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## “Hiding in Plain Sight”: Fashion and Mimicry in Cindy Sherman's (Non-Self) Portraits

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### Abstract

The contemporary notion of mimicry and mimesis in cultural theory may be seen as a combination of fashion as *device* and the metaphorical meaning of *to fashion*, namely in the broader sense of staging or enacting. This essay will look at Cindy Sherman's portraiture of 35 years—her most comprehensive retrospective to date opened at the MoMA—through the paradigm of fashion. Generally, Sherman's figures do not only fashion femaleness through apparel; they come alive through the precarious correspondence of dresses and backgrounds. Yet, while they stand out against their backgrounds, they also mimic the settings. Furthermore, the artist successfully *deceives* us with her use of all sorts of rags and trashy devices visually shaping a proper (female) *subject*. Here, the idea of fashion becomes a major tool for the re-enactment of gendered (stereo-)types. In that sense, fashion, or at least dress, is among the most effective means with which Sherman has now organized her enticing gallery of models for more than three decades.

*Fashion* is a *device*, a prevailing manner, usage or style. The verb *to fashion* works as a metaphor in the broader sense of staging or enacting. Both meanings come together in the contemporary notions of mimicry and mimesis in cultural theory. Given that mimicry combines aspects of protection and assimilation with aesthetic excess and that these factors address the eye of the beholder, this essay will look at Cindy Sherman's portraiture of nearly four decades—her most comprehensive retrospective to date only opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the end of February 2012—through the paradigm of fashion. Both her characters' normality and their eccentricity are performed through costumes, make-up and a few accessories. Organized according to historically and socially different habits, narratives, and images, the artist slips into most different clothes. But Sherman's figures do not only fashion femaleness through apparel; they come alive through the precarious correspondence of dresses and backgrounds—mostly interiors and cityscapes and lately also landscapes. Yet, while standing out against their backgrounds, they also mimic the settings. This is even the case when Cindy Sherman does not depict any backgrounds at all, but creates plain monochromes in front of which she places her characters as in some of her later series. Then, the concept of mimicry applies in an even more appropriate, namely an abstract way: as a more or less artful insertion into the common imagery of women concerning their age, their attire, their poses and acting. Since this image repertoire interrelates with the imaginary concerning women, a certain idea of mimicry as role-play, travesty, and the production of an aesthetic surplus beyond the conventional idea of protection in mimicry apply.

From the beginning, the reception of Cindy Sherman's work has been contextualized with different, even contradictory theoretical approaches, from poststructuralist feminist theory of *woman as image* to a discussion of the postmodern condition in general and to a theoretical stance in theatre and performance studies. What seems to have remained the same, however, is the so-called "problem of how to situate Sherman herself," (Burton, *Cindy Sherman: Empathy and Abstraction* 59) posed again in Cindy Sherman's latest and substantial publication: in the catalogue accompanying her MoMA exhibition. Turning round the problem, the mimicking processes do not coincide with what some critics called the artist's chameleon-like attitude in figuring herself as many characters, but we find it in the manifold triangulation between the work, its observers, and culture theory. All three stances challenge time: the time of biography, of society, of history, and they do so also according to certain waves or fads or even *fashions*.

Progressively having put forward theatricality and with it the modes of exaggeration and excess, Cindy Sherman has now explored the way a woman inhabits and performs imaginaries, embodies images and norms for almost forty years. Thus she achieved two different things: On the one hand she turned the passivity of woman-as-image into an active play with roles by, secondly, adhering to the format of single images (mostly coming in series). Though we cannot find a system of variances in her figurations—recourses within her own work complicate the cultural semantics—, we realize the intimidating aspect as seen in mimicry itself transformed. It came as a specific realism in the concurring of dress, pose, and neighbourhood in the *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) and has more and more turned fictional since then.

