject is not put aside, if not sometimes even emotionally engaged. In *Thriller* (2001), she uses a reminiscent image of Tarkovsky (a house in a forest) and operates as well a growing of tension. The subject is altered by anxiety but the visual metaphors remain open. The Finnish artist does not aim to denounce or deconstruct cultural prevalence, like Sherman or Sherrie. Her subjects are not weak or threatened by dispersion. On the contrary, their state of feeling can lead to setting changes, and individual is challenged on both sides of the work of art: inside and outside viewers are summoned to reaction. The territory where Sherman's art meets Tykkä's is the reevaluation of certain previous visual productions. They both think and rethink art, developing it in different directions. Women's artificial role in society and biological questioning remain the gathering point of their creation. In her recent film, *Airs Above the Ground*, Tykkä is leading an inquiry on the Lipizzan horses as cultural European products, while Sherman's later photographic work is based on shooting monstrous hybrid human masks and body prosthesis seen as the result of fashion's and commercials' development's impacts on the postmodern individual.

3 Salla Tykkä graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki 2003. She has been working with photography, video and film since 1996, and she participated at the Venice Biennale 2001.

By the time of their creation, the *Untitled Still Films* had great impact on art consumers. They became famous in a very short period of time, like Sherman herself: in 1979, several articles about them were already appearing in *Arts Magazine* and *October*. In nearly ten years, the American photographer had over 30 one-person shows at prestigious museums and galleries. Over one hundred articles in publications such as *Life*, the *Village Voice*, *Vogue*, *Art Forum* and the *Wall Street Journal* or *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Parachute* have commented on her work. The notoriety of her early photographic productions is striking if we think that at a certain moment she concentrated on painting and that, at the time she studied she had problems with the technical part of her subjects. Fortunately, later she met photography instructor Barbara Jo Revelle⁴, who inspired her to *just take pictures*, so that she soon abandoned the painted perfect imitation of objects in favor of the much more appealing immediacy of photography.

At the beginning of the *Stills* adventure, Sherman didn't make reference to any particular movie star, even though in some of the pictures we can recognize

the style of Marilyn Monroe, for instance. She only wanted to diversify as much as possible the range of female stereotypes which were appearing in the old movies, mocking a certain lack of profundity in all her portraits. The women she imitated seemed to be the incarnation of mentally weak heroines, sexy, provocative, frightened, excessively innocent or serious, never showing a complex psychology which would have been maybe closer to female inner realities. By posing in the shoes of a schoolgirl, Sherman criticized the narrow-minded idea and perception of what women teenagers were in the traditional society. The hitchhiking shy teenager is immortalized in her very great escape from what the world wanted her to be, but she is also a powerless type of character, in pray of what might happen. The evening shadows by the side of the highway orient the picture's meaning towards the dark side of the protagonist's future life as a runaway. In the same way, in *Untitled #17* Sherman performs as an innocent young woman on a city street, and in *Untitled #21*, a fearful, suspicious woman who is surrounded by large and overwhelming city buildings' heavy site.

4 Barbara Jo Revelle is a photographer, film/video maker, installation and public artist. She is a Professor and the Director of the Photography Area at the University of Florida, Gainesville, where she served as Director of the School of Art and Art History from 1996-2000. She was Director of the Photography and Electronic Media Program at the University of Colorado, Boulder, for 13 years prior to moving to Florida.



The defenseless fragile protagonist make us think of the reason for which everything around is presented as threatening, potentially harmful for such a character. The photographer didn't need to add any dense connotations to the picture. Showing it simply as it used to be seen on cinema, she provoked a major switch of the viewer's mind. The photographic still being by itself very different from a film's stream, the resulting images made people reflect on what they currently used to watch on cinema or on TV screens without ever questioning it. In this way, the time a spectator could spend analyzing a still frame gave him the opportunity of developing a reflection in relation to a movie recurrent scheme. By suspending certain moments from the whole series of frames a filmed story contained, Sherman reduced the power of the narrative and underlined the confined meaning beneath the cinematic magic. The nonexistent stories of the *Stills* were reduced to the transience of a single passing moment, usually representative for the fake movie's atmosphere and not for its scenario. The plainness of the pictures must have to do with the artist's point, showing that all moments are equal and none of them can be preferred to the others. The lack of narrative sequences reduces all the interpreted roles to a single quality: they are basically roles in movies, roles in the society. Following the whole story such characters could tell is less important than showing the anatomy of the ideological constructions they represent.

Sherman is alone in her female identity imagery quest. The absence of other

protagonists of her visual series focuses even more on female corrupted individuality. The impression of solitude which surrounds each appearance suggested a fragile position of these women in already-made stage sets. The gestures gained a sort of strangeness and sometimes they even seemed to be senseless, ridiculous or hardly excessive, therefore far away from a natural human being's behavior. Apparently isolated from the others, Sherman's ladies are peculiar monuments dedicated to an imposed feminine imposture.

