

# Will the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up?

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Fig. 1  
Cindy Sherman. Untitled (*Art News* cover). 1983. Chromogenic color print, 15 3/8 x 10 1/8" (39 x 27.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Janelle Reiring and Helene Winer

CINDY SHERMAN'S PHOTOGRAPHS ARE NOT self-portraits. It is true that she is the model for her own pictures, but that is beside the point. As a matter of practicality, Sherman prefers to work alone. To create her photographs, she assumes multiple roles of photographer, model, makeup artist, hairdresser, stylist, and wardrobe mistress. With an arsenal of wigs, costumes, makeup, prostheses, and props, Sherman has deftly altered her physique and surroundings to create a myriad of intriguing tableaux and characters, from screen siren to clown to aging socialite. Through her skillful masquerades, she has created an astonishing and influential body of work that amuses, titillates, disturbs, and shocks.

The fact that Sherman is in her photographs is immaterial, but the ongoing speculation about her identity gets to the very heart of her work and its resonance. The conflation of actor, artist, and subject and Sherman's simultaneous presence in and absence from her pictures has driven much of the literature on her, especially in relation to debates about authorship in postmodern art. The numerous exhibitions, essays, and catalogues dedicated to her

career have contributed to the mythology around Sherman the artist, especially as her fame has risen. Time and time again, writers have asked, *Who is the real Cindy Sherman?* This is entirely the wrong question, although it's almost unavoidable as a critical urge. Curators and critics have suggested which photographs reveal the *real* Cindy Sherman,<sup>1</sup> and almost every profile on the artist includes an account of how unassuming she is "in person." But it is Sherman's very anonymity that distinguishes her work. Rather than explorations of inner psychology, her pictures are about the projection of personas and stereotypes that are deep-seated in our shared cultural imagination. Even Sherman's public portraits are manufactured, such as the 1983 *Art News* cover (which carried the title *Who Does Cindy Sherman Think She Is?*) (fig. 1), enacting the role of the "artist" and recalling figures such as Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, and Gilbert & George, whose personas loom large in their work. Sherman has acknowledged: "Hype, money, celebrity. I like flirting with that idea of myself, but I know because my identity is so tied

up with my work that I'd also like to be a little more anonymous."<sup>2</sup>

Sherman's sustained, eloquent, and provocative investigation into the construction of contemporary identity and the nature of representation is drawn from the unlimited supply of images provided by movies, television, magazines, the Internet, and art history. Her invented characters speak to our current culture of YouTube fame, celebrity makeovers, reality shows, and the narcissism of social media. More than ever, identity is malleable and fluid, and Sherman's work confirms this, revealing and critiquing the artifice of identity and how photography is complicit in its making. Through a variety of characters and scenarios, she addresses the anxieties of the status of the self with pictures that are frighteningly on point and direct in their appraisal of the current culture of the cultivated self.

Sherman's work is singular in its vision, but infinitely complex in the ideas that are contained by it and radically original in its capacity for multiplicity. For more than thirty years, her photographs have encapsulated each era's leading ideas, striking

a deep cultural chord with scholars, curators, artists, students, and collectors alike. Sherman's work has found itself at the crossroads of diverse theoretical discourses—feminism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism, among others—with each camp claiming the artist as a representative of their ideas. The contradictory and complex readings of Sherman's work reinforce its ongoing relevance to multiple audiences and, in fact, speak to the contradictory forces at play in our culture at large—the surface appearance of ideas in the form of fleeting images that are often mistaken for content and depth.

Like any retrospective of a working artist, this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue provide an unfinished account of a career that continues to flourish. Because she is a prolific artist (some five hundred pictures and counting) and a vast literature already exists on Sherman, I will not attempt here a comprehensive account of her entire career. Rather, I will try to trace how her work has been received and interpreted over the last three decades within a critical context, and to investigate some of the dominant themes prevalent throughout

Sherman's work—including artifice and fiction; cinema and performance; horror and the grotesque; myth, carnival, and fairy tale; and gender and class identity—in tandem with her techniques, from analog and digital photography to collage and film. Sherman works in a serial fashion; each body of work is self-contained and has an internal coherence. In acknowledgment of this working method, I also examine some of Sherman's major bodies of work in depth. Together, these transverse readings—across themes and series—map out the career of one of the most remarkable and influential artists of our time.

TO GRASP THE SCOPE AND INVENTIVENESS OF Sherman's work, it is worth revisiting her formative cultural and artistic influences. She was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, in 1954 and grew up in suburban Huntington Beach on Long Island, forty miles from Manhattan. Belonging to the first generation of Americans raised on television, Sherman was fully steeped in mass-media culture, and she recalls watching such TV programs as the *Million Dollar Movie* and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* and such films as *Rear Window*.<sup>3</sup> Another activity that kept Sherman occupied was dressing up: "I'd try to look like another person—even like an old lady [fig. 2]. . . . I would make myself up like a monster, things like that, which seemed like much more fun than just looking like Barbie."<sup>4</sup> Even in childhood, Sherman's invented personas were unexpected, providing the seedlings for her diverse artistic oeuvre.

In 1972, Sherman enrolled at Buffalo State College in western New York, where she initially studied painting. She was adept at replicating details on canvas, but she soon became interested in photography, especially as it was being used by

Fig. 2  
Snapshot of Cindy Sherman (left) and friend Janet Zink dressed up as old ladies, c. 1966



conceptual and performance artists. Sherman failed a mandatory photography course because she wasn't proficient at the requisite technical skills. When she took the class again, her subsequent teacher, Barbara Jo Revelle, was less concerned with technical perfection and exposed her students to Conceptual art and other contemporary art movements. Sherman became aware of and interested in the work of feminist artists who performed for the camera, such as Lynda Benglis, Eleanor Antin, and Hannah Wilke,<sup>5</sup> as well as male artists such as Chris Burden and Vito Acconci, who used their own bodies as the locus for their art. Equally influential on Sherman was meeting fellow art student Robert Longo (whom she dated for several years) in her sophomore year: "Robert was really instrumental in opening my eyes to contemporary art, because in the first year of college, you study ancient history in art—and in suburban Long Island, where I grew up, I had no exposure to contemporary art. But I hung out with Robert and these other people, going with them to the Albright-Knox [Art Gallery], which is right across from the college, and I saw



Fig. 3  
Cindy Sherman. Left to right: Untitled #364, Untitled #365, Untitled #377, and Untitled #369. 1976. Gelatin silver prints (printed 2000), 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 5" (18.3 x 12.7 cm) each

contemporary art first-hand. That's when I started to question why I should paint. It just seemed not to make sense."<sup>6</sup>

Another influence on Sherman was the alternative space Hallwalls, located in a converted ice-packing warehouse, where many artists had studios. Hallwalls was established by Longo and Buffalo native Charles Clough, who both had studios in the building.<sup>7</sup> Their first collaboration was an impromptu exhibition of their own work on the wall of the hall between their studios (hence the name Hallwalls), and they soon conspired to renovate and establish the space as an artist-run gallery, which officially opened in February 1975 and hosted exhibitions, lectures, performances, and events. Grants from federal and state sources, such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, which were keen to support arts outside New York City, helped the fledgling organization gain traction.

Hallwalls was collaborative in spirit and a social hub where performance, painting, photography, and sculpture commingled. Sherman wasn't at the forefront of the organization (though she served as

secretary for a while), preferring instead to focus on her work and learn from studio-mates and visiting artists. The programs at Hallwalls attracted a number of notable artists and filmmakers during Sherman's tenure there, including Vito Acconci, Martha Wilson, Lynda Benglis, Jack Goldstein, Dan Graham, Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman, Nancy Holt, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Irwin, Richard Serra, and Katharina Sieverding, as well as critics and curators such as Lucy Lippard, Marcia Tucker, and Helene Winer. When Winer, director of the New York City alternative gallery Artists Space, visited Buffalo, she saw the work of Sherman, Longo, Clough, Nancy Dwyer, and Michael Zwack, and offered an exchange exhibition of artists associated with Hallwalls at Artists Space in November 1977, marking the beginning of a long relationship with Sherman. Hallwalls also cosponsored events with local institutions CEPA and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.<sup>8</sup> Buffalo was gaining a reputation for avant-garde art and becoming a destination on the conceptual art map, with Hallwalls at its center.

Sherman attended college at a time when attitudes about fashion and women's



Fig. 4

Suzy Lake. *Miss Chatelaine*. 1973. Gelatin silver print (printed 1996), 20 x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

bodies were changing. Gone were the girdles and restricting undergarments of her mother's generation, replaced by a more natural approach to grooming. Yet Sherman remained fascinated with makeup and artificial beauty enhancers, even though as a student she wore scant makeup and few adornments. For fun, she would spend hours playing with cosmetics and clothes, sometimes dressing up as characters—such as a pregnant woman or Lucille Ball (see page 68)—to go to openings and parties, and she soon began making photographs of the characters she had been dreaming up for years.

Sherman has referred to Untitled #479 (plate 11), made for a class assignment exploring the passage of time, as her "first serious work."<sup>9</sup> Like the before and after of a makeover, it records the process of transforming a single character, from plain bespectacled girl to cigarette-smoking vamp. She recalled: "When I got the assignment to do the serial piece . . . I did this transitional series—from no makeup at all to me looking like a completely different person. The piece got all this feedback. It dawned on me that I'd hit on something."<sup>10</sup>

Similar to a storyboard or filmstrip, the twenty-three hand-colored photographs (one exposure short of the film roll's twenty-four) resemble other works of Sherman's from the same year, Untitled A–E (plates 4–8), a series of five head shots in which a coquettish young woman is transformed into a dopey-looking train conductor, who morphs into a young woman staring at the camera, who turns into a shy girl in barrettes, who finally changes into a self-assured woman (wearing the same hat, incidentally, as in image A). Reminiscent of casting photographs where an actor shows off a range of emotions and characters, the pictures possess a playfulness that can also be seen in her other early satires of genres or types, such as the bus riders (fig. 3), a succession of characters inspired by people she observed on Buffalo's public transportation. Sherman's exploration of stereotypes (especially in the head-shot format) is reprised in later works, most notably in the head-shot series of 2000–2002.

The serial description in Sherman's early photographs resonates with works by a number of other artists from the period.

Fig. 5

Hannah Wilke. *S.O.S. – Starification Object Series*. 1974–82. Ten gelatin silver prints with chewing gum sculptures, 40 x 58½ x 2¼" (101.6 x 148.6 x 5.7 cm) overall. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase



Suzy Lake, an artist whom Sherman has cited as an influence,<sup>11</sup> produced gridlike transformations, such as the 1973 *Miss Chatelaine* (fig. 4), presenting multiple looks of a single character. Eleanor Antin's landmark multipart work *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972; fig. 6) and Hannah Wilke's *S.O.S. – Starification Object Series* (1974–82; fig. 5) each depict the transformation of the artist recorded over a number of pictures presented side by side. Wilke's parody of the stock poses struck by fashion models in *S.O.S. – Starification Object Series* is echoed in the hyperfeminized characters who appear at the end of the sequences in Sherman's Untitled #479 and Untitled A–E. While in many ways Sherman's work represents a break from these artists' more direct and political address of the camera, the legacy of their performative experiments and their exploration of surface appearances as powerful signifiers of cultural clichés and ideologies continues to resonate with Sherman's art today.