„Is mimicry the new Fashion buzzword? [...]“ Amit Anand (dreamingofgucci.blogspot.at), writer and the editor of the fashion blog for the *Men of Style & Substance*, has recently asked. And he continues musing on the new move toward androgynous fashion with a few loose assumptions: "It's not just the wildlife that is blurring the gender lines!<sup>1</sup> [It is t]his new wave of sexualism where now, androgyny and unisexuality is becoming far more pronounced and acceptable than it has ever been in the world of fashion." Tags that follow are: „Fashion blurs gender boundaries," "Girly men are the new alpha males," "Ode to Darwin: Men getting more attractive" ... (ibid.).

My second example is a most recent article featuring Dutch photographer duo Maurits Giesen & Ilse Leenders who have worked together on a *mimicry* series in the fashion field. Their photographic concept: "[T]he uniformity of human beings, people with inconspicuous identities. Just like animals they adapt to their environment. Visually in this series it is shown by the use of similar costumes,

position and gender" (Trendland.com). Interestingly enough, both comments take the gender aspect in mimicry as granted, though the first one is more oriented toward the queer fashion aspects in transgender models whereas the second example plays on the subject-vicinity-relation in a world full of risks.

I mention these current versions of mimicry in fashion—the first one a discursive take-on the phenomenon, the second its visual exemplification—as an introduction to the more theoretical idea of mimicry guiding my thoughts on Cindy Sherman's work in the following. As we see, the media talk about mimicry, gender, animals, identity, and evolution in the same breath, thus also proving its actual popularity—mimicry has entered the field of lifestyle; yet it comes with social and cultural ideas of role-playing, with a rethinking of the relation of assimilation and identity. With regard to our age of visibility mimicry enacts the precarious connection of visibility and invisibility: it unfolds the invisible within the visible and vice versa. Mimicry works in the manner of the veil whose function German artist and philosopher Eva Meyer describes as follows:

„The veil is not a sign of truth but of change, an emotional territory which is peculiarly resistant to any theory of the subject that refers to a thinking, feeling, and willing self as an existing part of what used to be called a person." (Meyer 11)

Thus the issue of the essay "*Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills: Reproductive or Transgressive Mimicry? (1977-81)*" (Reilly 117-140) in 2001 will not be answered. Instead, it will be deferred onto another terrain. There we will not decide on the concept's subversive qualities, but look at what knowledge it will unfold and how this is materially achieved. When the critical function of mimicry was questioned ten years ago, the author concluded from a feminist standpoint that Cindy Sherman's "playful dis-play" (ibid. 130) of the patriarchal logic would be trapped within it: "For mimicry to be successful it must *uncomfortably* inhabit the paternal language itself; which is to say that it must be unruly, defiant, and aggressive" (ibid. 129). The problem here is not so much that the *claimed* virtues of a critical visual discourse are by no means measurable in themselves. The difficulty lies in claiming *qualities* (of the image) and not discussing the complex and transforming negotiations between processes, objects, and the different gazes: the acting, the costumes and make-up, the spectator, the spaces depicted as well as the space of the viewer, the image techniques etc.

Since mimicry is inscribed into the field of vision it always leads to a (visual) result, which is usually observed like an image. However, the mimetic processes qualify for a description and analysis of phenomena circulating between (gendered and racialized) subjectivities, aesthetic practices and their reception in the times of the overall visual regime and its business. Yet mimicry has little to do with pure concealment. On the contrary, in many cases the protection mode does not work at all and the features of adaption turn into mere luxury, thus even endangering the wearer, because s/he has become too beautiful, too fashionable. Since this overkill is hardly commensurable, I shall go back to the point of time in history when it was

1 Anand refers to the exciting result of recent naturalist research on inter-sexual mimicry found in hawks (c.f. Gorman).

first observed and problematized: in evolutionary theory. The afore mentioned fashion blog says it all: "Ode to Darwin: Men getting more attractive" (Anand) plays on the historical gender trouble lying in some of Darwin's discoveries of his 1872 "The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex", mainly the fact that it is the female animal choosing her partner for reproduction and men who have to apply for sexual choice by being richly and even capriciously ornamented. Darwin's conceiving of beauty as scandalous excess shows how troubled he felt when he could not come up with any purposeful or pragmatic reason for the development of such decorative and in some species even utterly impractical forms within the explanatory modes of evolutionary biology, but had to admit their ongoing aesthetic differentiation "for the sake of change" (Darwin as quoted in Menninghaus, 263-78). Darwin's resistance can be seen as a rather conservative reflection of the *change for the sake of change* in fashion beginning to supersede the former validity of the dress code back then.