Although the nature of her work led to a deconstruction later movement, she didn't invert this kind of images at the time; she only showed people what they had created themselves, without interfering in any visible way on the cult portraits. The effect was immediate, as we can tell from the amount of magazines which remarked her *Stills* and commented on their message. The classical feminine was severely questioned and put to the test in Sherman's visual representations.

It was though not the first time a female photographer raised the question of the distorted feminine in her works. As much as time and means separate her from any predecessor, Sherman's photographs of herself continue the idea of Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob, also known under the pseudonym Claude Cahun. Surrealist in her aesthetics, Cahun practiced highly-staged self-portraying during the 1930s. She contested the feminine traditional look by wearing man costumes and short hairstyles. In several of her photographs

or tableaux, the image is doubled by mirrors or collage techniques, so that the viewer can admire there two versions of herself. The visual duplicates and the recurrent idea of the double were of a certain fashion in the surrealist circles of the time, pointing to a divergent inner psychological or emotional movement. The androgyny is underlined in Cahun's pictures not only by the clothing and hair style or by the lack of make-up, but also by the body's strange gestures, not belonging to any of the two declared sexes. Another part of her work is based on taking pictures of dismembered dolls in quiet deserted locations, usually insides, casting a bizarre light on the women's domestic universe. Chaos, disorder and desolation surrounded the wrecked dolls, provoking feelings of anxiety and raising questions in relation to the calm and serene feminine stereotypes which ruled Cahun's contemporary society. Monstrous by the time of their creation and admired only by in few restricted circles of vanguard communities, her creations continued to live and develop an underground existence, until they began showing again in the work of newer artists, like Cindy Sherman or Nan Goldin⁵. The distorted female domestic universe is present in Sherman's stills,

and it is even more powerful as we find out that the stage sets are part of her own apartment, or that many of the objects she uses for her *faux* foreign films, TV soap operas and Hollywood pictures belong to her and to her friends. In this familiar setting, Sherman created her version of a Sophia Loren character from the movie *Two Women*. (*Untitled Film Still #35*). A whole new world of stories was brought to still life at the artist's place. Except for one image, *Untitled Film Still #7*, in which



5 Nan Goldin is an American fine-art and documentary photographer. She graduated from Tufts University in 1977/8, where she had worked mostly with Cibachrome prints. After graduation she moved to New York and began documentary photography

of the post-punk new-wave music scene, gradually being drawn in to the Bowery's hard drug subculture. These pictures, taken from 1980 to 1986, formed her famous work *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.

Sherman peers from a piano glass while another woman, her face obscured by a large straw hat, crouches in the foreground, the stills are unpopulated. No one shares Sherman's performance or intrudes on it, as Elsa Dorfman remarked in her review of the *Retrospective* book on the artist (published by *Pantheon* in 1984). As Peter Schjeldahl writes in the introduction of the same book, Sherman's work is presented not as 'art photography' but as art, period. The one-woman performance has though a solipsist heavy side: alone in her stills and in her art, Sherman is showing that the yet unidentified persona she created and sustained for decades is tough. Fragility and ingenuity so often presented with critical distance in the stills' poses, are doubled by the images of a super-hero woman, who has the ability to change her interface as a chameleon and can never be completely defeated by the creepy landscapes she is vowed to go through. The anonymous woman of a thousand faces appears to be seized by a restless quest, as the whole range of stage sets and gesture aesthetics prove it. Each film still is what remains of a fugitive body line and expression. The protagonist is always in the middle of something, talking to someone, thinking alone, dreaming, peering at something, cooking, drinking, diving, looking for a book or just running away. Sherman places her changing character in relation with other unseen people: she is about to say something to them, waits for them to come, is dreaming of them or she is afraid of them. A particular pressure of

the alterity is to be found in any of the 69 compositions. An unseen presence is suggested by each photograph, and all the played roles are related to it, all gestures depend on it, as if it would be the reason for all the behavior schemes of the portraits. Even in the stills that call for intimacy, the image of a woman lying on a bed in different disguises suggests the presence of another eye beside that of the camera's objective. These photographs could have something to do with the idea of surveillance, so many times attacked by other artists (mainly videographers) before Cindy Sherman. A subject being watched gives the viewer the feeling of assisting to a sort of unjust indiscretion and makes him reflect on the nature of his own curious gesture while looking at a picture. Watching these same woman's silhouettes is similar to an intrusion act. The woman is permanently followed in her intimate life, therefore the idea of the lack of freedom is implied. According to this perspective, the whole series of stills reveals a complex critical machine. The documentation provided by each performing act is definitely more important than the act of taking the pictures, the idea beyond the image more important than the visual composition.

By using certain techniques intentionally minimizing the artistic dimension of her stills, Cindy Sherman is reducing the idea of photography to its primary use and meaning: simple documentation. Many critics say that what she does is antiphotography, as she deconstructs the act of taking pictures in both practice and theory. But whatever it is she is doing with

her camera, Cindy Sherman's creations remain among the most controversial photographic occurrences of feminine visual imagery in the 20th century.

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