It was during the early days of experimenting with the plasticity of identity and photography that Sherman's ideas about art began to take hold: "When I was in school

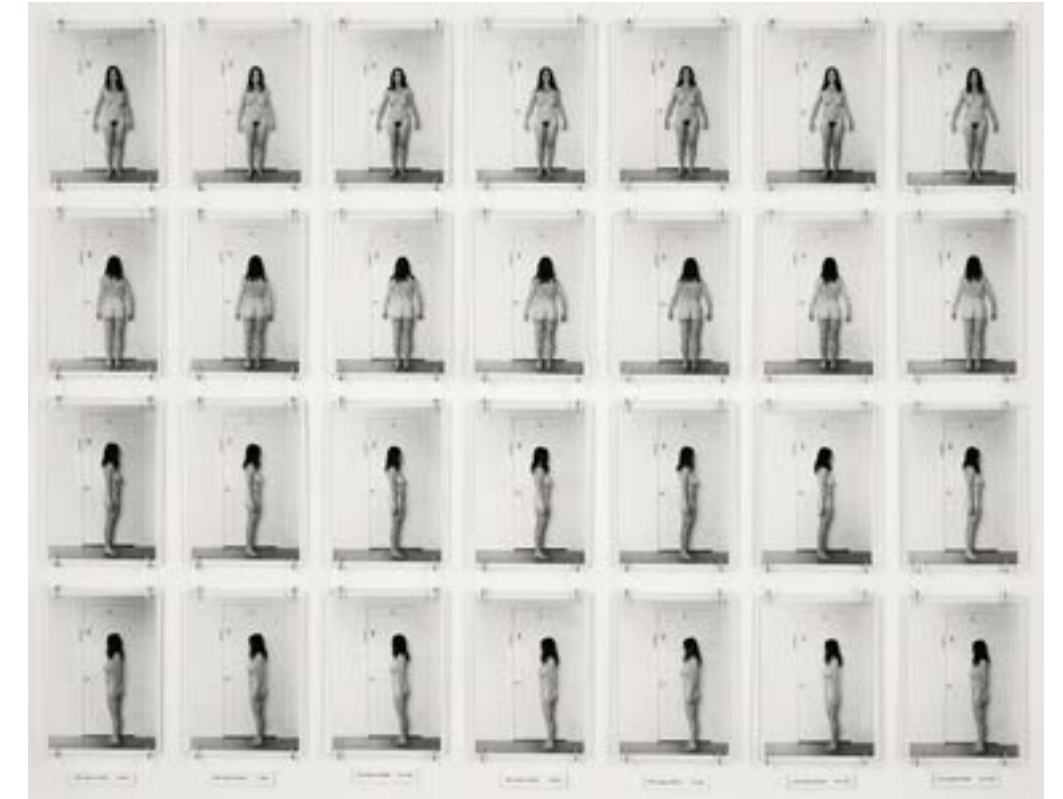


Fig. 6

Eleanor Antin. "The Last Seven Days" from *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*. 1972. Twenty-eight gelatin silver prints (printed 1999) with labels and wall text, 7 x 5" (17.8 x 12.7 cm) each





Fig. 7  
Cindy Sherman. *Untitled (Secretary)*.  
1978. Gelatin silver print (printed 1993).  
12½ x 9¼" (31.8 x 23.5 cm)

I was getting disgusted with the attitude of art being so religious or sacred, so I wanted to make something that people could relate to without having to read a book about it beforehand," she said. "So that anybody off the street could appreciate it, even if they couldn't fully understand it; they could still get something out of it. That's the reason why I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it."<sup>12</sup> From the very beginning, Sherman eschewed theory in favor of pop culture, film, television, and magazines—inspirations that remain at the heart of her work.

Sherman stayed in Buffalo for a year after graduating from college, and in 1977 she moved to New York City, settling in a loft downtown with Longo. After a one-day stint as an assistant buyer for Macy's, Sherman was hired in 1978 by Winer as a part-time assistant at Artists Space, a job that she kept through the early 1980s, and to which she would occasionally come dressed up (fig. 7). Winer, previously the director of the Pomona College Museum of Art in Claremont, California, championed conceptual artists such as Chris Burden,

Bas Jan Ader, and John Baldessari, as well as a younger generation of New York artists working in the same vein. In 1980, together with Janelle Reiring of Castelli Gallery, Winer opened Metro Pictures gallery, which became the platform from which Sherman's career matured and exploded.

In the fall of 1977, at the age of twenty-three, Sherman began making pictures that would eventually become the "Untitled Film Stills." Any consideration of her career must address the "Stills," arguably one of the most significant bodies of work made in the twentieth century and thoroughly canonized by art historians, curators, and critics. This series established Sherman as one of the most important and influential artists of her time, and provided the foundation for a career that continues to thrive, provoke, and astonish.

The eight-by-ten-inch black-and-white photographs explore the stereotypes of a ubiquitous element of our common culture—film—and look like publicity pictures made on movie sets.<sup>13</sup> Taken as a whole, the "Untitled Film Stills" read like an encyclopedic roster of female roles inspired by 1950s and 1960s Hollywood, film noir,

B movies, and European art-house films, evoking directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Douglas Sirk. However, Sherman's pictures do not depict actual films: "Some people have told me they remember the movie that one of my images is derived from," she commented, "but in fact I had no film in mind at all."<sup>14</sup> Her characters resonate with the virtual catalogue of cultural references that we carry around in our heads and sample from a variety of postwar cultural icons and styles. Based on types made recognizable by Hollywood, her characters represent deeply embedded clichés (career girl, bombshell, girl on the run, vamp, housewife, and so on). Every picture stars Sherman as the protagonist and is staged—from camera angle and props to hair, makeup, poses, and facial expressions. In keeping with the rules of film, her characters don't address the camera, often looking out of the frame with blank expressions or seemingly caught in a reverie. The "Stills" are constructed rather than appropriated; they blur narrative, fiction, film, role-playing, and disguise. Without resorting to parody, they explore the complexity of

Fig. 8  
Cindy Sherman. *Act 3-9 and Act 1-15*  
from *A Play of Selves*. 1975. Gelatin silver  
prints mounted on board, approximately  
15 x 12" (38.1 x 30.5 cm) each



representation in a world saturated with images and refer to the cultural filter of other images (moving and still) through which we see the world. But they *look* like copies, further complicating the cycle of representation in which they are enmeshed.

Before the "Untitled Film Stills" Sherman was making a series of cutout figures arranged into mini-narratives, such as *A Play of Selves* (fig. 8), a melodramatic allegory told through 244 cutouts of various characters that interact with one another. Although she wanted to continue making narrative pictures, she found the process of cutting too labor-intensive, and an idea developed after she visited the loft of David Salle, who had a stash of photographs from the art department of the midtown soft-core magazine where he worked. Cheesy and retrograde, the pictures encouraged Sherman to think about stock images. She recalls: "They seemed like they were from '50s movies, but you could tell that they weren't from *real* movies. Maybe they were done to illustrate some sleazy story in a magazine. . . . What was interesting to me, was that you couldn't tell whether each photograph was just its own isolated shot,



Fig. 9  
Installation view of "Untitled Film Stills"  
in *WHEREWHEN*, Hallwalls, Buffalo,  
December 3, 1977–January 6, 1978

or whether it was in a series that included other shots that I wasn't seeing. Maybe there were others that continued some kind of story. It was really ambiguous."<sup>15</sup>

The first "Stills" she made were conceived as a distinct set of six images of the same blonde actress playing different roles, and in their first showing at Hallwalls in 1977–78 (fig. 9), some were cropped slightly differently than the prints today. Sherman has referred to the protagonist as a "trashy has-been,"<sup>16</sup> a type that she has explored in a number of other series (such as the murder mystery pictures and the head shots). In one, the blonde is looking over her shoulder at herself in a mirror (#2; plate 76); in another, she is splayed on a bed in bra and panties clutching a mirror (#6; plate 55); in another tight shot, she looks as if she has been interrupted while reading a letter (#5; plate 26). In developing the first six "Film Stills," Sherman purposely caused reticulation in the negatives, a grainy effect that results when one chemical bath is very different in temperature from the preceding one. There is a telling double paradox here: Sherman did this with the intent of making the

pictures look technically poor (although real film stills with such a flaw would never have been distributed), yet only someone with a knowledge of film developing would understand that such a flaw could be deliberately introduced. In some of the "Stills" the shutter release cord detracts from the illusion (see for example #6, #11 [plate 74], and #35 [plate 67]), while #4 (plate 50) reveals an incongruent detail: a Manhattan phonebook in the hallway, presumably placed there by someone other than the artist. Another "Still," #33 (plate 49), includes a picture within the picture—the portrait on the bedside table is of the artist in drag, similar to her portrait as a doctor (fig. 10). The layers of artificiality reveal that these photographs, and by extension all photographs, are constructed.

The series eventually grew to a total of seventy photographs made over three years,<sup>17</sup> encompassing a wide range of female character types that evoke a repertoire of starlets, from Brigitte Bardot and Jeanne Moreau to Monica Vitti, Sophia Loren, and Anna Magnani. They refer to an ideal of beauty and femininity that belonged to Sherman's mother's generation; she was

Fig. 11  
August Sander. *Secretary at West German Radio in Cologne*. 1931. Gelatin silver print (printed 1995), 10¼ x 5⅞" (26 x 14.8 cm)



Fig. 10  
Cindy Sherman. Detail of *Untitled (Doctor and Nurse)*. 1980. One of two gelatin silver prints, 9⅞ x 8" (23.7 x 20.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Janelle Reiring and Helene Winer



searching for the "most artificial looking kinds of women. Women that had cinched-in waists and pointed bras, lots of make-up, stiff hair, high heels, and things like that."<sup>18</sup> While the pictures can be appreciated individually, much of their significance comes in the endless variation of identity from one photograph to the next. The series is an inventory of types, an August Sander catalogue for the media age. Where Sander endeavored a comprehensive compilation of the German people by occupation in his ambitious project *People of the 20th Century* (fig. 11), Sherman's index of women relies on the persistence of recognizable manufactured stereotypes that loom large in the cultural imagination.

After the first six pictures, in 1978 she made more "Stills" at Longo's family's beach house on Long Island and eventually photographed all over New York City (near the World Trade Center, on the West Side piers, in Chelsea), as well as elsewhere. *Untitled Film Stills* #42–44 (plates 28, 42, and 53) and #48 (plate 62) were taken in Arizona while Sherman was on a family trip (the famous "hitchhiker" [#48] was snapped by her father),<sup>19</sup> and #50 (plate #18) was

made in the Los Angeles home of Gifford Phillips (of the Phillips Collection), where her friend Nancy Dwyer was house-sitting in 1979. While her earlier studio-based proto-narrative works, such as the bus riders and *A Play of Selves*, suggested little storyline beyond the characters portrayed, the locations in the "Stills" were key to the success of their narrative potential. These pictures show us how identity, and the representation of it, relies not just on pose, gesture, and facial expression, but also on the arrangement of props, the choice of clothing, and, of course, the location.

The "Untitled Film Stills" cost fifty dollars each when they were first exhibited. Their cheapness was important, as it evoked the original referent—the film still. Rarely printed anymore, film stills were usually photographed on set and produced for publicity and promotion; they were never treated as artworks, and the photographers were rarely credited. Sherman's "Stills" mimic the publicity-still format—eight by ten inches, glossy—and often look like throw-away prints rather than precious works of art. "I wanted them to seem cheap and trashy," Sherman recalled, "something





Fig. 12 (far left)

Pierre-Louis Pierson. *Scherzo di Follia (Game of Madness)*. 1861–67. Gelatin silver print from glass negative (printed c. 1930), 15 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (39.8 x 29.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gilman Collection, Gift of The Howard Gilman Foundation, 2005

Fig. 13 (left)

Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob). *Untitled*. c. 1921. Gelatin silver print, 9 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 5 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (23.7 x 15 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Purchase

Fig. 14 (right)

Man Ray (Emmanuel Radnitzky). *Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy*. c. 1920–21. Gelatin silver print, retouched by Duchamp, 8 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 6 $\frac{13}{16}$ " (21.6 x 17.3 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Samuel S. White 3rd and Vera White Collection, 1957

Fig. 15 (far right)

Gertrud Arndt. *Maskenselbstbildnis Nr. 22 (Mask Self-Portrait No. 22)*. 1930. Gelatin silver print, 9 x 6 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (22.9 x 17 cm). Museum Folkwang, Essen

you'd find in a novelty store and buy for a quarter. I didn't want them to look like art."<sup>20</sup> However, at this stage Sherman was already deeply invested in her art, and the dual status of the pictures—as works of art that *appear* to be cheap prints—contribute to the layered complexity of the series.

The "Untitled Film Stills" are irrevocably tied to the history of performance art, and Sherman has cited the influence of the work of 1970s artists such as Eleanor Antin, Hannah Wilke, and Adrian Piper.<sup>21</sup> Sherman's work also has affinities with a tradition of artists performing for the camera that predates the 1970s performative experiments. Although Sherman may not have been familiar with these precedents, photographers have exploited photography's plasticity from the dawn of the medium, posing, performing, and masquerading for the camera to create a multitude of personas, fictions, and narratives that probe the nature of the medium and the genre of self-portraiture. A year after photography's invention, Hippolyte Bayard's *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man* (1840) was an open acknowledgment of photography's capacity to

create fictions. Twenty years later, the Countess de Castiglione, an extravagant French socialite, collaborated with court stage, and photograph herself in costume, presenting a range of characters that reflected her fantasies (fig. 12). Pictorialist F. Holland Day assumed the persona of Jesus Christ for his 1898 series of pictures depicting the Crucifixion, after fasting for several months and scarring his body.

