CINDY SHERMAN: 
Recapturing the Rhetoric of Female Identity

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The centrality of representation to and its role in the production, maintenance, and transmission of the gendering of society has been a principle organizing concept in feminist discourse. Gender differences have been considered basic to the structuring of cultural and societal institutions as well as to the constitution of the human subject. However gender is theorized (and feminist theorists are not univocal on this issue), cross-cultural research has shown that it is an ubiquitous feature of all human societies. Implicated in that ubiquity is the role of representation in constructing or defining female identity.

While both male and female identity are constituted as stable and fixed entities, male identity is the subject, while female identity is objectified by the male vision. As Owens states, “the representational systems of the West admit only one vision—that of the constitutive male subject.” Kristeva speaks of the notion of a fixed identity as “a fiction, an illusion.” Feminists argue that the illusion is maintained at the cost of exclusion and negation because it serves the cause of female subordination. Males desire to fix females in an unchanging, transcendental category: namely that of ‘woman.’ This fixing not only reinforces their own self-conception as both stable and constitutive of mastery, but results in the positioning and presentation of female identity as an object for the male gaze.

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

The man is the voyeur, the woman the object of voyeurism, and the act of viewing is an act of domination and control? Clearly, the relationship between women’s personal experiences, their particular narratives, and how they are represented in literature, the visual arts, the media, in effect, in all the cultural products of the dominant discourse, is imbricated with issues of ideology and power.

Concerns raised about representation provide the connecting bridge between feminist theory and contemporary feminist art. Some feminist theory draws upon Lacanian psychoanalytics, semiotics, Marxism, and structuralism in order to theorize the ideological structures of representation, subjectivity, and language. Feminist artists such as Cindy Sherman, Jennie Holzer, Shelagh Alexander, and Martha Rosler to list but a few, draw deeply upon these formulations in presenting their visual critiques of representation and female identity. However, feminist art is not wholly partisan often resulting in critiques of the theories themselves. Nonetheless, the influence and incorporation of feminist theory into the visual rhetoric of the art reveals the way theory and practice conjoin. The artists create art narratives that deconstruct traditional representations of female identity based on gender as both construct for ordering the world and determinant of social relations. Here practice not only explicates but reinfoms theory, challenges theory, refines theory, and ultimately demonstrates that “no one narrative can possibly account for all aspects of human experience.”

This paper examines the bridge between feminist theory and art through a close reading of the work of the contemporary artist, Cindy Sherman. Blending photography and performance, Sherman creates a visual rhetoric that deliberately intervenes with the process of identification as constructed by representation. Wielding her camera as deconstructive tool of choice, Sherman develops a visual ‘site of difference’ from which to explore both the social roles available to women, and the relationship between gender and sex. Her explorations form new art narratives, destabilizing the old ones, and illustrating poverty of a single master narrative. Only through intense deformation of those experiences can the master narratives (what Lyotard calls the grand recits) sustain their power. In this sense, Sherman’s project intersects with
postmodern concerns, although, as Owens notes, the postmodern discourse has neglected or even repressed feminist concerns.  

This paper is divided into three parts. Part one examines the different ways in which feminists have theorized gender, the role of representation in the gendering of society, and the strategies promoted for the degendering of society. The second and third parts of the paper examine how these concerns intersect, mingle, find agreement and disagreement, and are renegotiated in the work of Cindy Sherman. Throughout the paper, Sherman’s work, her medium, her rhetoric, are points of departure for further examination of issues of gender, ideology, and power structures.