German comparative literature theorist Winfried Menninghaus was the first to bridge the gap between Darwin's discoveries and cultural semantics, including fashion (ibid.). Surprisingly, fashion in this context is "the human fashion of naked skin," (ibid. 272-276) meaning the embellishment of the human species through the gradual reduction of hair on the body, respectively its decorative and seductive concentration on the sexual parts—just opposite to the distribution of hairy zones on apes with their naked genital-erogenous parts. "Naked skin," Menninghaus concludes, "is thus not only an absence, but a form of bodily *clothing* selected over many generations" (ibid. 275). And he makes sure that "[O]bviously, we jealously want to monopolize this feature finding every 'mimicry' or, more precisely, parallel in other species appalling" (ibid.).

When using mimicry as metaphor for the progressive differentiations and modalities of exclusion in the body-as-fashion, presumably Menninghaus did not think of it in the sense of the concept as introduced by the naturalist Henry W. Bates only a decade earlier, in 1862. By the time, Bates—himself familiar with questions of dress and looks as active part in the family business of hosiery manufacturing—chose it to name a certain mimetic behaviour in insects with the optical effect of an indistinguishability between object and background. Quite likely, he in turn did not intend to transfer its original meaning of a person entertaining or even ridiculing somebody through the imitation of his or her speech or mannerisms onto the optical appearance. In other words, mimicry had a history as a metaphor when it became adopted for zoology and there applied to plants and animals. Accordingly, it has often been misread since then.

Looking at Cindy Sherman's approach to fashion as a means of mimicry we go back to the concept's comedian origin of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to that of impersonation. Despite the fun the individual performer—Cindy Sherman—has, mimicry follows the logic of the social. It always addresses an environment. Yet, mimicry is no empirical fact in the social field, but a cultural happening between fact and fiction.

Concepts and practices of imitation have historically been criticized as deception of the mutual counterpart with this kind of betrayal being judged as crossing out the moral and ethic ideas of trustworthiness as society's foundation: Pretending to be somebody different from what you are or to fool her or him by simply playing somebody has been thought of as a creation of *false knowledge*.

The most recent *Catalogue raisonnée* of Cindy Sherman's early work of the years 1975-1979 (Schor) records *Air Shutter Release Fashions* (1975) as number 5. While her even earlier photographic work had introduced us to how make-up and making faces both transform expressions, we now see Cindy Sherman for the first and only time as a nude. Facing the camera, but later having erased her head, Cindy Sherman suggests wearing basic outfits, from *bra ,n' panties* to *T-shirt* and *halter top ,n' shorts*, by winding her newly acquired black self timer cord around her otherwise naked body. Even though we do not see more than these outlines on her torso and limbs and have to perfect it to actually *see* the performer dressed, there is no doubt that the garments insinuated are fashionable: *miniskirt*, *bunny outfit*, or *short shorts* demonstrate the sexy and provocative style for young women of the time.

Since then fashion is at the heart of Cindy Sherman's project. I even speak of its *primal scene* here, for this 17-pieces work brings it all together: the naked female body with its prominent breasts and pudenda and the meaningful use of the cable drawing the lines of fashion both on the body and against its *natural* look while at the same time short-circuiting the different signs with the picture itself by finally releasing the self-timer. As we see, fashion does not necessarily have to be materially present, but still governs the idea of female gender—as tracings and markings. Feeling highly uncomfortable with her nudity in this project, as Cindy Sherman remembers, she promptly decided to never show herself naked again even though she had anonymised herself afterwards and cropped the figure by painting over the head and part of the legs. The same year, works like *Doll Clothes* and *Paper Dolls* are made, showing herself in underwear as the doll next to a transparent bag filled with cut out outfits to be clipped over her-as-the-the doll's shoulders.<sup>2</sup> Dress-up games for girls have always been an early exercise in gender formation. From the beginning, Cindy Sherman has played such practices through in sets of guises, in combinations and variations of poses and dress-ups testing the potential of imitation as much as that of imagination.