The Surrealist Claude Cahun's self-portraits have been cited as an important precedent for Sherman's exploration of the malleability of identity.<sup>22</sup> Cahun's gender-bending self-portrait in drag (fig. 13) recalls another significant exemplar known to Sherman, Marcel's Duchamp's female alter ego, Rose Sélavy (fig. 14), photographed by Man Ray around 1921. An overlooked figure in this tradition is Gertrud Arndt, a Bauhaus student who masqueraded for the camera in a series of self-portraits taken in 1930 (fig. 15). Like Sherman, she enacted a series of stereotypes, such as the femme fatale, bourgeois lady, and widow—all interpretations of the multiplicity of female identity. These early examples ushered in the era

of set-up photography, best exemplified by the work of Paul Outerbridge and Edward Steichen and copied by countless anonymous professionals (fig. 16). They became the norm in the worlds of advertising and fashion as the picture press became the dominant mode of disseminating images. These would have been the kinds of images Sherman absorbed as a child, informing the female stereotypes in the "Film Stills" as much as the iconic characters from film did.

For Sherman, performing for the camera was always undertaken in relation to the act of photographing: "Once I'm set up, the camera starts clicking, then I just start to move and watch how I move in the mirror. It's not like I'm method acting or anything. I don't feel that I *am* that person," she has explained. "I may be thinking about a certain story or situation, but I don't become her. There's this distance. The image in the mirror becomes her—the image the camera gets on the film. And the one thing I've always known is that the camera lies."<sup>23</sup> Sherman acknowledges that we are conditioned by cinema and other media, and she uses these associations to steer her viewers in many narrative directions. The



Fig. 16

Photographer unknown. Advertising photo. c. 1950. Cabro print, 12 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 16 $\frac{3}{16}$ " (31 x 42 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Richard Benson

cracks in the facade of the work (obvious makeup, ill-fitting clothes, repeated props, blank expressions) reveal the artificiality of her enterprise, and as viewers we become knowing participants in the fiction of photography. Sherman is interested in the disrupted narrative, the apparatus of it, and the process of the narrative structure, rather than a convincing performance.<sup>24</sup> The photographs are not seamless copies, nor were they ever meant to be. Rather, they are comments on images themselves. Seen as a whole, the series points to how we experience our media-saturated world, but also how contemporary identity (which is always shifting) is fractured and constructed by an evolving set of references.

It is difficult to divorce the “Untitled Film Stills” from the mountain of critical writing they stimulated, in which they were cited to illustrate postmodernism, feminism, psychoanalytic theories of the male gaze, and the culture of the spectacle. It is to Sherman’s credit that the pictorial worlds she creates do not spring from any particular theoretical grounding, yet they tolerate and thrive on such varied, and sometimes conflicting, readings. Art

historian Craig Owens saw the women in the “Stills” as a critique of the construction of feminine identity seen in the media, positing: “Sherman’s women are not women but images of women, specular models of femininity projected by the media to encourage imitation, identification; they are, in other words, tropes, figures.”<sup>25</sup> For critic Arthur Danto they signaled something sexy and sinister: “The Girl [in each “Still”] is an allegory for something deeper and darker, in the mythic unconscious of everyone, regardless of sex. . . . Each of the stills is about the Girl in Trouble, but in the aggregate they touch the myth we each carry out of childhood, of danger, love, and security that defines the human condition where the wild things are.”<sup>26</sup> The frequent use of frames within frames in the “Stills” (see #2, #14 [plate 44], #56 [plate 71], and #81 [plate 12]) led theorists such as Laura Mulvey to posit that the act of looking and photographing made the viewer aware of, even complicit in, the cycle of voyeurism.<sup>27</sup> In her 1993 book, art historian Rosalind Krauss wrote about the relationship of Sherman’s work to theorist Jean Baudrillard’s idea of the simulacrum: “The condition of

Sherman’s work[s] . . . is the simulacral nature of what they contain, the condition of being a copy *without* an original.”<sup>28</sup> The “Stills” are all this and more. They struck a deep nerve within critical art historical circles and became a talisman of many of the emergent ideas of the 1980s, when photography and art were commingling and the nature of photography’s veracity was being debated. The “Stills” engender a number of different readings because they contain and support all those meanings—their strength is their mutability and elusiveness.

The “Stills” became a key example of the developing ideas of postmodernism, as articulated primarily by Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens.<sup>29</sup> Along with the work of Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Robert Longo, Laurie Simmons, Barbara Kruger, Jack Goldstein, and Troy Brauntuch (some of whom exhibited with Sherman at Metro Pictures), Sherman’s photographs helped define this critical discourse. Postmodernism proposed a rethinking of the tenets of modernism, attacking the basic assumption of the original artwork and the genius artist. These

artists came to define postmodern artistic practices by creating art from existing material (such as news pictures, advertisements, television, and movies), suggesting the finiteness of the visual world and the depreciation of the primacy of a single image. They engaged with photography’s capacity to examine and undermine the production of stereotypes and representations by acknowledging that in our dominant camera culture, pictures (moving and still) mediate our encounters in the world. The artist and critic Thomas Lawson wrote in his influential essay “Last Exit: Painting,” “The photograph *is* the modern world,” positing that natural perception has given way to photographic perception.<sup>30</sup> While his essay primarily addressed painting, he did make a point that artists in the late 1970s and the 1980s used photography as the main, if not dominant, tool with which to explore the nature of representation.

A hallmark of postmodern art was the influential *Pictures* exhibition organized by Douglas Crimp and presented at Artists Space in fall 1977. Sherman was not included in *Pictures*, which featured Troy

Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith, but an expanded version of the exhibition’s brochure text that Crimp later published in the journal *October* included a discussion of Sherman’s “Untitled Film Stills.”<sup>31</sup> *Pictures* signaled the emergence and recognition of the influence of media culture on a variety of artistic practices, and would become shorthand for referring to a generation of artists and their shared artistic concerns. The artists associated with the *Pictures* exhibition came to represent the spirit of criticism of the era and an involvement with images and ideas born out of mass culture. Referred to as postmodernists, appropriation artists, and “pictures” artists, they produced works (in a variety of mediums) that represented several strategies—including appropriation, approximation, pastiche, and recontextualization—that are loosely related and often lumped together in the assessment of the 1980s. Despite individual personalities and practices, these artists were all exploring similar ideas that worked against the modernist paradigm.

Although Crimp’s theories would become the touchstone for the period, he

was not working in isolation. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Thomas Lawson, and Andy Grundberg were other leading voices in the development of postmodern culture and theory.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, French theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard, whose writings were increasingly available through translation, were influential, particularly Barthes’s 1967 manifesto “The Death of the Author.” Another key text for postmodernists was Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), where he asserted that photographs have rendered earlier forms of picture making, such as painting, obsolete.

Postmodern artists were the inheritors of the strategies and experiments of Conceptual art, in which photography began to play an increasingly pivotal role as traditional forms of painting and sculpture were rejected in favor of performance-based, ephemeral, and earth art practices. Postmodern artists coming of age in the 1970s were educated not as photographers but as fine artists. Many of them were influenced by the matter-of-fact attitude toward photography adopted by artists



Fig. 17

Richard Prince. *Untitled (Three Women Looking in the Same Direction)*. 1980. Chromogenic color prints, 16 x 23½" (40.6 x 59.7 cm) each. The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Boardroom, Inc.

such as John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha, perhaps best encapsulated in Baldessari's wry painting *An Artist Is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer* (1966–68; fig. 18), which challenges the conventions of "good" (i.e., traditional) photography. Richard Prince (fig. 17) and Sherrie Levine appropriated freely from the plethora of images in our culture, and Jeff Koons engaged in similar practices with sculpture. It's not as if artists hadn't borrowed from pop culture in the past, but the 1980s ushered in a new way of thinking about it. Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades and his incorporation of everyday objects as art were important precedents for how postmodernists would come to use life and "low" culture as material for their art. Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol were equally significant for how they utilized popular photographic images in their work. Other lesser-known precedents included Robert Heineken's *Are You Rea* (1964–68; fig. 19), in which he exposed magazine pages to light against photographic paper, collapsing the verso and recto into a single image and melding advertising and editorial texts and images. Moreover, traditional photographers like



Fig. 18

John Baldessari. *An Artist Is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer*. 1966–68. Photoemulsion, varnish, and gesso on canvas, 59½ x 45" (150.2 x 114.3 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee and gift of an anonymous donor



Fig. 19

Robert Heineken. *Are You Rea #1*. 1964–68. Lithograph, 10⅞ x 7⅞" (27.4 x 20 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Clark Winter Fund



Fig. 20

Lee Friedlander. *Tampa, Florida*. 1970. Gelatin silver print, 6 x 9⅞" (15.3 x 23.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Lee Friedlander (fig. 20) had also expressed an interest in pop culture, photographing signs and window displays and celebrating the poetry of the everyday. However, by the 1980s a different set of rules had come into play, partly because modern art (which was largely defined as the rarefied art of painting) had itself become a commodity, and artists were looking to other sources and material for inspiration to work against the modernist paradigm. In addition, the late 1970s and 1980s marked a shift to new operational modes, where hip hop, DJs, mix tapes, and other forms of sampling became the norm in culture at large. Music, art, film, and theater were increasingly cross-pollinating each other in New York, contributing to the rich artistic boom of the era.

Women played a leading role in the formation of postmodernist work. Photography was still regarded as a second-class citizen, and as such it held an appeal for artists like Laurie Simmons, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine (fig. 21), Sarah Charlesworth, and, of course, Sherman. Working in an era that celebrated a return to painting,



Fig. 21

Sherrie Levine. *President Collage: 1*. 1979. Cut-and-pasted printed paper on paper, 24 x 18" (61 x 45.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift



specifically the expressionist and figurative works of a group of “bad boy” painters who operated on an overtly macho public stage—Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, and David Salle (the rising stars of the Mary Boone Gallery)—these women claimed photography for themselves. It is perhaps partially due to this context that Sherman’s work appealed to feminist theorists, but also because it emerged with some of the most ambitious and challenging photography made by women since Diane Arbus. Sherman recalled, “In the later ‘80s, when it seemed like everywhere you looked people were talking about appropriation—then it seemed like a thing, a real presence. But I wasn’t really aware of any group feeling. . . . [W]hat probably did increase the feeling of community was when more women began to get recognized for their work, most of them in photography: Sherrie, Laurie, Sarah Charlesworth, Barbara Ess. I felt there was more of a support system than among the women artists. It could also have been that many of us were doing this other kind of work—we were using photography—but people like Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer were in

there too. There was a female solidarity.”<sup>33</sup>

Sherman’s work bloomed alongside, and was partly responsible for, photography’s entrée into museum, gallery, and critical circles. Painting and sculpture were no longer perceived by the art market and museums as the only legitimate modes of art production. Sherman insists, however, that she is not a photographer but, rather, an artist who uses photography. Critics and curators debated what it meant to “use photography” to make art, as opposed to making photographs as art, in the new discourse on the medium that engaged histories and referents other than the modernist history of photography.<sup>34</sup> The work of postmodern photographers can be read as a tacit rejection of the ideals of modernist photographers like Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams, a refusal of form in favor of content. Sherman and her contemporaries cared little about the perfect print or correct exposure; they were more interested in how vernacular pictures reverberated in their art, how photography shaped the world and raised issues about power and representation. These photographers were

also creating work alongside the rising mode of fictional photography by artists like Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Jeff Wall (fig. 22), who were producing elaborately constructed tableaux and cinematically staged pictures. It was a groundbreaking era for photography, and Sherman’s work was at the center of this fertile and radical repositioning of the medium.