**Theorizing a feminist rhetoric**

Feminist theory holds that the symbolic order of representation is phallocentric resulting in a patriarchal discourse that serves to repress women’s unique experiences. Thus the process of social construction of women through representation has become a point of departure for further examinations of gender, ideology, and power. These issues have been centrally addressed by, among others, the French feminists (Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous) who provide a feminist rethinking of Lacan’s theory of language acquisition. In theorizing all signifying practices, they claim an androcentric bias and a subsequent repression of feminine language and thought. Their solution, *l’écriture féministe*, is problematic but powerful in its theoretic formulation essentially advocating the creation of a women’s rhetoric. Such a rhetoric would be not only an act of resistance, but a recapturing of women’s experiences for themselves. For Cixous:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

*L’écriture féministe* challenges the phallocratic symbolic order that appropriates the world. To combat this appropriation, women can use their erotic experiences and memories as data for generating their own codes and significations. The result: the creation of new languages, embodied in the concept of *jouissance*, which Jones describes as “the direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality...” A site of *difference* (a point of view founded in difference), created from these *textes feminins*, provides the launching pad for deconstructions of the old repressive codes.

The emphasis placed on *difference* by the French feminists has been criticized as tending towards essentialism in its formulation. Male-female differences are seen as innate, and consequently the locus for feminine rhetoric is in female biology. As Jones sums it up, the French feminists “oppose women’s bodily experience to the phallic-symbolic patterns embedded in Western thought.” But do women’s bodily experiences exist in a vacuum, isolated from their social experiences? Jones asks, then answers with a resounding no. Just as gender is socially constructed, so too are the meanings one attaches to sexual experiences, meanings that use the significations of the dominant discourse as an interpretive source. Difference, if rooted in *jouissance*, is as much a social construction as gender. Consequently the body cannot be relied on as source of pure knowledge from which to generate a rhetoric.

If the body has been delegitimized as a source of pure knowledge, where then to find the locus for a women’s rhetoric? A different line of feminist scholarship (Chodorow, Flax, Wittig, Jones), one which can be described as constructionist versus essentialist, proposes developing a rhetoric through an interrogation of the ways in which women have come to be constructed as women through social and historical practices. Here the emphasis in not on the way women are different from men, but on how the significations in the various disciplines, such as class, race, and the category of ‘woman,’ have furnished the dominant tropes for oppression. ‘Woman’ is not a transcendent, ahistorical
essence—'the eternal feminine'—as Ruthven puts it, but is constructed ideologically and, through representation, inscribed in the discourse. A thorough interrogation of representation is required to unmask the oppressive nature of female representation in the dominant discourse.

Whether one legitimizes a feminine rhetoric(s) by situating its development in (female) bodily experiences or in an analysis of social practices, an exposure of the tyranny of representation is central to such development. Such an exposure is part of the postmodern project which seeks, not to transcend representation but to reveal the system of power operating behind representational practices. With regard to women, Owens notes:

Among those prohibited from Western representation, whose representations are denied all legitimacy, are women. [E]xcluded from representation by its very structure, they (women) return within it as a figure for—a representation of—the unrepresentable (Nature, Truth, the Sublime, etc) 17.

The postmodern project raises questions of the role of legitimation in representational practices. Why are some representations legitimized while others are repressed? Why do some narratives acquire the status of truth while others are dismissed as myth and fairy tale? Why are women excluded by the representational system while still providing the very ground for representation?

Developing a site of difference: the rationale for a feminist critique

Let us now move from theory to practice, since the topic of this paper is to examine the the way theory and art intersect in the work of Cindy Sherman, and how she articulates her own responses to some of the above questions. Despite making female identity and the role of representation in constituting that identity the central concern of her work, Sherman is no mere applicant of feminist theory. She is artist not theoretician, and although the division between the two has, in our postmodern condition, blurred, it would be reductionistic to present her work as no more than a visual explication of feminist theory. Thus, before proceeding further, the following
questions need addressing: Why do a feminist reading, as opposed to another kind of critical reading, of Cindy Sherman’s work? What constitutes an appropriate reading of an artwork? This question is thorny and unanswerable in the abstract. However, in terms of the nature of Sherman’s work, I believe that feminist theories provide powerful critical insights. I would argue that Sherman’s works, structured around issues of female representation and female subjectivity, share common ground with feminist theories. Ruthven argues that until feminist criticism arrived, the gender component was repressed, as repressed as the voices of women attempting to recapture their own rhetoric. He remarks:

