Maura Reilly, “Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* Series: Regressive or Transgressive Mimicry?” *Women Making Art: Women Artists from the Visual, Literary, and Performing Arts, 1960-1990*. Eds. Deborah Johnson and Wendy Oliver (Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 117–140.

Chapter 5

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*: Reproductive or Transgressive Mimicry? (1977–81)

Maura Reilly

Cindy Sherman (b.1954) was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. Even as a child in the 1960s, she found herself deeply fascinated by television, makeup, and disguises, interests that would become definitive in her art. She began academic training in painting at the State University of New York at Buffalo, but by junior year turned to photography, in part because of then-current notions that painting was no longer modern or viable.

In 1976, she earned her B.A. and the following year, moved to New York City. Her earliest photographic images had, by then, documented her obsession with personae in a series of black and white self-portraits which showed her applying makeup; by 1977, these had evolved into the Untitled Film Stills *series in which she enacted scenarios around these invented personae, drawing upon her obsession with soap opera, grade B movies, and detective magazines. Although she had some success as an exhibiting photographer even in her undergraduate years, in 1980, Sherman received her first New York one-person shows, at the Kitchen and Metro Pictures.*

Typically willing to move in new directions, Sherman switched to color photography in 1980-81, and in 1983 became one of

I would like to thank Robert Lubar, Deborah Johnson, Linda Nochlin, Debra Wacks, Laura Morowitz, Ariella Budick, and Jessica Falvo for their critical comments and assistance.

the youngest artists in the history of the Guggenheim Foundation to win a coveted fellowship. Her works continued to change, largely in response to criticism that they, especially the black and white Untitled Film Stills, *were ambiguous in their attitudes toward gender stereotyping: although an avowed feminist, Sherman was accused of promoting, rather than critiquing, these stereotypes. Sherman's work grew aggressive and startling in limiting the ways in which the viewer could respond to her imagery. In 1986, she began to incorporate detritus as the main theme of her work, and by 1990, this often resulted in extraordinary apocalyptic images of decay.*

In 1992, she began to explore systematically the links between sex and violence, especially in the context of abused women, employing plastic dolls as sex toys in her work along with plastic medical models of body parts and internal organs. The large scale and spectacular palette of these photographs conflate repulsion, desire, and fear, and charges of ambivalence toward her subject matter continue to follow her. Nonetheless, her works may be found in virtually all major museums internationally, including the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Tate Gallery in London, and the Pompidou Center in Paris.

In recent years, there has been a critical debate surrounding the usage of deconstruction within a feminist context.[1] The terms themselves—deconstruction and feminism—have been deemed irreconcilable insofar as the former is always necessarily "doubly coded" (Hutcheon 168); which is to say that it is always already complicitous within the system it seeks to deconstruct. This is particularly problematic in the context of a feminist endeavor in that any deconstructivist strategy or resistance from within (parody, masquerade, appropriation, for instance) will inevitably reproduce and perpetuate precisely the modes of representation that the strategist had sought to displace. If, as Audre Lord has said, "the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house" (hooks 36), will we not always be *within* the system of representation that binds us? Can we ever break from the straightjacket of phallogocentrism? And if so, how?

Mimesis, in the context of mimicry of male discourse, is one way in which women may disrupt and exceed patriarchal logic. A political strategy which engages directly with the "powers that be" by repeating its discourse from the point of view of a woman, mimicry aims to ape that discourse in order to undermine it by appropriating its "voice." However,

mimicry is not without its problems. For unless the mimic is careful, her efforts may succeed in reinforcing the patriarchal discourse. In other words, if mimicry fails to produce its difference, via excess or a gesture of defiance, for instance, then it runs the risk of reproducing, and thereby affirming, the very tropes it has set out to dismantle. This polemical form of mimicry will be termed reproductive mimicry.