The vast majority of the figures in Sherman’s photographs are women, so inevitably the discourse on her works must acknowledge gender as an important element in their meaning and reception. The construction of female identity, established through visual codes like dress, hair, and makeup, had been rejected by feminist artists in the 1970s. Sherman’s reappraisal of these roles was both an embrace and a rejection, establishing a complex relationship to feminism. Furthermore, her role as both subject (and object) and producer of images of women put her in the unique position of enacting the traditionally male viewpoint of photographer while also undermining it. Sherman’s types, especially in the “Stills,” are representations of representations—



Fig. 22

Jeff Wall. *The Destroyed Room*. 1978. Transparency in light box, 62½" x 7' 6¼" (159 x 234 cm). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1979

stereotypes that critique feminine roles and conventions. Later series, with increased suggestions of violence and mutilated bodies, inspired further feminist discourse on the polemics of gender and sexuality in contemporary culture.

Feminist readings of Sherman’s work emerged mostly after postmodernism was established, partly as a response to the male-dominated postmodern discourse but also as a by-product of it, as feminist perspectives offered an alternative to the male-centric modern tradition. Essays by theorists Laura Mulvey and Judith Williamson were particularly influential in this regard.<sup>35</sup> In her 1983 essay “Images of ‘Woman,’” Williamson related the image of femininity to the constructed image of photography and film. She argued that Sherman’s work invited the viewer to see the manufactured feminine image in tandem with the constructed photographic one: “In the ‘Untitled Film Stills’ we are constantly forced to recognize a visual style (often you could name the director) simultaneously with a type of femininity.”<sup>36</sup> While Sherman didn’t necessarily see the “Film Stills” through a feminist lens, she

also didn't negate this reading of her series: "I know I was not consciously aware of this thing the 'male gaze.' It was the way I was shooting, the mimicry of the style of black and white grade-Z motion pictures that produced the self-consciousness of these characters, not my knowledge of feminist theory." She continued, "I suppose unconsciously, or semiconsciously at best, I was wrestling with some sort of turmoil of my own about understanding women. . . . I definitely felt that the characters were questioning something—perhaps being forced into a certain role. At the same time, those roles are in a film: the women aren't being lifelike, they're acting. There are so many levels of artifice. I liked that whole jumble of ambiguity."<sup>37</sup>

The debates over Sherman's work in relation to feminism really exploded with her 1981 series known as centerfolds (sometimes referred to as horizontals).<sup>38</sup> The twelve color horizontal photographs (measuring two by four feet) that comprise the series sent ripples throughout the art world when they were first shown at Metro Pictures in November 1981. One impassioned critic wrote that the show "cracked

my personal top-ten list of life-changing art epiphanies."<sup>39</sup> Commercially and critically, this provocative body of work ushered in a new era in Sherman's career, catapulting her to art stardom and engendering a new round of vigorous critical debate.

The centerfolds refer to both the printed page and the cinema—two constant inspirations for Sherman. The size of the prints, with their allusion to the Cinemascope format, allows for a more physical viewing experience than that offered by the "Untitled Film Stills," and a sense that the viewer is entering into (or being surrounded by) a fictive space. Originally commissioned by Ingrid Sischy, then editor of *Artforum*, these send-ups of men's erotic magazine centerfolds were ultimately not published because Sischy was concerned that they might be misunderstood. It recalls the debates triggered by Lynda Benglis's infamous self-produced ad in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum* (fig. 23), wherein she posed nude for the camera wearing nothing but sunglasses and holding a dildo, prompting a group of *Artforum* editors to protest the ad's "vulgarity."<sup>40</sup> Sherman acknowledged the influence of Benglis's ad,

Fig. 23

Lynda Benglis. Photograph for advertisement in *Artforum*, November 1974. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York



and similarly provocative ads by Robert Morris and Eleanor Antin, "where they used themselves in a kind of joke about advertising."<sup>41</sup>

Sherman's centerfolds depict a variety of young women, mostly in supine positions, photographed close up and cropped so that they seem compressed into the frame and the photographic space is flattened. In many of these pictures, the women are in a state of reverie or day-dreaming, seemingly unaware of the camera and staring outside of the picture frame. The characters are in extreme emotional states, ranging from terrified (Untitled #92; plate 96) to heartbroken (Untitled #90; plate 97) to melancholic (Untitled #88; plate 93). The suggestion of interiority is a shift from the surface masquerades and blank stares of the "Untitled Film Stills" and earlier work. The saturated palette contributes to both the intensity and the alienation of the women, heightening the drama of each picture. Sherman uses color to great expressive effect, as in Untitled #96 (plate 90), where the warm glow of the orange sweater of the girl lying on the floor, clutching a lonely-hearts ad, contributes

to her seemingly dreamy state. In Untitled #92, the cool blue tones of the picture enhance the girl's terror-stricken expression. The photographs are at once seductive and anxious-making. It's as if we're witnessing a private moment unfolding, which leads to a number of readings about the status of the viewer as a voyeur in the work. Sherman plays into the male conditioning of looking at photographs of exposed women, but she takes on the roles of both (assumed) male photographer and female pinup. The use of a horizontal format makes the reference to magazine centerfolds unmistakable, forcing us to reflect on this photographic cliché. Sherman's photographs are the antithesis of what a viewer expects to see in a centerfold. Like the "Film Stills," they foreground the way pictures affect us, making us aware of the act of photographing and looking.

The centerfolds provoked debate about the victimization of women because in many of the pictures viewers look down at the model, a vantage point that evokes a male point of view and suggests the woman's passivity and vulnerability. Laura Mulvey saw the photographs as a comment

on women as an erotic construction and fetish of the male gaze: "[The centerfolds] announce themselves as photographs and, as in a pinup, the model's eroticism, and her pose, are directed towards the camera, and ultimately towards the spectator."<sup>42</sup> Untitled #93 (plate 92) was a particular lightning rod for debate, as some interpreted the puffy-faced girl clutching at her bedsheets as a victim of sexual assault. Critic Roberta Smith wrote in 1981: "Some [of the women] seem slightly retarded or dazed, others are fearful—they seem to have been or are about to be victimized."<sup>43</sup> Sherman imagined another scenario entirely: "To me, the whole inspiration for the picture was somebody who'd been up all night drinking and partying and had just gone to sleep five minutes before the sun rose and woke her up. So it bothered me at first when people criticized the picture, seeing the side that I hadn't intended. I finally decided it was something I had to accept."<sup>44</sup> She later commented: "I was definitely trying to provoke in those pictures. But it was more about provoking men into reassessing their assumptions when they look at pictures of women. I was thinking about vulnerability

in a way that would make a male viewer feel uncomfortable—like seeing your daughter in a vulnerable state.”<sup>45</sup>

This is typical of the debates that have surrounded Sherman and her work: the artist’s accounts of her own intentions often conflict with the scholarly debates about feminism and the role of women in her pictures. The controversy and discussion around the centerfolds, and Untitled #93 in particular, are emblematic of the competing readings of her work. Like the “Untitled Film Stills,” the impact of the individual centerfolds was generally overlooked in service of the theories about the work. While certainly those readings shed light on the photographs, they didn’t acknowledge how all-encompassing Sherman’s pictorial worlds are—so persuasive, in fact, that critics were up in arms about the depiction of violence, terror, and fear in her characters.

The centerfolds’ references to the printed page and the feminine stereotypes formed and perpetuated by men’s magazines were further developed by Sherman in works made for, by, and about fashion. It seems only natural that she would take up the subject of fashion itself

at various points throughout her career, as fashion has been a constant source of inspiration for Sherman and often a leading ingredient in the creation of her characters. After all, fashion is a masquerade that women engage in on a daily basis, in hopes of attaining a more beautiful, sexy, and polished version of themselves. It is an aspirational medium sold via magazines, advertisements, billboards, television, and the Internet with a rich visual language that communicates aspects of culture, gender, and class. Sherman’s interest in the construction of femininity and mass circulation of images informs much of the work that takes fashion as its subject, illustrating not only a fascination with fashion images but also a critical stance against what they represent.

Sherman’s first fashion commission, in 1983, was from the New York boutique owner Dianne Benson, who also hired Robert Mapplethorpe, Laurie Simmons, and Peter Hujar to produce photographs for advertisements. Sherman’s advertisements (fig. 24) ran in the March, April, and June 1983 issues of *Interview* magazine. With an element of slapstick humor and theatri-

cality, these parodies of fashion photography were never meant to stand in for traditional fashion shots. Rather than projecting glamour, sex, or wealth, they feature characters that are far from desirable—goofy, hysterical, angry, and slightly mad—challenging conventional notions of beauty and grace. The traditionally acquiescent fashion model is replaced here with powerful and strong women, whose diverse behavior ranges from temper tantrum (Untitled #122; plate 84) to delirious outburst (Untitled #119; plate 83) to prudish giggling (Untitled #131; plate 89). The characters have an eccentric, almost gothic quality. Some critics have noted that it was in these works that Sherman’s preoccupation with the grotesque began, seen here in the use of melodrama, violence, and mutilation and eventually expressed through bulbous prostheses and hybrid species in later series such as the fairy tales and sex pictures.<sup>46</sup> In an interview in 1986, Sherman commented on her growing fascination with darker subject matter that consciously worked against fashion’s norms: “I’m disgusted with how people get themselves to look



Fig. 24  
Advertisement for Dianne B., *Interview*,  
March 1983. Photograph by Cindy  
Sherman

beautiful; I’m much more fascinated with the other side. . . . I was trying to make fun of fashion.”<sup>47</sup>

In 1984, the French fashion company Dorothée Bis commissioned Sherman to make photographs for *Vogue Paris*. More extreme than the Benson pictures made a year earlier, they feature ugly characters with bloodshot eyes, bruises, and unflattering pancake makeup. Sherman said about this series: “This is going to be in French *Vogue*. I’ve really got to do something to rip open the French fashion world.’ So I wanted to make really ugly pictures. The first couple of pictures I shot and sent to Dorothée Bis they didn’t like at all. . . . That inspired even more depressing, bloody, ugly characters.”<sup>48</sup> The fashion in the pictures is layered, oversized, not at all body conscious or sexy. In Untitled #133 and #137 (plate 87), the women are wrapped in heavy winter coats and sweaters and have a sullen look, disheveled hair, and bruised faces. These characters are beaten down and leaden, in stark opposition to the gazelles typically found bounding across the pages of fashion magazines. On close inspection, though, the clothes are luxurious and expensive

(by designers Comme des Garçons and Issey Miyake) and point to how wealth and class play into conventions of beauty and aging, topics that become more acute in later bodies of Sherman’s work from 2000 on. Violence and power are also at play here—an uneasy cruelty, perhaps a suggestion of the implicit violence found just beneath the surface of many fashion pictures.

A decade later, in 1993, *Harper’s Bazaar* commissioned Sherman to make editorial pictures for a feature that included clothes by Christian Dior, Jean-Paul Gaultier, John Galliano, Dolce & Gabbana, Calvin Klein, and Vivienne Westwood. In these pictures, clothes are utilized like costumes to create bizarre characters, such as a coy court jester (Untitled #277), a puckered-up Cinderella (Untitled #279), and a hung-over geisha (Untitled #278). Similarly, Sherman’s 1994 commission from Comme des Garçons for an advertising mailer includes peculiar characters like a Kabuki-esque mime (Untitled #296; plate 143) and a tattooed truck-stop diva (Untitled #299; plate 85). By hiring Sherman, *Harper’s Bazaar* and Comme des Garçons embraced the artist’s



Fig. 25

Juergen Teller and Cindy Sherman.  
Untitled. 2004. Photograph for  
Marc Jacobs Spring/Summer 2005  
campaign

challenge to the conventions of high fashion and beauty and acknowledged that their own clothes and media influence were complicit in the masquerade of fashion. With these pictures, the circle was completed, as the ideas of the postmodernists were now co-opted by the very media they were commenting on. This strategy was reprised in the 2004 collaboration between Sherman and German photographer Juergen Teller for anti-fashion fashion ads for Marc Jacobs, which featured both artists dressed and posing in character for the camera, looking sometimes like a flamboyant couple groping each other and other times like frumpy siblings (fig. 25).

The exaggerated characters in Sherman's fashion pictures turned to ostentatious heights in 2007–08 with a series of over-the-top fashion victims dressed in head-to-toe Balenciaga clothes commissioned by *Vogue Paris* for their August 2007 issue (see plates 86, 105, and 164). The larger-than-life characters resemble steely fashion editors, PR mavens, assistant buyers, and wannabe fashionistas trying to look sexy for the camera. With their telltale signs of plastic surgery, gaudy dress, and



high-society aspirations, the characters are reminiscent of women in party pictures in fashion magazines or the *Real Housewives* reality show franchise. In an industry obsessed with image and status, these pictures are far from flattering, but as with her collaboration with Teller for Marc Jacobs, they were embraced by Balenciaga and the editors of *Vogue Paris* as a way to align themselves with the cutting edge. Thus the pictures operate on several levels: the photographs are at the center of a rejection of fashion's desire machine, yet they participate in it at the highest echelon.