Every critical method is a scanning device for picking up particular types of information, which it logs by means of a technical vocabulary specially invented for the purpose… Feminist criticism is a scanning device in this sense: it operates in the service of a new knowledge which is constructed by rendering visible the hitherto invisible component of ‘gender’ in all discourses produced by the humanities and the social sciences.¹⁸

Feminist criticism and theory reveal a new knowledge, namely that universalist scientific claims are questionable, that they emerge from a gendered science, and as such, rely on the systematic exclusion of female experiences. In tandem with other intellectual movements such as semiotics, deconstructionism, archaeology/genealogy, structuralism, and nihilism, feminist theory and criticism exhibits skepticism towards objectivity and a greater consciousness of subjectivity, specifically, female subjectivity. New knowledges challenge old ones, thus requiring an adjustment on the part of the old knowledges—an adjustment not always easily or willingly made. Owens points out that many critical discussions of contemporary artists’ works avoid the subject of gender by subsuming it under the larger issue of ideology. In terms of the subject of this paper, an example would be to read Cindy Sherman’s work as offering a critique of mass media images in general, rather than a critique of mass media images of women in particular. This would be a major oversight since Sherman’s work, as with the work of other contemporary female artists, forms an alliance between feminist theory and artistic practice.

**Strategies for Recapture: the photos**

What are the details of this alliance? What are the visual strategies used by Sherman in her deconstructions of the representations of female identity? In her early black and white photo-stills
(1977-1980), Sherman transforms herself through wigs and costumes into a variety of stereotypical female social roles—a frightened naif in the big city dwarfed by skyscrapers, a waif-like, solitary hitchhiker with battered suitcase, a sparsely dressed woman with drink in hand, looking out through the sliding glass door of a cheap motel, a teen sex queen, a sulky housewife on her knees in her New Jersey kitchen—and photographs her masquerades. The result is series of created characters, a series of narratives, reminiscent of film stills from Hollywood movies of the fifties and sixties. Each ‘still’ represents a recognizable ‘type’ drawn from the vast repertoire of imagery inherited from the mass media. The scenes are vaguely familiar creating a sense of deja vu for the viewer. According to Sherman they:

should trigger your memory so that you feel you have seen it before. Some people have told me that they remember the movie that one of my images derives from, but in fact I had no film in mind at all.19

What kind of mood do these film stills evoke outside of recognition? There is a double sense of loss operating here, first on the part of the viewer, whose sense of nostalgia draws forth an accompanying one of loss, and second on the part of the characters. Gazing obliquely away from the camera, the characters appear expressionless and empty. Essentially they project a superficiality, a flat surface on which their mute appearances have been constructed. No attempt is made to portray a real self, one composed from a set of individual experiences and lived history. Sherman’s preoccupation is with external appearance, with the ways in which female identity has been created and projected through clothing and make-up, with the ways in which the female body participates as a prop in its own representation.

Through so precise a reconstruction of these inherited images, Sherman shows us how deeply our sense of ourselves is formed and manipulated by predigested representations. Sherman exhumes these portmanteau characters from the morgue of central casting, and resurrects them. But the resurrection does not contain the promise of transformation. The new life is merely a repetition of the old, for the characters are reproductions of reproductions. Thus there is no reality here, merely layers of simulacrum. The concept of origin is blurred, as is the boundary between the real and the fake. Sherman reveals that social roles do not just constrain women, and distort their experiences, they produce women. The actual being in the world with female sexual organs is nothing like the waif, the ingénue, the New Jersey housewife, or the teen sex queen. It is as if each photo-stills is accompanied by a warning label in invisible ink which reads: Iden-
tification of oneself with one's social role can lead to loss of self.