It is in light of this polemic that we may look at the work of photographer Cindy Sherman. From a feminist perspective, her tactical strategy of mimicry is problematic. In her photographic series, the *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–81), Sherman parodies the cultural roles of women by disguising herself in stereotypically "feminine" roles: suburban gardener, sex object, urban shopper, career girl, housewife. The series itself consists of eighty-five black-and-white photographs which comprise a vast repertoire of characters, all of which are Sherman herself in costume. The images, reminiscent of "real" film, stills from 1950s/'60s cinema (namely, film noir,[2] B-Grade movies, horror films), are scrupulously reconstructed. In her representation of a stereotyped "femininity," Sherman borrows various pictorial strategies from her sources—a nostalgic photographic style, dated costume, moody lighting, objectifying camera angles, and a partial narrative approach. It is via this tactical strategy of mimicry, by actively playing out the stereotype of the passive female, that Sherman attempts to expose "femininity" as a fictitious, social construct.

The series itself has been variously received by the critics. For the poststructuralists and theorists of postmodernism, Sherman's deconstructivist endeavor succeeds precisely because it wreaks semiotic havoc within the system—because it "scrambles the codes."[3] Sherman is deemed a "demystifier of myth" in that, via a subtle display between signifier and signified, the viewer is unable to "buy into the myth" of femininity.[4] Such theorists insist that we must "look under the hood"[5] at the signifiers (depth of field, grain, light, etc.), in order to understand how Sherman brings forth the masquerade of femininity. To some, feminists and humanists, Sherman is considered the quintessential postmodern feminist in her ability to "jar" the gender codes, to defetishize conventional femininity.[6] They argue that in her emphasis on femininity as "surface," gender comes to be understood as a facade, as a mask that one can take off, or put on, at will.

For other feminists, however, her project falls short: the critique is not quite right, or just not enough.[7] These critics argue that in her attempt to deconstruct "feminine" stereotypes, she merely reinstates them.[8] They argue that in her critique of the patriarchal system, Sherman uses the very

"tools" employed by that system, and, paradoxically, confirms rather than subverts the social constructions of that dominant order. Emphasizing the importance of disrupting visual pleasure, these critics pose an important question: if Sherman's series fails to disrupt the scopophilic dialogue between the (presumably) male spectator and the female image, and if it fails to thwart the language of desire, could it not be read as a reaffirmation of stereotypical "feminine" codes?[9] It is particularly in light of Sherman's more recent work and its successful deferral of the scopophilic gaze that the *Film Stills* are deemed weak and nonargumentative.[10]

How is it that Sherman's work can elicit such diverse reactions? How is it that, depending on the viewer and how s/he "reads" the work, the *Film Stills* can be seen as creating a sense of both defeat and of insurrection? How is it that she can be simultaneously negating and reaffirming the gender codes that she has set out to dismantle? This essay will reconsider the *Untitled Film Stills* in light of this inherent paradox. The series will be reexamined as a problematic feminist project from which much is to be learned regarding the usages of deconstructivist strategies within a feminist context.

Sherman's interest in masquerade began as a young child when she would dress-up in imitation of the female characters she viewed on television and at the movies. This fascination with "playing dress-up" continued through her teens and into college where she would spend countless hours in front of the mirror, changing makeup, and putting on different dresses and wigs. Often finding herself "all dressed up with no place to go," she would go out—in "drag"—to parties, class, to work (Nairne 132). In 1975, at the suggestion of then boyfriend Robert Longo, she began documenting herself during this laborious cosmetic process. In the resulting *Cutouts* (1975-77), Sherman would write a melodramatic short story, photograph herself, dressed in the role of protagonist, at different points in the narrative. She would then cut her images out "like paper dolls" (Siegel 270) and glue them to pieces of stiff paper. Finally, she would hang them in sequence on a wall to create a storyboard. One of these *Cutouts* was included in "Pictures," a show at Artists Space in 1976. Referring to this show, Sherman has said that the images were presented "in a filmic sort of way; scene went all the way around the room . . . [The Cutouts were] about how to put all these different characters together and tell a story without words" (Siegel 270).

Sherman moved to New York City upon graduation from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1976. It was there that she began to explore more fully her childhood interest in film. She frequented Bleecker

Street Cinema for Grade-B movies, film noir, and European films from the 1950s and 1960s, especially ones with subtitles.[11] As Sherman says:

> I was more interested in going to the movies than I was in going to galleries and looking at art. Sam Fullers' *The Naked Kiss, Double Indemnity*, those kind of classics. I would go to Bleecker Street Cinema just to look at the Samurai movies. But I'd go to see any kind of movie, really" (Siegel 273).