Sherman's early fashion work marks the beginning of her exploration of the ugly, macabre, and grotesque and a trajectory of the physical disintegration of the body, which she explored to their fullest potential with several series in the 1980s and 1990s, including the fairy tales (1985), disasters (1986–89), civil war (1991), sex pictures (1992), horror and surrealist pictures (1994–96), masks (1995–96), and her 1997 film *Office Killer*. While she did create other series during this period, such as the 1990 history portraits (discussed later in this essay), the grotesque and abject—explored in various

forms—were consistent preoccupations throughout these bodies of work.

This subject matter begins to manifest itself with the 1985 fairy tales series, larger-than-life photographs in jewel-toned colors that menace viewers with their dark visions. Although the pictures do not correspond to any specific fairy tales (just as the “Untitled Film Stills” do not refer to specific films), the macabre, gothic, deranged, and monstrous images evoke the narratives of the Brothers Grimm, Teutonic myths, folk legends, and oriental fables.<sup>49</sup> Originally commissioned by *Vanity Fair* but never published (like the *Artforum* centerfolds), the pictures are theatrical and revel in their own artificiality. In these fantastical mise-en-scènes, elements of metamorphosis are rampant, with animal/human hybrids (such as the snout-nosed face in Untitled #140 [plate 110]) and figures that appear neither male nor female, and barely human (see plate 147). The series encompasses a nightmarish perspective on the world that becomes increasingly pronounced in Sherman's work in the years to follow.

With the fairy tales, Sherman introduced prosthetic parts as a stand-in

for the human body, a practice that would soon replace the figure altogether. Even when Sherman is in the photographs, she appears doll-like and artificial, as in Untitled #153 (plate 2). Reminiscent of a crime scene photo, the picture shows a dead woman lying on the ground and covered in dirt, her glassy eyes opened wide, as if shocked by her own violent demise. Unlike a police photograph, however, this larger-than-life glossy picture is full of seductive detail, with rich descriptions of the colors and textures of the gravel background, the woman's mussed hair, and her waxy face. With this picture, the suspense and suggestion of violence lurking in the “Untitled Film Stills” and centerfolds is amplified and articulated.

In the series referred to as the disasters (1986–89), Sherman continued the theatrical devices, themes, and motifs explored in the fairy tales. The figure disappears (or is only nominally present) in favor of outlandish and revolting scenes that explore the psychic terrain of the abject. The pictures feature mutilated body parts, blow-up dolls (Untitled #188), rotting food, and substances that look like vomit (Untitled #182; plate 111), feces, and blood,

and recall female bodily functions such as menstruation and giving birth, as well as bulimia, an illness associated with women (see Untitled #175 [plate 116]). Despite their gruesome qualities, the pictures are not without humor, as seen in the reflection of a screaming face in a pair of glasses in Untitled #175. These landscapes of decay are visually rich and painterly in texture and color. Sherman said of these pictures that she “wanted something visually offensive but seductive, beautiful, and textural as well, to suck you in and then repulse you.”<sup>50</sup> While some of the photographs do have shock value, that is not their primary intent; rather, the carefully arranged tableaux are surrogates for larger narratives of violence, decomposition, and death.

These grotesque bodies of work marked a turn away from the representation of women, perhaps reflecting Sherman’s response to the feminist critical discourse surrounding the “Film Stills” and center-folds. Although debates about feminism and the issue of pornography certainly continued with the sex pictures, the disasters and the subsequent horror and surreal series engendered new ways of

framing her work in terms of the psycho-analytic, grotesque, and abject, as articulated by art historians such as Amada Cruz, Hal Foster, and Norman Bryson, among others.<sup>51</sup> The lack of the figure was read by Cruz as a rejection of the “socialized body that we encounter daily in the media”<sup>52</sup> and by Foster (who read Sherman’s pictures through Julia Kristeva’s construct of abjection) as proof of the “body turned inside out, of the subject literally abjected, thrown out.”<sup>53</sup> However, Sherman’s shift was motivated at least in part by practicality; she was getting increasingly tired of using herself as a model and had become interested in the theatrical narratives made possible by using dolls, prosthetic body parts, and props. She also made these pictures in response to her increased popularity in the art world. Without the artist in the picture, the work was no longer a recognizable “Sherman.” She explained: “I’m pretty disgusted, I guess, with the art world in general. The boy artists, the boy painters, the collectors, the crawl, and climb, and stabbing each other to the top sort of competition. I don’t know why that work would come out

from those feelings, but I think I wanted to make something that I couldn’t imagine anybody buying. ‘I dare you to like *this*.’”<sup>54</sup>

Violated and hybrid bodies found their full expression in Sherman’s 1992 sex pictures. Sherman wanted to make explicit pictures but was not interested in photographing herself nude, so she used dolls bought from medical supply catalogues, arranged them to simulate sex acts and mimic hard-core pornography, and photographed them, sometimes in extreme and disorienting close-up. She used a cache of body parts, creating her own hybrids at will—a mix of male and female that evoked the crossbreeds from the fairy tales. Sherman added makeup and pubic hair to the plasticized, hairless medical dolls to make them more diverse and lifelike. Mannequins and sex dolls are usually idealized versions of women’s bodies with unrealistic proportions, and Sherman’s use of medical dolls with gaping orifices and her mix of male and female parts (see Untitled #263; plate 109) challenge fetishized female sexuality. She forces viewers to confront their own preconceived ideas about sex, pornography, and erotic images: “[T]hey were

a refusal to make a sexy image about sex,” she said. “I’ve never wanted to do that. . . . Nudity can be a cop out. That is why I use fake tits and asses, to avoid sensationalisms, which I wanted to subvert.”<sup>55</sup> Suggested in her combination of bodies and parts is dismemberment and violence, as well as allusions to sadomasochism (seen in Untitled #264 [plate 3]). Her fascination with and repulsion by grotesquely engineered bodies is reprised in later pictures, from 2000 on, that address the manipulation of the body through cosmetic enhancement and plastic surgery.

The sex pictures are distinctly unerotic. While the scenarios are pornographic, the bodies themselves are sterile and medical, and they simply mimic erotic poses and acts (both gay and straight). Their manufactured quality enhances the allusion to pornographic photographs and videos, forcing viewers to become self-conscious about watching themselves watching, keenly aware of the cycle of fetishism and voyeurism on which pornography thrives. Sherman commented on people’s reactions to viewing the work: “I got the feeling at the opening and at the other times I would

walk into the gallery that people would look around and quickly leave. I think someone told me that they couldn’t stay in the gallery very long. . . . I think the show made people very uncomfortable.”<sup>56</sup> Although the scenarios were obviously fake, they nonetheless succeeded in making the viewers feel complicit in the act of looking and photographing.

On one level, the sex pictures were Sherman’s response to Jeff Koons’s bombastic paintings of himself having sex with his wife, Ilona Staller, a former porn star also known as Cicciolina (fig. 26). But they were also made against the politically charged backdrop of debates about censorship and federal funding of the arts after a public outcry against government sponsorship of a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition. Sherman said: “The censorship issue is important. . . . I felt that my previous show. . . was so commercially successful that it made sense to go out on a limb in these difficult times. Since I really don’t expect people to buy my art anyway, and because I don’t have to worry about funding or being censored at this point, I thought I might as well really try to pull out all the

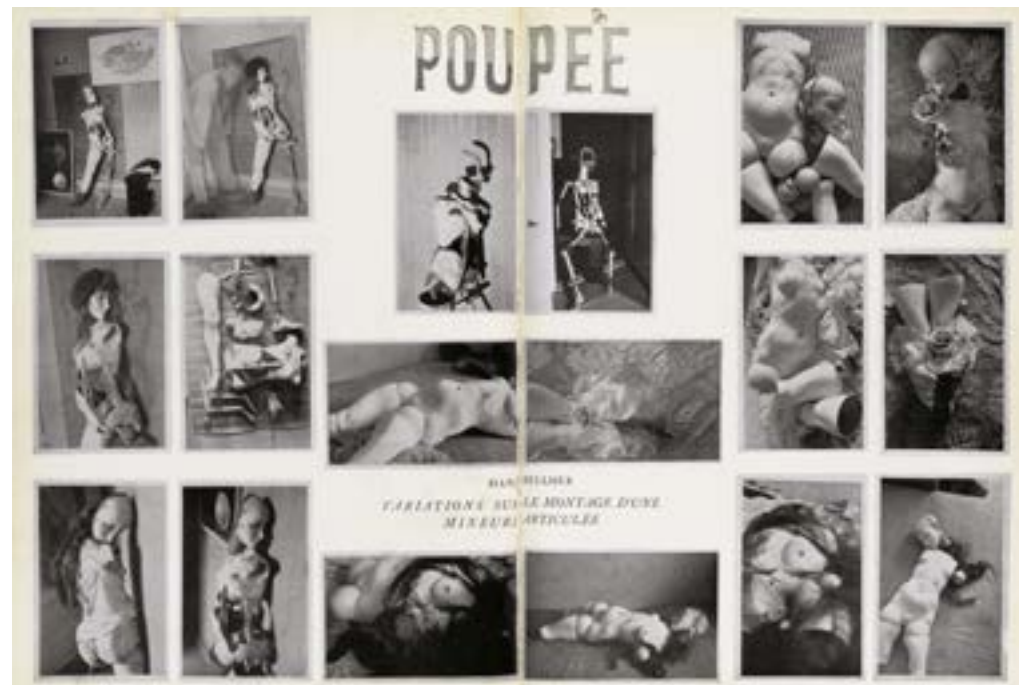
Fig. 26

Jeff Koons. *Ponies*. 1991. Oil inks silkscreened on canvas, 90 x 60" (228.6 x 152.4 cm)



Fig. 27

Spread from *Minotaure*, December 1934, showing eighteen photographs of Hans Bellmer's *Poupées*. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York



stops and just make something that directly deals with sexuality and censorship without compromising my values."<sup>57</sup> The sex pictures also operated under the specter of AIDS, during a period when the body and its surrogate took on new meanings in the context of images of wasted AIDS victims. Devoid of pleasure and intimacy, Sherman's sex pictures reflect a fear of the body and suggest the degeneration and dehumanization of sexual desire. In opposition to the use of the body as a direct instrument of action in art of the 1960s and early 1970s, the bodies in Sherman's sex pictures are empty receptacles that function as signifiers for death, power, and aggression.

The relationship of the sex pictures to Hans Bellmer's experiments with dolls (fig. 27) has been discussed numerous times in the literature on Sherman.<sup>58</sup> Bellmer's *Poupées*, which he constructed and photographed in the 1930s, are surrogates for his fantasies and imagination and comprise terrifying images of women. As a female author of her works, however, Sherman creates photographs that suggest a critique of the fetishes of male artists such as Bellmer and other Surrealists who engaged

in similar fantastical dismemberments of the female body. While Bellmer's *Poupées* are a key precedent, perhaps a more fruitful and revealing comparison is with Sherman's contemporary Charles Ray, in particular his sculpture *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley . . .* (fig. 29), a life-scale depiction of the artist engaged in an orgy with himself, made in the same year as Sherman's sex pictures. While Sherman's pictures are artificial and de-individualized and Ray's sculpture is realistic, they share an oddly asexual quality in their examination of how the body functions in a masturbatory image culture that seems to endlessly multiply on itself. Robert Gober also explored the fragmented body in his sculptural works, which resonate with many of the themes found in Sherman's sex pictures. Like her pictures, Gober's dismembered and damaged bodies (fig. 28) were a response to AIDS and political art under fire, as well as an exploration of the language of identity politics. Both artists paint a bleak picture of the cultural and political landscape of the early 1990s.