Since it is always Sherman who appears in each photograph, albeit disguised, do these photostills represent self-portraits of a kind? Owens glosses them as self-portraits that deliberately force one to recognize the instability of the self. Though we recognize the same person in each photo, the person never seems the same: The result: a "trembling around the edges" of the identity. This trembling challenges the concept of identity as stable and unitary. I would agree with Owens in his reading of Sherman as launching an attack on the concept of the stable self. However, I would not describe the photos as self-portraits of any kind. They are neither autobiographical, nor sardonic, witty images of self. Dressing oneself up is not the same as recreating fictive characters through masquerade. The first is a rhetoric of private imagery, while the second obliterates the private self and draws on the public imagery of the mass media to create the illusion of a private self. Sherman is not disguising the essence of herself behind the costumes. She is challenging the very idea of essentialism by destabilizing identity. The monologue becomes a dialogue, a heteroglossia of codes and significations. Sherman, as both model and photographer, inverts the objectifying gaze. Since she is both subject and object, both model and photographer, she is both the object and the origin of the gaze. By locating both of these in one place, Sherman fixes the (male) gaze (rather than fixing the identity), and becomes an agent capable of action, rather than a fetish.

Further, by being both subject and object in her own text, Sherman engages in a visual metalinguage. She reveals the capacity of signification to turn back upon itself, and in this reversal, to generate significations about significations. This reflexive rhetoric intentionally reveals process with the aim of questioning the unquestioned assumptions that underlie female representation. By revealing the machinery at work, one reveals the unnaturalness of representation. The reflexive communicative act has three major components, product, process and producer, and provides information about all three within the act. Sherman is both the producer (photographer) and the product (created character). In addition, she reveals the mechanical means of image-making, the process (photography), by which she accomplishes this duality.

**Photography: the myth of reality**

Photography is the medium that names that which it photographs as natural. As such it reflects a modernist mentality, claiming the existence of a truth and its unique capacity to capture that truth objectively. Sherman explodes the myth of the photograph as an index of reality. She states, "a photograph is less of an icon. And because its a photograph you remain aware of an event in real time." But how real is the time in photography, and similarly, how real are the images of women 'captured' in that photograph moment? By featuring herself in the text, by synthesizing both Cindy Sherman and the synthetic character into one image, she challenges our preconceptions about both women and photography, forcing us to consider the fictitious rather than factual quality of both. Photographs, after all, have been used as empirical evidence of the real, the true, the actual. But where is the actual Cindy Sherman in these photo stills? How much of her person can be defined in these fashioned images, and how much of her person do they obscure? According to Garber the answer is an ambiguous one: she is both absent and present, and it is this very present/absent quality that reveals something about the nature of photography. Thus for Garber, Sherman reveals that photographs (like women) are composed, stylized, and fabricated. Yet, despite this fabrication, they present their subjects as natural and real. The camera presents itself and its product as a mere extension of the human eye. The medium lends authenticity to the image. In fact, the camera is not a neutral recorder of the natural but a strategist in the naturalizing process whereby the contrived, the fashioned, is neutralized into the natural, the ordinary. Yet at the same time, while making art appear artless, the camera has an ability to create types, media-generated images, that can be repeated as examples of female kinds. Sherman demonstrates how destructive these images are while at the same time,
revealing their seductive quality. The mass media attract and enthrall. We make photographs and are made by them. That fact is concealed under the guise of recording the ordinary and the real. Further, Sherman’s presence and absence in her photos, pointedly underscores the fragmentation of identity, and, in the works in which she has actually disappeared from the photo leaving behind only the detritus of herself (glasses, hair) the visible loss of identity.

Deconstructing the body

In her more recent work, Sherman moves from a critique of gender as a determinant of social relations that reflect all other social relations and identity, to a deconstruction of gender as category, as a way of ordering the world. Feminist theory has sought to denaturalize gender by problematizing it. Flax sees this as the most important advance made by feminist theory. As a result, “gender can no longer be treated as a simple, natural fact.”

One important barrier to our comprehension of gender relations has been the difficulty of understanding the relationship between gender and sex. In this context, sex means the anatomical differences between male and female.

What Flax is trying to say is that gender and genitals are not to be confused with each other. The former are natural facts rooted in biology, while the latter is a biologized fiction, masquerading as a fact. Its genesis is not biology but society. Yet by developing a biological trope for gender, anatomical differences between the sexes have been used as the yardstick for assigning males and females to one of two exclusive and rigid categories. The result: two different types of beings occupying the same world separately.