On the occasion of her 2012 retrospective at the MoMA, an art critic can sum up Cindy Sherman's whole endeavour and say that she

2 Today a fashion blog for emerging fashion designers is called Paper Doll (<http://www.paperdoll.com/>) and virtual paper dolls enable the user to drag and drop images of clothes onto images of dolls or actual people, mostly celebrities. See f.e. a website like Stardoll (<http://www.stardoll.com/en/dolls-games/>) (06.18.2012).

"has been braiding together fashion, photography and the strange internal magic of herself—dressing up, putting on makeup, doing her hair, donning wigs and posing alone in her studio for the camera. She shows us fashion as costume, compulsion, camp, ritual and necessity. We see the ways fabric and cosmetics touch our bodies in public and how these performances of self make us visible, invisible, awful, sublime. Fashion helps Cindy *hide in plain sight*; in turn, she plays havoc with fashion" (Saltz, Artnet.com).

Only a few months earlier, in the end of September 2011, she had appeared as the face for a makeup promotion:

"Cindy Sherman fronting a M.A.C makeup collection? What took them so long? In some ways, when you consider why we wear makeup, this seems the perfect collaboration. We do it to play up and manipulate our features; to peacock, colour in, draw moons of light around our eyes and shades of suggestion on our lips, to make ourselves more visible. The other, not unrelated motive, is to hide in plain sight. [...] M.A.C has always taken a different tack. Its models have included Lady Gaga, Missy Elliott, kd lang, the drag queen RuPaul, and Elton John. It is a rare woman who wants to look like Elton John. It has positioned itself as the makeup company of outsiders and artists: all the people who want to be different, to be utterly transformed, much, much more than they want to be pretty" (Cochrane, Guardian.co.uk).

*Hiding in plain sight*—the camouflage theme is what both reviews share in their comments on Cindy Sherman's images. Even if the critics implicitly refer to the artist's somehow missing identity, we can reread their metaphor in relation to the visual space as public space. There, belonging is negotiated—certainly not only, but prominently through fashion. Additionally, the exchange of beauty with transformation, mentioned in the second critique, is exactly what is specifically described by mimicry. Mimicry, first introduced by biology and zoology as insect mimicry, has now been discussed in culture theory for some 20 years. With mimicry it was possible both to bridge the traditional gap between scientific research and cultural theory and to have a theoretical paradigm of subversive and empowering strategies linking aesthetic practices with the socio-political field. What was exclusively regarded as mere assimilation in the sense of protective behaviour or survival techniques of animals became receivable as a multifaceted activity of all creatures including human beings. Thus, mimicry became a modality of social actions to undermine hegemonic power structures. As is well known, feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray has been speaking about mimicry in her "Speculum of the Other Woman" (origin 1977) (Irigaray 365) and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has done so in his "The Location of Culture" (1994) (Bhabha, 1994), explicitly in the chapter "On Mimicry and Man". Yet both authors remain ambivalent toward mimicry. Both cannot finally decide on whether it is a form of mere adaption to the powers and authorities or a strategy of spectacular resistance and emancipation, yet both do not doubt its potential either. The dilemma of this as-well-as is accompanying mimicry in the field of cultural semantics, certainly only as long as we are stuck in the dialectics of an either-or. Once we exchange the polarizing either-or with a chain of transformations,

mimicry turns out to be an act of imagination. Then, the cunning repetition will bring forth the qualities we find both in fashion and in Cindy Sherman.