The artificial tableaux of body parts and grotesque subjects appeared again in



Fig. 29

Charles Ray. *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley . . .* 1992. Eight painted cast fiberglass mannequins with wigs, 6 x 15 x 15' (182.9 x 457.2 x 457.2 cm) overall. Rubell Family Collection, Miami



Fig. 28

Robert Gober. *Untitled Leg*. 1989–90. Beeswax, cotton, wood, leather, and human hair, 11¾ x 7¾ x 20" (28.9 x 19.7 x 50.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Dannheisser Foundation





Fig. 30  
Cindy Sherman. *Office Killer*. 1997. Film,  
35mm, color, 82 minutes

Sherman's 1997 feature film, *Office Killer* (fig. 30), starring Carol Kane, Molly Ringwald, and Jeanne Tripplehorn.<sup>59</sup> Set in the generic offices of a *Consumer Reports*-type magazine, *Office Killer* follows Dorine (played by Kane), a mousy copy editor whose accidental murder of a coworker precipitates a killing spree, after which she hides the bodies in her basement to play house with them. The film resonates with much of the photographic work Sherman was making at the time—especially the colorful tableaux of vomit, body parts, and excrement—and her love of horror films is seen in the movie's campy melodrama (an underappreciated aspect of the work). In the film, the office is dominated by female characters wearing power suits and gaudy jewelry, smacking gum, and being catty. Ringwald's character, Kim Poole, an ambitious young office worker, is reminiscent of the office girls in the "Untitled Film Stills" (such as #21 [plate 35]) or Untitled #74 (plate 108) from the rear screen projection series that followed in 1980. The film's self-awareness and referentiality (to her own work and to B horror movies) echo the strategies of Sherman's photographic work.

It seems inevitable that Sherman would turn to the subject of art itself at some point in her career. The body of work known as the history portraits (also referred to as old masters) was first exhibited in 1990 at Metro Pictures to great acclaim. A critic noted in his review that the gallery "resembled the Impressionist wing of the Met on a busy Sunday" and that the extensive press coverage of the exhibition accorded the works "the kind of cultural legitimation usually reserved for traditional Masterpieces."<sup>60</sup> The series began in 1988, when Artes Magnus, a producer of limited-edition tableware made by artists, invited Sherman to create a dinnerware and tea service with the French porcelain house Limoges, which houses the original molds for the eighteenth-century designs made for Madame de Pompadour, mistress of King Louis XV. Sherman's porcelain objects (fig. 31) are adorned with images of herself as Pompadour, and later that year, for a group exhibition at Metro Pictures, Sherman produced a photograph based on the character (Untitled #183; plate 128). The next year, on the occasion of the bicentennial of the French Revolution,

Sherman produced a group of pictures for a show at Chantal Crousel gallery in Paris inspired by that event (Untitled #193–201; see, for example, plates 119, 120, 122, 125, and 139). As the series continued to take shape, she made a second group of pictures during a two-month stay in Rome in late 1989, and then produced the last group in the series when she returned to New York.

These classically composed portraits, presented in ornate and gilded frames, refer to Old Master paintings in their format and size. The subjects, who include aristocrats, Madonna and child, clergymen, women of leisure, and milkmaids, pose with props, costumes, and prostheses. The portraits borrow from a number of art historical periods—Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical—and make allusions to Raphael, Caravaggio, Fragonard, and Ingres. (Of course, all the Old Master painters were men.) This free-association sampling creates an illusion of familiarity, but not to specific eras or styles (just as the "Untitled Film Stills" evoke generic types, not particular films). With the exception of a few works that were inspired by specific paintings, most of Sherman's subjects are

Fig. 31

Cindy Sherman. *Madame de Pompadour (née Poisson)*. 1990. Porcelain with painted and silkscreened decoration, tureen with cover: 10¼ x 14¾ x 9¼" (26 x 37.2 x 23.5 cm), under plate: 2½ x 22½ x 17¼" (6.4 x 56.2 x 43.5 cm)





Fig. 32 (left)  
Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (Raphael).  
*La Fornarina*. c. 1518. Oil on wood, 34 $\frac{1}{4}$  x  
24 $\frac{3}{16}$ " (87 x 63 cm). Galleria Nazionale  
d'Arte Antica, Rome



Fig. 33 (center)  
Jean Fouquet. *Virgin of Melun*. c. 1452.  
Oil on panel, 37 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (94.5 x  
85.5 cm). Koninklijk Museum voor  
Schone Kunsten, Antwerp



Fig. 35  
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.  
*Sick Bacchus*. c. 1593. Oil on canvas,  
26 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 21" (67 x 53.3 cm). Galleria  
Borghese, Rome

Fig. 34 (right)  
Oscar Gustave Rejlander. *Untitled*  
(*The Virgin in Prayer*). c. 1857. Albumen  
silver print, 8 x 6" (20.3 x 15.2 cm).  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.  
Purchased 2002

anonymous, although their status, roles, and class are denoted through clothing, props, backgrounds, and set dressing. The obvious use of prostheses builds on the theatricality of the fairy tale and disaster series, and the large noses, bulging bellies, squirting breasts, warts, and unibrows that populate these pictures make for less-than-graceful portraits of nobility; one critic described them as "butt-ugly aristocrats."<sup>61</sup> The history portraits toe the line between humorous parody and grotesque, as in *Untitled #216* (plate 10), which pokes fun at the Renaissance treatment of female anatomy by featuring an obviously artificial, impossibly globular breast.

For the first time in Sherman's work, men played a big role in the series—nearly half the portraits are of men. Where some of Sherman's previous masquerades as male characters veered toward campy drag, the men in the history portraits blend in seamlessly with the female characters. Their overly bushy eyebrows and ill-fitting wigs are just as artificial as the women's witchy noses and heaving bosoms. All the portraits are treated with a similar mocking questioning of the nature of representation in art

history and the relationship between painter and model.

At first glance, the set dressing and costumes, made from fabrics such as brocade, silk, damask, lace, and velvet, look sumptuous and evoke a general "Old Master" era. However, like elements of a film set, they are required to look convincing only through the camera lens, and in fact most of them are cheap retrofits of contemporary fabrics made to look "period"—a facade that alludes to a historical context. Some contemporary details also appear in the history portraits, such as in *Untitled #204* (plate 127), where a shred of contemporary graph paper with illegible notes is wedged in the corner of a mirror in the background. The illusion collapses, as it inevitably does in all of Sherman's photographs, leaving the process of disguise in plain sight as part of the meaning of the work. In creating these pictures, Sherman generally used as her inspiration reproductions in books, further emphasizing her reassessment of and allusion to a representational model: "Even when I was doing those history pictures, I was living in Rome but never went to the churches and

museums there. I worked out of books, with reproductions. It's an aspect of photography I appreciate, conceptually: the idea that images can be reproduced and seen anytime, anywhere, by anyone."<sup>62</sup> These representational systems are part of our cultural history, familiar to us through generic coffee table art books and vaguely recalled childhood museum visits.

There are a handful of works inspired by actual paintings: *Untitled #224* (plate 136) is based on Caravaggio's *Sick Bacchus* (c. 1593); *Untitled #205* (plate 134), on Raphael's *La Fornarina*, a portrait of his mistress (c. 1518; fig. 32); and *Untitled #216*, on Jean Fouquet's *Virgin of Melun* (c. 1452; fig. 33). *Untitled #228* (plate 140) refers to the biblical story of Judith beheading Holofernes, illustrated by numerous painters, including Caravaggio, Donatello, and Botticelli. In Sherman's depiction, Judith seems unmoved, and her apparent lack of emotion as she holds the head of Holofernes contributes to the sense of fiction and remove from the violent action.

The practice of photographing scenes inspired by paintings was common among Victorian photographers in the nineteenth

century, such as Oscar Gustave Rejlander, whose photograph *Untitled (The Virgin in Prayer)* (c. 1857; fig. 34) was taken after the seventeenth-century painting *The Virgin in Prayer* by the Italian artist Sassoferrato. Rejlander's carefully staged picture recalls the tradition of copying great works as a pedagogical tool for art students. But whereas Rejlander restaged the Old Masters in photography to prove that the status of the medium was equal to that of drawing and painting, Sherman undermines the historical tradition by combining a variety of styles and references.

Of the history portraits inspired by specific paintings, *Untitled #224* is the least caricature-like, but even here Sherman effects a transformation of the original source. In her interpretation of Caravaggio's work (fig. 35), commonly believed to be a self-portrait of the artist as Bacchus, there are numerous layers of representation—a female artist impersonating a male artist impersonating a pagan divinity—creating a sense of pastiche and criticality in her version. Herein lies the brilliance of the history portraits: even where her pictures offer a gleam of art historical recognition,





Sherman has inserted her own interpretation of these ossified paintings, turning them into contemporary artifacts of a bygone era.

Sherman continued to test the boundaries of portraiture, photography, and, perhaps most importantly, identity with a series of head shots executed in 2000–2002 and referred to as *Hollywood/Hamptons* or *West Coast/East Coast*. The format recalls ID pictures, head shots, or vanity portraits made in garden-variety portrait studios by professional photographers (who are fast becoming obsolete in the digital era). In her role as both sitter and photographer, Sherman has disrupted the usual power dynamic between model and artist and created new avenues through which to explore the very apparatus of portrait photography itself. Shown at Gagosian Gallery's Beverly Hills location in 2000 around the time of the Oscars, the first eleven photographs in the series explore the cycle of desire and failed ambition that permeates Hollywood. Sherman conceived a cast of characters who were, in her words, "would-be or has-been actors (in reality secretaries, housewives, or gardeners) posing for headshots to get an acting job.

These people are trying to sell themselves with all their might; they're just begging the viewer: don't you want to hire me?"<sup>63</sup> Later Sherman added eleven "East Coast" types (hence the reference to the Hamptons, the exclusive beach enclave sometimes referred to as East Hollywood) for her show at Metro Pictures in 2001. Whichever part of the country they're from, we've seen these women before—on reality TV, in soap operas, or at the PTA meeting.

The series marked a return to a more intimate scale and the figure after Sherman had been working for almost a decade with dolls and props. The series also recalls early works, such as *Untitled A–E*, where the focus was on the transformative qualities of makeup, hair, expression, and pose, and the recognition of certain stereotypes as powerful transmitters of cultural clichés. Here Sherman utilizes makeup, clothes, and styling to project well-drawn personas: the enormous pouting lips of the woman in *Untitled #360* (plate 158) suggest a yearning for youth, while the glittery makeup and purple iridescent dress worn by the character in *Untitled #400* (plate 149) indicate an aspiration to reach a certain social status.

The women in this series covet youth and glamour, sometimes at a level bordering on desperation—just one of the elements that make the series so powerful.

The head-shot series continued Sherman's close engagement with screen sirens, celebrity, and Hollywood, but it would be limiting to read these pictures only in relation to such references. Whereas Hollywood was once the main generator and disseminator of feminine types and role models (the currency of the "Untitled Film Stills"), now magazines, tabloids, the Internet, and reality TV are all progenitors of female stereotypes, and Sherman's work increasingly references these sources. The pictures speak to the pervasive youth-obsessed culture of the twenty-first century and expertly capture the slippage between the artificial face of our personas—the photo-op-ready glamazons—and the insecure individuals underneath the garish makeup and silicone implants. Sherman has explored the theme of failure in several of her series, played out to a certain extent in some of the protagonists of the "Film Stills" and to a gorier end with works she created in the mid-1990s. With this series, however,

Fig. 36

Eadweard Muybridge. Plate no. 495 from *Animal Locomotion*. 1887. Collotype, 7 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 14 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (20 x 37 cm). University of Pennsylvania Archives



the desperation of the characters is palpable. While there is an element of satire, there are equal, if not greater, parts of compassion for, and affinity with, these women.

The uneasy relationship between artificial surface appearance and inner psychology in portraiture is explored in a series of pictures of clowns Sherman made a few years later, in 2002–04. This series builds on the exploration of the conventions of portraiture seen in the history portraits and head shots, but it is also an extension of Sherman's interest in fairy tales, black humor, and masks. The clowns evoke circus posters in their style but represent a range of emotions and states, from hysterical passion to tragedy. Rather than simply impersonate the clichéd clown, Sherman created a cast of players who are cruel, wicked, disturbed, even lustful—in her words, "intense, with a nasty side or an ugly side, but also with a real pathos."<sup>64</sup>

Clowns wear masks and are predominantly men, and for these portraits Sherman adopted a variety of male characters as well as ambiguously gendered ones, recalling the hybrids of the fairy tales and sex pictures. She was interested in moving

beyond the strict set of defined roles and codified types generally assigned to clowns (like the happy or sad clown) to reveal the persona underneath, who might be "an alcoholic, or even a child-molester."<sup>65</sup> (For instance, in *Untitled #411* [plate 146] the clown inexplicably wears a neck brace, suggesting violence or an accident.) This opens the door to multiple layers of meaning and narrative: the surface facade denoted by makeup and clothes, as well as the underlayer expressed by Sherman through gesture, pose, and styling.

