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Techniques of The Self On the art of Cindy Sherman

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Montaigne has said that to philosophize is nothing else than to imagine one's own mortality. Cindy Sherman's photographs update this statement for the present: in the age of advanced technology, photography - rather than philosophy - allows us to see mortality as the very condition of the image. Sherman's work rejects the idea of the photograph as a document. Her photographs intend to reproduce the existential experience of non-being. While at first glance Sherman is tirelessly making a copy of herself, she is actually engaged in the erasure of her own presence. For that reason, one could say that the artistic precursor to Sherman's photographs is the *memento mori* - an artwork designed to remind the beholder of mortality.

Considered as a whole, Sherman's project touches on three interlinked dimensions of contemporary existence: first, it puts forward a conception of time appropriate to the accelerated tempo of instant communication and new media. Second it grasps the image as a sensation rather than a representation, and third is the insight that the notion of an individual, autonomous self is incompatible with the development of new media, the culture of the selfie and Instagram. What follows is an outline of these qualities of Sherman's art.

Exposure Time

Sherman proposes that we think of the photograph as expressive of something that cannot be put into words. Her photography is at once a form of visual practice and a method of critical thinking. What makes the photograph a philosophical, as well as a visual object is that as a hybrid of human perception and scientific know-how, the photograph abolishes the distinction between images and reality. In stark difference to a painting, a photograph is not a picture of something but the perception of an instant, a new dimension of time. Just as the mechanical clock helps to visualize time as an infinite straight line, the opening and closing of the camera shutter gives us an instantaneous and immediate time. Sherman's figures do not exist in the flow of time, because they do not have a past and a future. They are extant only for the duration of the opening of the shutter. Their time is the instant of photographic exposure as the complete integration of a technological process with human perception. Exposure operates on three interconnected levels in

Sherman's work: it abolishes the distinction between the person in front of the camera and the person behind it, it destroys the notion of the photograph as a document, and it produces a figure that has no existence that is independent from the photograph.

Sherman's photographs do not record a performance for the camera, they reject recording as a false move, advancing not the way the self is documented but the way it appears. Sherman's images expose the fallacy of thinking in terms of artist and artwork as separate entities. The conventional binary body/image is overcome in Sherman's photographs in favor of a triad: body-figure-image. The figure is neither material nor immaterial, it is a sensation in its pure form, a sensation that is brought to life by the photograph. The figure does not represent, but it produces a sensation of presence.

This is significant because Sherman is making photographs that deal not with facts and faces but with the possibility of becoming. The figure is both an image and a body at one and the same time. Far from being reducible to an alternative between falsity and truth, the figure is outside of oppositions and appears only when oppositions vanish. Sherman's photographs produce the present moment not as a middle point between past and future, but as the instant when the self reaches out and grasps its own other.

The moment of exposure is the moment of encountering the loss of the autonomous self and the rediscovery of the self in the other; the figure is not Sherman, but neither is it someone else. Instead of using photography as a device for capture as in 'capturing the prey', Sherman emphasizes photography as a way of grasping the unphotographable, that which is outside of the captor/captive framework. In the instant of the photographic exposure the other-self and the self are merged. In this sudden merging of the person, the figure and the image there is no history, no autobiography of any kind. The essence of time is revealed not in the ticking of the clock, but in the pressing of the shutter.

Contactless self

It would be a category mistake to see Sherman's photographs as belonging to the genre of the photographic self-portrait. A self-portrait points to a subject, to someone who is physically absent yet re-presented in a picture. A (self) portrait always points outside itself and in so doing, the portrait relies on representation as the visual manifestation of the logic of identity. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1970-80) series avoids

entirely both identity and representation. It is a study in what it is like not to have an identity, or a fixed, immutable time-space history.

Sherman's 'portrait' is identical only to itself, it does not point to anyone outside of itself, it does not represent. It speaks of a possibility of existence beyond a representational framework, because to be represented means to be under the control of the one who is doing the representing.

Instead of pointing back at a person and a past moment, the *Untitled Film Stills* series is a study in otherness. The photograph acquires a status not of a witness, not even of an unreliable witness, but of something much more resembling life itself, or if not life then perhaps language. Language is capable of ambivalences and ambiguities, of expressing facts, fictions and emotions all mixed together. Sherman restores this dynamism to photography by pointing her images not towards a specific individual but towards the essential otherness of individuality. The inherent ambiguity of the *Untitled Film Stills* series shifts the attention away from the person behind the image, and points to the equivocation of identity, to the necessary complication that arises from the plurality of the ever-multiplying individual. The individual is the one who can never stop multiplying.