Equaling the space of fashion with mimicry here means seeing mimicry as a spacial project: "Morphological mimicry could then be genuine photography, in the manner of chromatic mimicry, but photography of shape and relief, in the order of objects and not of images;" the French sociologist and former partaker in the Surrealist movement Roger Caillois had suggested, "a three-dimensional reproduction with volume and depth: sculpture-photography, or better yet *teleplasty* [...]" (Caillois, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia* 96). We could not find any better description of what Cindy Sherman does. In order to receive a photographic picture she conceives of an image three-dimensionally. Here we have both the plastic rendering in her disguises and posings and the photographic image.

Caillois had brought up the idea of the plastic figuration of metamorphosis as mimicry process as early as in 1935 (*ibid.*), revising it as *The Mask of Medusa* in 1960 (Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa*). In his investigations of animal mimicry he labelled its functions as *travesty*, *camouflage* and *intimidation*. Strictly having in mind the fields of human action, he doubly transcended the notion of mimicry as strategy of defence, survival or self-protection, by bringing magic, fascination, and luxury into play. These observations go hand in hand with his simultaneous *Man, Play and Games* (1961; orig. 1958) (Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*). There, Caillois interprets many social structures as elaborate forms of games and much behaviour as a form of play. "Caillois," his translator writes in 1961, "defines play as free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive, yet regulated and make-believe" (*ibid.* ix). The author himself argues with the public dimension of liberation in mimicry. Therefore it never comes as an individual metamorphoses in the first place, but as a token of exchange between the image producer, the spectator(s), and the public space:

"Mimicry is incessant invention. The rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor's fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. The spectator must lend himself to the illusion without first challenging the décor, mask, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself" (*ibid.* 23).

Caillois sees mimicry and masquerades as a cultural form in carnivals and theatre, as institutional form in uniforms and ceremonies and as corruption in forms of alienation on an anthropological basis. Not on his agenda were gender difference and the fact that mimicry and masquerade culturally mean something different to men and women.

Like Caillois strictly opposing any idea of mimicry as solely advantageous adaptation, Jacques Lacan furthermore asks:

"The most radical problem of mimicry is to know whether we must attribute it to some formative power of the very organism that shows us its manifestations. For this to be legitimate, we would have to be able to conceive by what circuits this force might find

itself in a position to control, not only the very form of the imitated body, but its relation to the environment, from which is [sic] has to be distinguished or, on the contrary, in which it has to merge" (Lacan 73).

If travesty and disguise may generally be defined—and specifically in the framework of gender identity—as looking *like somebody else* or *like everybody else*, then intimidation becomes, according to this classification, a provocative, demonstrative masking technique. And if woman must do everything possible to appear to be another and, at the same time, just like everyone else that is, not be herself, but rather put on femaleness like a cloak of invisibility, she can show through intimidation that she is not to be controlled. Is this not exactly what Cindy Sherman has recently done more explicitly than ever before?

In the last two series to date (*Untitled 2010* and *Untitled 2010/2012*) Cindy Sherman poses gawkily, almost helplessly in the way non-actors present themselves in front of a camera. Although the series resemble each other in the conception of the figure-ground-relation, they are also quite different. In the first one the fantasy-figures appear in front of huge wallpapered, rococo-stylized parklands. The faces looking *natural*, their whim lies in the cross-fashion, combining folkloristic elements with sports apparel, putting underwear on top or wearing a skin-colored jumpsuit with huge breasts like an armor. The other series deals with high fashion. Here the characters resemble a mixture of the *History Portraits* (1988-90) and the *Society Portraits* (2008). They are paired with landscape photographs taken in Iceland during a 2010 volcanic eruption and on the isle of Capri. The combination is done in a way that each of the figures stands out with hardly any relation to the background. Even though digitally processed this time, the figurations remind us of the little black-and-white paper dolls of the beginning of Cindy Sherman's career, once suggesting the actual game play.

Yet while these early picture objects draw on just some garment, be it fashionable or not, the most recent versions to date operate with fabulous vintage fashion items by Chanel Haute Couture, some designs from the 1920s by Gabrielle Chanel, albeit most of them by Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel since the 1970s (for example *Untitled #512* and *Untitled #513*, both 2010/2012).