She was most intrigued by production film stills for horror movies within which "brooding character[s] [were] caught between potential violence and sex" (Siegel 272). Sherman also claims to have been influenced by European stars like Jeanne Moreau and Brigitte Bardot because, to her, they seemed to be "more vulnerable, lower-class types of characters, more identifiable as working-class women" (272).

In 1977, Sherman visited fellow artist David Salle's studio where she encountered some "sleazy detective magazines" from the 1950s. As Sherman describes these soft-core porn images:

> They [the women in the magazines] 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. They were these women in these situations. What was interesting to me was that you couldn't tell whether each photograph was just its own isolated shot, 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 (Marzorati 85).

This encounter proved to be a crucial turning point in her work. Having grown tired of the *Cutouts*,[12] Sherman had been searching for a way to make "a filmic sort of image" in which a character reacted "to something outside the frame so that the viewer would assume another person" (Siegel 271). The 8" by 10" glossies in the soft-core detective magazines proved to be a solution to her problem. It was the women in unspecified situations captured in "one isolated shot," and the ensuing ambiguity of this partial narrative approach, that struck Sherman as a way out of the limited narrative format of the *Cutouts*.

As a result of the collision of "feminine" stereotypes from film and porn magazines, Cindy Sherman created her first "film still" in 1977 in the hallway just outside her loft. *Untitled Film Still #4*, 1977 (fig. 14) exemplifies Sherman's deconstructivist strategies, in which she formally mimics her mass media sources. Her use of lighting and shadow (here, as elsewhere) creates a scenario of psychodrama as the figure, starkly lit, is surrounded by ominous shadows which lurk behind her and down the

Figure 14. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #4*, silver print, 1977

hallway. The camera angle, placed at a "safe" distance, leaves the viewer (who acts as a voyeur) on the same plane as the woman. The surface of the photograph is grainy and coarse, creating a dematerialized, nostalgic presence. Furthermore, Sherman's partial narrative approach is visible here; she is waiting—for whom or for what, however, is uncertain.

In the *Film Stills*, Sherman manipulates each image in an attempt to *re-present* mass media representations of woman as sex object. The mimetic strategies (props, camera angles, cropping, close-ups) are employed to emphasize the theatricality of the scenarios, the fictitiousness of the charade. To achieve her task, she scrupulously reconstructs the scenarios, and alters her appearance in accordance with the chosen narrative. Her costuming and makeup, selected and applied by Sherman herself, are in perfect imitation of her mass media sources. The "women" are made-up and garbed in clothing stereotypically associated with the 1950s and 1960s: hip-huggers, polyester dresses, lip gloss. The cosmetics and attire aim to highlight the traditional signifiers of "femininity": cheekbones, eyes, breasts, and buttocks. As Laura Mulvey has written, in opting for the "nostalgia genre," Sherman "draws attention to the historical importance of this

period for establishing a particular culture of appearance—specifically, the feminine appearance" ("A Phantasmagoria"141). As Sherman has explained, having "come out of the '70s, which were concerned with the 'natural look,' I was intrigued with the habits and *restraints* women of the '50s put up with" (Siegel 279).

Most of the settings which Sherman (re)constructs in the *Untitled Film Stills* are eerie and foreboding, as if something "bad" is about to occur. Many of the *Stills* depict the "women" in gendered spaces or sites representative of the "woman's place"—in a kitchen, in front of a mirror, or on a bed. But always a feeling of impending doom resides. Oftentimes, the characters are waiting—alone—at a train station, on a ledge, or on a deserted road. It is this aloneness and the omnipresent aura of vulnerability that suggest a negative or even violent fate for these women—as if trapped in the confines of a horror film.[13] For example, in *Untitled Film Still #27* (1979), (fig. 15), the woman seems to have just experienced or seen something horrific as mascara-colored tears run down her cheeks. She appears to be in complete shock and one can almost feel the cigarette—her oral consolation, or phallic trope—shaking nervously in her right hand. To achieve this horror-film effect, Sherman manipulates natural and artificial light to heighten the drama and to invoke feelings of fear. This is a consistent strategy. In *Untitled Film Still #30* (1979), for example, Sherman gives us just enough light to see the bruises, swollen lips, and perspiration on the woman's face as a dramatic light cuts in from the left. The severe contrast of light and dark, and the way in which the light sculpts her face visually contribute to the woman's obvious anxiety and "hysteria."