In a series of rather Gothic mythological photos, Sherman finds her own visual language for problematizing, denaturalizing and finally exploding, the pseudo-biological roots of gender. Using a wide variety of fake body parts, she corrupts her image beyond recognition, disclosing the artificiality of gender and the way it has been used to establish and maintain differences between males and females. The huge buttocks, the luridly fulsome breasts with bullet shaped nipples exaggerate the physical features of the female
form, in the same way that anatomical differences between the sexes have been exaggerated, and same-nesses obscured. With these prostheses strapped to herself, Sherman annihilates the integrity of her body. Thus women have been similarly annihilated by a tits and arse mentality, that devalues them outside of their sexual and reproductive capacities. Here, Sherman writes from the body, a body deformed by dominant discourse, a body whose interpretations stem not from uncoded pleasure (*jouissance*), but proscribed pain. In these works, Sherman's imaginary storehouse is not Hollywood, but the world of fairy tales, myth and legend, appearing as a harem slave or a horrifying witch.

She mockingly rewrites the characters, transforming them into nightmare versions. Here the Brothers Grimm become truly grim! Using the traditional narratives of fairy tales, but rewriting them, Sherman delivers a satire, manifesting the latent misogyny that inheres in myths and legends.

**Conclusion**

*If the new languages of images were used differently, it would, through its use, confer a new kind of power.*

John Berger

Through the development of new art narratives, through the different use of, in Berger's phrase, the "languages of images," Sherman recaptures the rhetoric of female identity. Strategically, her building blocks for this project of recapture come from the citadels of female repression: the images of the media, advertising, and photography. Using these 'readymades' parodistically, Sherman deconstructs the constitution of female identity through social roles, taking control of her own image in protest against the stereotypical, limiting images available to women. She also develops a visual language for exploding the fake biological roots of gender, once again using weapons from the arsenal of the enemy. Through her photo-stills, Sherman reveals the manipulation involved in creating fictions posing as natural facts—facts that function as reinforcers of the dominant ideology. She reveals that the very act of representation serves the rhetorical purpose of persuading others to a 'form of life,' a way of being in and seeing the world.

In this sense, Sherman has responded to the same urgency that provoked the French feminisms to call for a l'écriture féministe, by creating a set of new languages with which to articulate her critique. However, her visuelle textes féminin (my phrase) both echo the French feminisms and critique them. She writes not from the untainted body of *jouissance*, but from the tainted body of cultural experience—the socially coded and constructed body. Her work raises the same question as that of the constructionists: namely, that if female
bodily experiences are culturally inflected with the codes of a phallocratic society, where might the untainted body exist? I would argue that Sherman has developed a rhetoric that successfully negotiates a middle ground between the essentialist's and the constructionist's point of view, both writing from the body yet viewing that body as a social construction.

In Ways of Seeing, Berger maintains "[T]he art of the past no longer exists as it once did. Its authority is lost."27 Both feminist theory and art have shown us how deforming that authority was in its representation of women and its essential role in the oppression of women. It is uncertain whether that role is over, but it is under siege. For Berger, "what matters now is who uses that language [the language of images] for what purpose?" Sherman's work provides an answer to his question. She uses the language of representation for a very specific purpose: to reveal how the individual experiences of women have been stolen from them, and to recapture those experiences so as to give real meaning to their uniqueness.

1See C. Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism," Feminism/Postmodernism, ed. L. J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990) 63-82. However, the purpose of this paper is to look at the role of representation, not at the role of the concept of gender, in perpetuating the myth of difference.
2Di Stefano.
3Di Stefano.
9Owens 64.
10Owens 65.
14Behind this idea lies an entire theory of epistemology. Feminists argue that the phallocratic symbolic order generates an epistemology that views knowledge as objective, something to be mastered and conquered. This view is an exploitative one, separating object from subject, and giving the latter mastery over the former. Verbal mastery is yet another form of appropriating the world.
15Jones 362.
16Jones 366.
17Owens 59.
18Ruthven 24.
20Owens 75.
22Myerhof & Ruby, 1982
23Jones 45.
26Flax 44.
27Flax 45.
29Berger 33.