There is a deeply unsettling quality that permeates the clowns, underscored by the aggressive makeup and garish Day-Glo backdrops. Sherman shot the characters on slide film and made all the backgrounds digitally, allowing her to incorporate multiple figures, which she had wanted to do for many years but had found technically challenging. (She had experimented with digital backgrounds with a few of the head-shot pictures, such as *Untitled #408* [plate 103] and *#409*, and would shoot her first complete series digitally with the Balenciaga pictures in 2007–08.) The new digital techniques she employed in the

series recall her college experiments with cutouts of multiple figures, such as *Doll Clothes*, her 1975 stop-motion animated 16mm film,<sup>66</sup> and the 1976 collages *Untitled #488* and *#489* (plates 166 and 165), which evoke the early experiments in motion photography by Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge (fig. 36). Where these early works chart the movements and gestures of a character that is replicated and multiplied, the multiple figures in *Untitled #425* (plate 161) interact with one another to create a tableau; they also allow for a variation in scale that leads to a nightmarish effect in which clowns seem to encroach on the viewer's physical space.

The clown can be seen as a stand-in for the artist, who is often expected to entertain in the contemporary circus of society and is encouraged to act outside of codified norms. Perhaps the sad clown in *Untitled #413* (plate 1), donning a silk jacket embroidered with "Cindy" on the chest, is an acknowledgment of the demands made on the artist to embody such a manufactured persona. Contemporary artists such as Paul McCarthy, Bruce Nauman, Roni Horn, and Ugo Rondinone have also



examined the pathos of the clown; several works by Nauman feature clowns in hysterically extreme states, most memorably in his 1987 video installation *Clown Torture* (fig. 37), a disturbing spectacle of noise exploring themes of surveillance, torture, and madness. Like Nauman, Sherman uses the guise of the clown to explore uncanny and monstrous impulses that have a complex hold on the public imagination.

The larger-than-life clowns made way for the 2008 series of society portraits, an even larger set of pictures (some tower over eight feet tall). They are a continuation of themes explored in the head shots and the series of Balenciaga pictures made in 2007–08 for *Vogue Paris*. The 2008 society portraits feature women “of a certain age” from the top echelons of polite society: politicians’ wives, old-money blue bloods, and the nouveau riche. While the characters are not based on actual women, Sherman makes these stereotypes look entirely familiar. Presented in opulent gilded frames, presumably to be installed in the foyers and grand rooms of their mansions, the characters are both vulgar and tragic. “I started to think about some of the



Fig. 37

Bruce Nauman. *Clown Torture*. 1987. Four-channel video, sound (two projections, four monitors), 60-minute loop. The Art Institute of Chicago. Watson F. Blair Prize, Wilson L. Mead and Twentieth-Century Purchase funds; through prior gift of Joseph Winterbotham; gift of Lannan Foundation

characters—how they’re older women and if they are successful, maybe they’re not really that happy,” Sherman said. “Maybe they’ve been divorced, or they’re in an unhappy marriage, but because of the money, they’re not going to get out. That’s what I was thinking—that there’s something more below the surface that you can’t really see.”<sup>67</sup> The characters are set against the backdrop of opulent palazzos, lush gardens, and elegant drawing rooms, holding lap dogs or wearing ball gowns—all familiar signifiers of money and status. To create the portraits, Sherman photographed herself against a green screen and later inserted digital backdrops that she shot herself, in Central Park (Untitled #465; plate 170), the Cloisters (Untitled #466; plate 9), and the National Arts Club in Gramercy Park (Untitled #474; plate 169), among other locations.

The bejeweled and begloved women in these pictures struggle with the impossible standards of beauty that prevail in our youth- and status-obsessed culture, and more than a few of them show the telltale signs of cosmetic alteration. The large scale of the pictures allows viewers to see certain

key details very clearly: papery skin around the eyes and lips, the turkey neck that is the bane of older women everywhere, impossibly smooth foreheads thanks to Botox, and arm fat that won’t dissipate despite a daily Pilates regimen. The psychological weight of these pictures comes through the unrelenting honesty of the description of aging and the small details that belie the attempt to project a certain appearance. In Untitled #476 (plate 168), a woman sits on a sofa with her Schnauzer, but the dog is fake. In Untitled #466, a grand dame wears an opulent caftan, but her feet are stuffed into pink plastic slippers from a dollar store and she’s wearing the kind of thick stockings that reduce varicose veins. Upon careful viewing, these pictures reveal a darker reality lurking beneath the glossy surface of perfection. In a world where nobody knows who has had work done or what is fake, the series confounds viewers, leaving them unsure of what is artificial and what is real.

It would be easy to dismiss the pictures as callous parodies, but Sherman’s attention to the details (aging hands, just the right earrings, perfect hair) reveals her intense

fascination with, and empathy for, the women she portrays. A sense of personal connection with her characters seems stronger here than in any other body of work: “To me, it’s a little scary when I see myself. And it’s especially scary when I see myself in these older women.”<sup>68</sup> Sherman has always included older characters in her work, but, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau pointed out in her 1991 essay “Suitable for Framing: The Critical Recasting of Cindy Sherman”: “that such types [have] become critically invisible grimly parallels their invisibility in real life.”<sup>69</sup> Here, women “of a certain age” loom large, unmistakably visible.

With this series, Sherman doesn’t critique just ideas of glamour and standards of beauty; she also takes on issues of class. Although the artist did not conceive of these characters as art patrons,<sup>70</sup> Sherman herself has attained celebrity status within the art world, and these are among the types of women she now mingles with. Sherman takes on a subject that challenges her collectors, and one of the many paradoxes of this series is how the patron class is both the champion and the subject of it. As with much of her work, Sherman has a



Fig. 38  
Installation view of *Cindy Sherman*,  
Sprüth Magers, London, January 12–  
February 19, 2011

remarkable capacity to channel the zeitgeist. These well-heeled divas presage the end of an era of opulence with the financial collapse in 2008. The size of the photographs alone seems a commentary on an age of excess and the overcompensation of wealth and status. At this scale the characters' facades are on full view, making it easier to decipher the vulnerability behind the makeup, jewelry, and fabulous settings. The pictures represent a synthesis of the opposing compulsions that plague women: bodily self-loathing and the quest for youth and status. In the infinite possibilities of the mutability of identity and gender, these pictures, like other of Sherman's best work, stand out for their ability to be at once provocative, disparaging, empathetic, and mysterious.

The grandeur of Sherman's society portraits morphed to an architectural scale with the photographic murals she began working on in 2010. Like wallpaper, the murals cover the gallery from floor to ceiling, wrapping around multiple walls to create an immersive fictive environment. They are Sherman's first foray into transforming space and represent a huge artistic step,

illustrating her continuing experimental vigor. The characters are no longer frozen in their frames; they float in space and surround and tower over the viewer (fig. 38). In an echo of her removal of herself in the 1990s in favor of unseemly landscapes of vomit, body parts, and bodily fluids, the murals similarly challenge the commodified photograph, as they are essentially images that you can't take with you.

The characters are set against a black and white background reminiscent of toile wallpaper, a nod to a vaguely rococo decorative environment. The pastoral backgrounds were all shot by Sherman, then mirrored and manipulated in Photoshop to look more "drawn." The figures—in color—sport an odd mix of costumes: a feathered leotard (plate 174), a homemade juggler's outfit (plate 173), and the shawl and matronly dress of a babushka (plate 178). Sherman described the statuesque figures, which were inspired by a trip she took to Mexico, as akin to the monumental objects that often protect or block the entrance to a shrine, sacred site, or landscape.<sup>71</sup> Instead of using makeup or prostheses, she transformed her face via digital means,

exaggerating her features through Photoshop by elongating her nose, narrowing her eyes, or creating smaller lips. The effect is of a natural face, but one that looks oddly off.

The characters seem sad, depleted, and somewhat on the margins. One woman in a tight-fitting body suit might be a batty crystal-loving cat lady; a young boy (or androgynous girl) seems obsessed with gaming, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and Renaissance reenactments (plate 177); a blonde proudly wears a county-fair medal and cradles leeks (plate 174). These characters are taken from daily life, slightly odd eccentrics that Sherman has elevated to larger-than-life status. Set against the decorative toile background, they seem like protagonists from their own carnivalesque worlds, where fantasy and reality merge. The characters don't fit into a pat category, as the characters of many of her other series do; instead, they hint at the multiple and varied roles demanded of contemporary women.

In a recent series of photographs (see *Untitled #512* [plate 176] and *Untitled #513* [plate 175])—the result of a commission for a special insert of *POP* magazine's autumn/

winter 2010 issue—Sherman used the same digital methods as the murals. The artist photographed herself against a green screen in head-to-toe Chanel, then digitally inserted herself into photographs she took of the Icelandic landscape, which looks grand and mythic, evoking the folklore and fairy tales of previous series. As in the murals, some characters seem frumpy and others just plain wacky, and she also used Photoshop to alter her features. Because they are bare-faced, wearing no makeup, it seems inevitable that these characters will be seen as a comment on age and the possibilities of digital and surgical enhancements. Ironically, the works where Sherman wears the least makeup are the most opaque. The characters in her murals and Icelandic photographs are mysterious and raise the question as to why they are gathered together. They are emblematic of Sherman's entire practice, which samples at will from all echelons of culture to create a hybrid set of references that inform our own understanding of the world.

THROUGHOUT HER CAREER, SHERMAN HAS broken down stereotypes while also enforcing them. There is no real sex in the sex pictures, no real movies in the "Untitled Film Stills," no nudity in the centerfolds, and little beauty in the fashion pictures. Yet the photographs are persuasive, their fictions all-encompassing. Since she was barely out of college, Sherman's work has been received with enthusiasm, accolades, and unprecedented critical success. Students and professors alike have filled volumes about her pictures, and her work is equally popular with museums, galleries, and collectors. Why is it that Sherman has struck such a vital nerve in our contemporary culture? Sherman has never announced the intentions of her work vis-à-vis theory, nor has she denied or managed any of the myriad of readings. In fact, her silence seems to fan the flames of the historians and critics who write about her work, and in many ways her rejection of any theoretical framework makes her work more available to the many discourses that claim it as their own. In trying to understand the magnetism and enormous influence of Sherman's work, one sees that its power lies in its mutability. More important

than any one reading of Sherman’s work is its ability to reflect the ideas of culture at large and its continuing capacity to resonate enormously with multiple audiences.

Sherman’s pictures also tell us something about photography: its ability to lie, mask, and seduce. Photography is particularly suited to the synthesis of the real and the imagined, and she has brilliantly exploited the medium’s plasticity and narrative capacity. Her work signaled the arrival of photography on art’s main stage, and she has been a key player in changing our understanding of it. In the early 1980s she was one of the main agents challenging traditional ideologies of art, and her work represents the fundamental sea change that occurred during that era. Sherman’s career matured during the debates about modes of representation in different fields (from academia to Madison Avenue to Hollywood). In a society thoroughly saturated with images, the work of this relentlessly adventurous artist speaks to how we understand the proliferation of cultural myths, icons, and narratives through the prism of photography, and how images participate in the construction of

culture, consumption, and ideology.

Let’s return to the question I pose in the title of this essay—“Will the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up?”—based on the phrase popularized by *To Tell the Truth*, a game show from the 1950s, wherein celebrity panelists tried to guess the real identity of a described contestant among impersonators. Just like the show, Sherman’s photographs afford a glimpse into a character, one that seems real and rooted in life. But the more questions we ask and the closer we look, the more the fiction unravels. There is no *real* Cindy Sherman, only infinite characters who reflect the countless mediated images that bombard us daily. Her work speaks to the conspiratorial role that images play in society’s self-visualization and reinforces the artificial nature of these images. Her pictures remind us about our own complicated relationship to identity and representation, and how the archive of images we carry in our collective imagination informs our vision of the world and, ultimately, our view of ourselves. Sherman’s photographs speak not only to our desire to transform and be transformed, but also to our desire for art to transform us.