In Sherman's work there is no requirement for an audience. The self contains the others within itself, there is no need for anyone else. Even the word *woman* sounds wrong, as it implies the presence of man. For that reason sometimes the figure is not a woman but a monster, a transvestite or a drag queen. The extreme solitude of the figure that has only props and prosthetics for company is not simply the isolated body but also the deformed, the sometimes broken, and often trying to escape from itself.

Sherman's photographs have in common Sherman's own body, which is implied in almost every image. Yet the contact with the body is always partial because the body is continually being fragmented. There is no attempt at objectivity, which implies the separation of subject and object. Instead, Sherman produces the difference between how she sees herself and how the other sees her. This difference is Sherman's task. Unlike identity, which requires a single image of a model, difference requires repetition. Difference itself cannot be represented, but there is a technique for the production of difference, the technique of the series. A series creates repetition (it is always the same body) and repetition is the visual manifestation of difference (it is always different figure) that exposes the self as both singular and plural.

Instagram

Sherman's Instagram photographs articulate something essential about self-representation, and identity in general: there is a growing rift between the idea of the self as autonomous and powerful and the way the self is being manipulated by algorithms and used for profits by big data companies. In this environment, our own self is becoming a kind of Frankenstein monster, capable of destroying its creator. In the age of facial recognition algorithms and the harvesting of personal data for political gains, to *be* is to be caught in a flash of photographic exposure. To *be* is to appear on a screen, on a data sheet or on a sheet of photographic paper. The real problem is that in the world of financial derivatives, troll factories, predictive policing, Facebook scams and Cambridge Analytica, to name but a few of the products of algorithmic culture, big data can take pieces of our own self, and weaponize them.

Sherman's Instagrams seem to ridicule the idea that anyone or anything can be represented in an image. The idea of representation is a deception which begins when we innocently look at a photograph expecting to find there something 'real'. Yet what we invariably find is mutual dependence between an image that is posing as a real person, and a real person that is absent from the image yet lends it its truth value. Sherman's Instagram feed seems to confirm that the personal and the political are not two separate entities. On the contrary, in this new technological and social reality, Instagram is an expression of an attitude toward life that does not recognize traditional boundaries between private and public, but points towards fragmented and always-incomplete identity, as expressed in the culture of the selfie.

Sherman's photographs not only manipulate the body, they also manipulate the framing of the body, either through incorporating elements of *film noir* or drawing on the attributes of the poster, the digital print, the studio portrait or, in the recent body of work, Instagram. Without this second degree of separation the body would become an illustration, it would tell a story, become a piece of theatre. If the photograph is read in terms of what it signifies, Sherman's work is lost.

For that reason, attempts at interpretation that focus on what the figure represents miss the mark. The determining quality of Sherman's images is isolation, it is required in order to break the habitual chain of representation which implies a relationship between a subject and an

object. Sherman's work is political not to the extent that it catalogues female stereotypes but to the extent that it demonstrates that stereotypes is all there is, as the photograph is the mass-technology of the stereotype. There is no blank canvas, no possibility of expression that is not already infused with this reproductive technology.

Photography is not the name of one type of images among many, it is the universal condition of making something, anything, into an image. For this reason, Sherman's Instagram images are not gentle, they do not take a neutral position towards their subject. On the contrary, this work is violent, because it has to force the image to reveal itself, destroying along the way the natural relationship between the original and the copy. Hence it is necessary for Sherman to manipulate our perception of Instagram by putting her practice on it and mixing it with pictures of commercial success. In Sherman's work there isn't and there never will be a finished, self-contained self. To become a subject is to become figural and fragmented.

Even though there is no fixed identity, it does not mean that the personal does not exist. But the personal does not have to be understood as representational. Because even though we know the image to be untrue, it still exercises a strange fascination upon us, suggesting that the lure of photography has nothing to do with truth, documents and evidence.

Sherman insists that the self exists in the gap between the desire for a fully autonomous and undivided identity and a community of always incomplete relations. The splitting and fragmenting of the self cannot be solidified into a fixed identity, and the desire for stable, unambiguous and autonomous individuality is as seductive as it is disastrous. What we value in the photograph is not that it tells the truth, but that it mesmerizes us; haunting and seducing us, the photograph is a reproduction of desire. And beneath the masks and the prosthetics there is the suggestion of a new self that is not attached to a single individual, but one that is distributed, streamed, networked and shared.