Yet this self-conscious appropriation of the stereotype of the weak, distraught female can unfortunately produce split effects. Because of the inherent paradox of utilizing deconstructivist strategies, in that the "master's tools" are being used to dismantle the "master's house," such imagery could be "read" as either an uncritical celebration of a weak femininity or as a debunking of the myth of the hysterical female. Perhaps Sherman's mimicry *without a difference* is most visible when comparing one of the *Untitled Film Stills* to a "real" film still, that is, that of Kim Novak in *Vertigo* (1958) or Tippie Hendren in *Marnie* (1964), (fig. 16). The similarity between these images and *Untitled Film Still #13*, (fig. 17), for example, is uncanny: a seemingly distraught woman, alone, looking outside the frame toward some unidentified person or thing. There is nothing *visible* within Sherman's image that jumps out at the viewer exclaiming, "this is a construction." Her images are so scrupulously reconstructed,

Figure 15. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #27*, silver print, 1979

and therefore so closely aligned with the representational strategies of film that they merely repeat the codes. Without the "knowing wink" or gesture of defiance to the noncognizant viewer, these images could function to reaffirm the negative stereotype of the distraught female.

Figure 16. Tippi Hedren in *Marnie*, 1964 (Alfred Hitchcock, director)

The empty facial expressions and lack of eye contact in this series are conscious artistic choices which mimic the traditional mode of representation. The women in these photos never look directly at the viewer. They are always looking just outside of the frame at some unidentified person or thing. Most often, the women wear fundamentally unreadable facial expressions—entirely ambiguous, blank, and empty—as if they, the silent women, have already been spoken for;[14] or as if they, the silent women, are "voiceless."[15] Lost in thought, vacated or abandoned, the women seem apathetic to the camera's incarcerating gaze: "the camera

Figure 17. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #13*, silver print, 1978

never draws or contains her full attention" (MacDonald 39). In this conventional relationship to the camera in which the viewer can/cannot possess the female figure, Sherman oscillates between negation and reaffirmations of such seductive tropes. Her blank expression, without the "knowing wink . . . of empowerment" (McClary 6), merely reproduces the conventional codes.

In her mimesis of mass media representations of women, Sherman employs strategic camera angles, cropping techniques, and close-ups. In

Untitled Film Still #13 (1978), (fig. 17), the woman is cropped at the hip as she reaches—breasts protruding, buttocks out—for a book. Her partial body, confined into a shallow space, is tightly framed by the edge of the photograph and the oversized bookshelves. The woman, now a fragment of a body compressed into a claustrophobic area, is restricted by the frame of the photograph—a metaphor for women's restricted terrain in society or her lack of mobility—which "cuts her off, reduces her and sets limits on her body in order to contain her" (Goldberg 29). As film theorist Laura Mulvey has explained about such formal techniques in cinema:

> Conventional close-ups of legs (Dietrich for instance) or a face (Garbo) integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cutout or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen ("Visual Pleasure" 367).

Mulvey explains how camera angles, cropping techniques, and close-ups fragment the body, and as devices for aestheticizing and fetishizing, aid in the objectification of women in film by allowing only a *portion* of the iconic female to be controlled by the (presumably) male spectator. By uncritically re-producing a fragmented female form without extensively disrupting the codes, Sherman fails to complicate traditional desire—a goal heralded by many feminists.