## Notes

- See, for example, critic Peter Schjeldahl’s assessment of the 1982 series known as pink robes: “These, I believe, are as close as we will ever get to a glimpse of ‘the real Cindy.’” Schjeldahl, “Introduction: The Oracle of Images,” in Schjeldahl and I. Michael Danoff, *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 10. Curator Els Barents described the centerfolds: “Dressed in today’s clothes, and free of references to archetypes, the portraits seem more refined, natural and closer to Cindy Sherman herself.” Els Barents, “Introduction,” in *Cindy Sherman* (Amsterdam: The Stedelijk Museum, 1982), 10.
- Interview with Paul Taylor, *Flash Art* 124 (October/November 1985): 79.
- Gail Stavitsky, *The Unseen Cindy Sherman: Early Transformations, 1975/1976* (Montclair, N.J.: Montclair Art Museum, 2004), 5–6.
- Interview with Noriko Fuku, in Chika Mori et al., eds., *Cindy Sherman* (Shiga, Japan: Asahi Shimbun, 1996), 161.
- Cindy Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 5.
- Interview with Fuku, 161.
- The building was owned by the charitable organization Ashford Hollow Foundation, which was run by the local sculptor Larry Griffis, who sponsored the building’s initial conversion to live/work lofts in 1966–67.
- CEPA (The Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Arts), founded in 1974 by Robert Muffoletto, a graduate of the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, became a sisterlike institution to Hallwalls. Sherman was given early exposure there in a 1975 group show of photographs by five women artists. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery had recently hired Linda Cathcart as a curator. She became friendly with the artists at Hallwalls and included Sherman’s work in a juried exhibition at the gallery in 1975 that also included works by Longo and Clough. Cathcart later organized Sherman’s first solo museum exhibition, in 1980, at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.
- Stavitsky, *The Unseen Cindy Sherman*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Marzorati, “Imitation of Life,” *Art News* 82, no. 7 (September 1983): 85.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt from an interview with Anthony Bannon, in Ronald Ehmke and Elizabeth Licata, eds., *Consider the Alternatives: 20 Years of Contemporary Art at Hallwalls* (Buffalo: Hallwalls, 1996), 32.

<sup>12</sup> Sandy Nairne, Geoff Dunlop, and John Wyver, *State of the Art: Ideas & Images in the 1980s* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), 132.

<sup>13</sup> The “Untitled Film Stills” exist in several sizes, primarily eight by ten inches (approximating publicity stills), but also thirty by forty inches (approximating movie posters). In their first showing, in 1977, at Hallwalls, the “Stills” were presented as eight-by-ten-inch prints; in a 1978 group exhibition at Artists Space (their New York debut), they were thirty by forty inches. A small number of “Stills” were printed at sixteen by twenty inches for *Re:Figuration*, a group exhibition at Max Protetch gallery in 1979–80 before the size of the photographs and the number of editions were established, and Sherman later determined that three sizes were too many. There are very few sixteen-by-twenty-inch prints for most of the “Film Stills.” I am grateful to Sarah Evans for the exhaustive exhibition history of the “Film Stills” in her dissertation, *Situating Cindy Sherman: Artistic Communities, Critical Agendas and Cultural Allegiances, 1975–1984* (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2004), 116.

<sup>14</sup> Lisbet Nilson, “Q & A: Cindy Sherman,” *American Photographer* 11, no. 3 (September 1983): 77. This presumption is repeated in Rosalind Krauss’s essay “Cindy Sherman: Untitled,” in Krauss, *Cindy Sherman: 1975–1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 17, in an anecdote about a lecture given by a critic on Sherman’s work comparing the “Stills” to actual films.

<sup>15</sup> Marzorati, “Imitation of Life,” 85.

<sup>16</sup> Phoebe Hoban, “30 Years, 30 Voices; Cindy Sherman: Moving Pictures,” *New York*, April 6, 1998, 178.

<sup>17</sup> The series comprised sixty-nine photographs until the occasion of the 2003 MoMA publication of the complete “Untitled Film Stills,” when a long-lost original contact sheet

turned up a “Film Still” Sherman had meant to add (now #62). During the first decade after shooting the “Stills,” Sherman would occasionally add and subtract pictures, which accounts for gaps in the numbering, where some seemingly congruent images are separated and others seem to have been added after subsequent series. The seventieth image was placed in one of those gaps.

<sup>18</sup> Thom Thompson, “A Conversation with Cindy Sherman,” in *Cindy Sherman* (Stony Brook, N.Y.: State University of New York; Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University, 1983), n.p.

<sup>19</sup> Other photographs in the series were taken by Helene Winer, Diane Bertolo, and Sherman’s niece, Barbara Foster.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin Tomkins, “Her Secret Identities,” *New Yorker*, May 15, 2000, 78.

<sup>21</sup> See Evans, *Situating Cindy Sherman*, 132–35; Jeanne Siegel, “Cindy Sherman,” in *Art Talk: The Early 80s* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 270; Stavitsky, *The Unseen Cindy Sherman*, 12; and Catherine Morris, “The Education of Cindy Sherman,” in Paul Ha, *Cindy Sherman: Working Girl* (Saint Louis: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2005), 10.

<sup>22</sup> For more on Sherman and Cahun, see Katy Kline, “In or Out of the Picture: Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman,” in Whitney Chadwick, ed., *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 66–81; Shelley Rice, ed., *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999); and Amelia Jones, “Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman,” in Amada Cruz, Elizabeth A. T. Smith, and Amelia Jones, *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 33–53.

<sup>23</sup> Marzorati, “Imitation of Life,” 81.

<sup>24</sup> Sherman said, “What I didn’t want were pictures showing strong emotion . . . what I was interested in was when they were almost expressionless. Which was rare to see; in film stills there’s a lot of overacting because they’re trying to



sell the movie." Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills*, 8.

25 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 77.

26 Arthur C. Danto, *Cindy Sherman: Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 14.

27 See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

28 Krauss, "Cindy Sherman: Untitled," 17.

29 See Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88; Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 91–101; and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse."

30 Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (October 1981): 45.

31 Crimp, "Pictures." Crimp also published the essay "About Pictures" in *Flash Art* 88/89 (March/April 1979): 34–36.

32 See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Photography after Art Photography," in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 103–23; Thomas Lawson, "The Uses of Representation: Making Some Distinctions," *Flash Art* 88/89 (March/April 1979): 37–39; and Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974–1989* (New York: Aperture, 1990).

33 David Frankel, "Cindy Sherman Talks to David Frankel," *Artforum* 41, no. 7 (March 2003): 54.

34 In her essay "Photography after Art Photography," Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that Sherman is a crucial figure because she was *using* photography. For more on this distinction (and the question of artist versus photographer), see Solomon-Godeau, "Photography after Art Photography," 113–14.

35 See Judith Williamson, "Images of 'Woman': Judith Williamson Introduces the Photography of Cindy Sherman," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (November/December 1983): 102–16; Laura

Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review* 188 (July/August 1991): 137–50; Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"; and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Suitable for Framing: The Critical Recasting of Cindy Sherman," *Parkett* 29 (1991): 112–15. For many critics feminism was collapsed into the larger postmodern critique of representation, which Amelia Jones questions in her essay "Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures and Embodied Theories of Art," in the anthology *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, eds. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: Icon Editions, 1993), 16–41. The above essays point to a new discourse quite apart from postmodernism.

36 Williamson, "Images of 'Woman,'" 102.

37 Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills*, 9.

38 While much of the critical discourse on the centerfolds addressed feminist issues, it was not the only reading of the work. For example, Rosalind Krauss focused on the pictures' horizontality as the most significant aspect of the work. She argued that the horizontal format challenged the formal categories associated with the vertical plane. She likened this overturning of the vertical axis of high art to the activities of Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, and Robert Morris, who worked from a low vantage point: the floor. These artists challenged the vertical plane associated with fetishized fine art, and Krauss placed Sherman's centerfolds within this tradition of resistance. See Krauss, "Cindy Sherman: Untitled," 96 (and see Krauss's footnote in this discussion: "For the argument about Warhol's and Morris's reading of the horizontality of Pollock's mark, see my *The Optical Unconscious*" [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993]).

39 Peter Schjeldahl, "Valley of the Dolls: Cindy Sherman's Return to Form," *New Yorker*, June 7, 1999, 95.

40 In a letter to the editor in the next issue of the magazine, they wrote: "In the specific context of this journal, it exists as an object of extreme vulgarity. Although we realize that it is by no means the first instance of vulgarity to appear in the magazine, it represents a qualitative leap in that genre, brutalizing ourselves and, we think, our readers." Lawrence Alloway, Max Kozloff, Rosalind Krauss, Joseph Masheck, and

Annette Michelson, "Letters," *Artforum* 13, no. 4 (December 1974): 9.

41 Andy Grundberg, "The '80s Seen Through a Postmodern Lens," *New York Times*, July 5, 1987, 29.

42 Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body," 143.

43 Roberta Smith, "Spacewalk," *Village Voice*, November 18–24, 1981, 98.

44 Interview with Fuku, 165.

45 Tomkins, "Her Secret Identities," 79.

46 For example, Laura Mulvey wrote of the fashion pictures, "the 'something' that had seemed to be lurking in the phantasmatic topography of femininity, begins, as it were, to congeal." In "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body," 144.

47 Larry Frascella, "Cindy Sherman's Tales of Terror," *Aperture* 103 (Summer 1986): 49.

48 Interview with Fuku, 164.

49 Later, in 1992, Rizzoli published the book *Fitcher's Bird*, a fairy tale based on a story by the Brothers Grimm and illustrated with Sherman's photographs.

50 Tomkins, "Her Secret Identities," 81.

51 See Amada Cruz, "Movies, Monstrosities, and Masks: Twenty Years of Cindy Sherman," and Elizabeth A. T. Smith, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," in Cruz, Smith, and Jones, *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*, 1–17 and 19–31, respectively; Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (Fall 1996): 106–24; Norman Bryson, "House of Wax," in Krauss, *Cindy Sherman*, 216–23; Norman Bryson, "The Ideal and the Abject: Cindy Sherman's Historical Portraits," *Parkett* 29 (1991): 91–93; Simon Taylor, "The Phobic Object: Abjection in Contemporary Art," in Jack Ben-Levi et al., eds., *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 59–83.

52 Cruz, "Movies, Monstrosities, and Masks," 10.

53 Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," 112.

54 Gary Indiana, "Untitled (Cindy Sherman Confidential)," *Village Voice*, June 2, 1987, 87.

55 Ingvild Goetz and Christiane Meyer-Stoll, *Jürgen Klauke/Cindy Sherman* (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 1994), 69.

56 Therese Lichtenstein, "Cindy Sherman," *Journal of Contemporary Art* 5, no. 2 (1992): 81.

57 *Ibid.*, 82.

58 See Krauss, "Cindy Sherman: Untitled"; Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic"; and Johanna Burton, "A Body Slate: Cindy Sherman," in Burton, ed., *Cindy Sherman*, October Files (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 193–215.

59 Todd Haynes, Elise MacAdam, and Tom Kalin developed the *Office Killer* screenplay based on Sherman's idea, and Evan Lurie from the Lounge Lizards scored the music.

60 David Rimanelli, "Cindy Sherman: Metro Pictures," *Artforum* 28, no. 9 (May 1990): 187.

61 Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," 111.

62 Michael Kimmelman, "At the Met With: Cindy Sherman; Portraitist in the Halls of Her Artistic Ancestors," *New York Times*, May 19, 1995, C1.

63 Maik Schlüter and Isabelle Graw, *Cindy Sherman: Clowns* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2004), 58.

64 Betsy Berne, "Studio: Cindy Sherman," *Tate Arts and Culture* 5 (May/June 2003): 38.

65 Jo Craven, "What Lies Beneath," *Vogue* (London), June 2003, 186.

66 Due to the fragility of the original material, *Doll Clothes* was transferred to DVD in 2006, and is now exhibited from DVD. The film was not viewed between 1975 and 2006, when it was shown at Metro Pictures gallery for the first time since the year it was made.

67 David Hershkovits, "In Your Face?," *Paper*, November 2008, 54.

68 *Ibid.*

69 Solomon-Godeau, "Suitable for Framing," 114.

70 Conversation with the author, June 6, 2010.

71 *Ibid.*