The photographs are based on an insert Cindy Sherman did for Britain's POP Magazine in 2010, then bringing together 15 motives in an independent bookzine (Figures 1, 2, 3). However, the images from the magazine have been altered in their later re-edition. Whereas the female figures remain exactly the same in pose and dress, some of them are clipped differently and their combination with the landscapes varies significantly: Sometimes Cindy Sherman places them in a different position on the same background, sometimes she has decided on a different landscape altogether, not to speak of the irregular shapes of the images in the magazine which have become proper rectangles. I see the artist's use of nature-as-image in direct relation with my idea of mimicry in a more abstract sense. Cindy Sherman's late personae do certainly not disappear in front of their backgrounds,

on the contrary, they stand out strikingly, but the mood they seem to be in, strongly corresponds with or is even produced by the landscapes.<sup>3</sup> Digitally emptied out and atmospherically charged this *nature* rubs off on the reception of the figures placed within or in front of them. Opposite to the romantic landscapes enwrought with male subjectivity often figured by men displayed from the back, we see the female protagonists facing us. Again, we find the making-up of the (female) subject in direct relation to the figure's surroundings: There is no make-up missing, the colouring process has only migrated from the face into the space and changed its atmosphere significantly. This reception of the new series comes close to what Caillois figured as his first idea of mimicry. In 1935 it had been the des/organisation of space affecting the subject psychologically—and vice versa: The (psychotic) subject feeling itself dispersed into the space, which, in turn, lures the subject into this undistinguishability.



Figure 1 Photograph Bookzine Cindy Sherman. Design and typography by Rory McCartney. In: POP Magazine, Autumn/Winter (September) 2010

3 Sherman herself has quite a different explanation for some of her faces, and this is her old, but certainly not very decisive disgust for the sizes of the clothes in relation to living women's bodies: "The dresses were so unbelievably tight on me — normally I wear a size 4, but these were like size zero [...] I mean, I was aware that they were going to be small when I was choosing the outfits [from the Chanel's archive], but what I didn't realize is that with couture, even if it looks loose, there's a supertight corseted zip-up slip on the inside [...] Some of the scowls that are on my face were also because I was just so pissed off that these goddamn designers make things so small that even a normal-sized woman can't fit into them." Quoted from Epstein (*Things We Love*.)



Figure 2 Photograph Bookzine Cindy Sherman. Design and typography by Rory McCartney. In: POP Magazine, Autumn/Winter (September) 2010



Figures 3 Photograph Bookzine Cindy Sherman. Design and typography by Rory McCartney. In: POP Magazine, Autumn/Winter (September) 2010

Some series like the *Fashion Pictures* (1983-84; 1993-94) address fashion and the fashion system explicitly; Here, the artist worked with fashion items in terms of labels and of looks (see Loreck, *De/constructing Fashion* 255-275). The results have been published in fashion magazines and as ads—or they have been rejected for being classified as inappropriate, at least with regard to commercial aims (see Loreck, *Küss mich, küss mich*, 181-187). However, the majority of Sherman’s images function in a different way. Like some insect in biological mimicry, the artist successfully *deceives* us with her use of all sorts of rags and trashy devices visually shaping a proper (female) *subject*. Here, the idea of fashion becomes a major tool for the re-enactment of gendered (stereo-)types. Its application is effectively based on a mixture of an allusion to and a quotation of the subject’s historical, social, and media surroundings. This is especially strong in the early *History Portraits* (1988-90) for which Cindy Sherman refigured popular portrait paintings of women (and few men) from the Renaissance to the 19th century. Her most successful series to date—sold out the very evening of the exhibition opening—, she abandoned these *mise-en-scènes* immediately. Speculating about the reasons of their great success, the images’ unconscious asks for analysis. Brilliantly re-enacted as they are, they refer to the historical beginnings of new modes of both aristocratic and bourgeois subjectivity. In the *History Portraits* with all their visual cogency, be it the art historically granted recognisability of the models, be it the artist’s sophisticated manner of mimicking them, the desire of today’s bourgeoisie to demonstrate conservative educational values and radical contemporaneity at the same time, had been accomplished too well.

This touches on the concept of *self-fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt has figured for the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This concept does not only inform about the then novel practices, manners (particularly that of the elite), and shapings of what he calls the self. Greenblatt grounds his argument in the idea of representation (in literature, and, we may add, also in the visual arts) not being categorically detached from social life:

“It invariably crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one’s own identity, the experience of being moulded by forces outside one’s control, the attempt to fashion ourselves” (Greenblatt 3).

In Cindy Sherman’s re-enactments of certain historical representations, her interruption of the mode of this self-fashioning is plainest at the point of dress. Since she imitates the postures and facial expressions of her models impressively accurately, it often is the cheapness of the materials, their as-if, which effectively breaks the perfect insinuation of the historical garb and with it the power of the self-representation of the elite. Women, as is well known, functioned as their husbands’ decoration. Garnishing the historical figures and decorating their architectural spaces with odd fabrics and inappropriate ornaments and not caring about any historical authenticity of the costumes at all, means visually mocking both representative dresses made from velvet and lace and the splendour of the

corresponding interiors. This deconstruction is supported by the use of the same device in different pictures<sup>4</sup>; their earlier and later deployments sometimes even spanning decades. Thus it becomes visible as a stratagem indicating the break with unparalleled selfhood.

However, self-fashioning has changed in the course of time and turned into what Foucault called self-governing, present in Sherman's more recent types of aging women of different classes. Her deferrals of the historic visual register of (female) members of the nobility and the bourgeoisie in the *History Portraits* to women of today's money aristocracy share the depiction of the more or less successful fight for beauty while negotiating the set of socially acceptable standards anew.

The artist has radically appropriated all sorts of image material—from art history to mass media, be it film or magazines, and even to pornography. Now looking at her output through fashion and dress definitely defers the female body of visuality to the formula of textiles within the social fabric. The artist has generally negated the culturally differing values of images within their conventional ranking between high and low; thus, we may say, she enacts equality on more than one level. The balance between a specific artistic attitude composed of the partly unconscious dimension of play mixed with manifest strategic actions is brought together in the use of garments and cosmetics for displaying identities and not *being* a self. Yet what is the difference here? Displays are directed toward the other whereas the narcissistic search for a self only needs the other as mirror. In mimicry we find an author-centred approach toward subjectivity and identity with an analysis of the ideas of communication and the common.

Cindy Sherman's figurations operate as an as if, they exist only in relation to other references. However, this mimicry differs decisively from the passivity art historian Johanna Burton laments on in her 2004 essay on the artist: "[I]mages of women' (this still the common gloss to describe the work) are still deeply and automatically associated with passivity, even when they are produced to work against such constructions" (Burton, *A Body Slate: Cindy Sherman* 199). Hence, Burton pleads for the characters' inherent aggressivity, a topic she follows up in her *Cindy Sherman: Empathy and Abstraction* from 2012 (Burton, *Cindy Sherman: Empathy and Abstraction* 54-67). Here she argues for the conciliation of the gaze-related poststructuralist readings of the work with its personal and affectionate impact on the viewer. My objection against this stance is that it sticks to the individual receiver's response. With her title turning round Wilhelm Worringer's landmark *Abstraction and Empathy* from 1907, Burton implicitly approves of a highly subjective idea of art reception—as the art historian had put it to explain his then novel concept of empathy: "aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment"

4 About the recycling of the same accessory, fabric or garment see Loreck (*Geschlechterfiguren und Körpermodelle: Cindy Sherman* 215-225)

(Worringer 159). In contrast, mimicry allows for a collective approach to being, one that is shared exactly through fashion, its (re)enactments, and its images. This concept is supported by the fact that Cindy Sherman's art of disguise has never addressed the question "Is this me?"—the question in search of identity usually directed towards the mirror. Instead, it has always been the camera Cindy Sherman has faced in all of her personae. But do camera and mirror relate to or oppose each other? Different from the mirror image the camera makes pictures available for distribution and thus for sharing both common imagery and individual experiences with looks.

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