A similarly strategic use of camera angle is visible in *Untitled Film Still #34* (1979), (fig. 18), where we gaze down at a woman who lies, in seductive position, upon a bed. Reminiscent of a porn shot or a pin-up, the woman possesses a "come-hither" look in her provocativeness: her body, in lingerie, is laid out on a bed of black satin sheets. But while Sherman is playing with and dis-playing the conventional codes of the 1950s–'60s cinema, she fails to alter the rhetoric radically, so that, ultimately, in her role as object of the (presumably) male gaze, Sherman's imaging of herself uncritically regurgitates the iconic female image omnipresent in the mass media.

Sherman's use of a film still creates a moment of ambiguity with no before or after except that which the viewer proposes. After contemplating one of Sherman's images, the viewer can attempt to construct a narrative, but is given only a "hint" of one. For instance, in *Untitled Film Still #35* (1979), the viewer is granted few narrative clues: it seems as if a woman has just hung up a man's overcoat, hat, and umbrella on a coat rack and is not very happy about it, judging from her stance and facial expression of disquiet. Because there is no filmic sequencing, an image such as this becomes extremely provocative and open-ended. Such a

Figure 18. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #34*, silver print, 1979

strategy is deemed perfect postmodern posture in that the author of the work is "dead" because each viewer will "rewrite" the text according to his/her own reading.[16] The work is essentially meaningless without the existence and imagination of the viewer.

While the viewer is ultimately responsible for the meaning of the stills, Sherman-the-artist is the "manipulator" of meaning. She functions, therefore, as a "mouthpiece" for the ideas omnipresent within the patriarchal

system. As the sole actress, lighting director, camera technician, makeup artist, and costume designer, Sherman seems to control the narrative of the *Film Stills*. She sets up the scenario, manipulates the *mise-en-scène*, then lets the viewer take over to make of it what s/he will. Because the "manipulator of meaning" is a role typically associated with the male (in patriarchal society), Sherman's active co-option of that role, along with her simultaneous masquerade as subject of the gaze, subsequently posits her as both Absolute and Other.[17] Throughout the series, Sherman's role vacillates between artist and model, between Absolute and Other, between victimizer and victim. She inhabits both positions and thereby refuses closure. But, while her transvestism turns sexual identity into a kind of play, "her oscillation between artist and model," as Margaret Iversen has stated, "only reinforces the positions it was meant to call into question. The riddle of the female artist is answered by assigning her the role of performer. The 'feminine' position as object of the male gaze remains intact"(53). Art critic Peter Schjeldahl's reaction to Sherman's images is paradigmatic of this polemic:

> As a male, I also find these pictures sentimentally, charmingly, and sometimes pretty fiercely erotic: I'm in love again with every look at the insecure blond in the nighttime city. I am responding to Sherman's knack, shared with many movie actresses, of projecting feminine vulnerability thereby triggering (masculine) urges to ravish and/or protect (9).

Similarly, as Ken Johnson has confessed, "Like motorists without gas, these are lonely women waiting desperately for men to rescue them from passionless isolation"(50). Illusionism has been sustained for these two viewers in that the tactical mime has not been perceived as such. Because Sherman has remained too loyal to her source, and has failed to emphasize her difference visually, the imagery continues to function in a problematic manner.

In her subtle dis-play of femininity, Sherman fails to overhaul the myth of the weak, powerless, vulnerable woman. For mimicry to be successful, it must *uncomfortably* inhabit the paternal language itself; which is to say that it must be unruly, defiant, and aggressive.[18] Otherwise, such parodic repetitions will *comfortably* exist within the system—a system which will forever recuperate such endeavors precisely because they do not threaten it. Lynda Benglis's well-known *Artforum* advertisement (November 1974), can function as a counter-example of an unruly image that successfully threatens the system. In this scandalous ad, Benglis mimics a sexy porn centerfold: she slicks up her nude body, places a humongous dildo at her

groin, and with one hand on her hip, turns belligerently to confront the viewer. This mocking and defiant gesture in which Benglis "performs a violently threatening female subjectivity" (Jones 33), is an aggressive statement against conventional femininity and against the traditional role of the silent woman artist.[19] In her utter usurpation of the "phallus" (or signifier of masculine power), and in her outright naked unruliness, Benglis's image can do nothing but *uncomfortably* inhabit the paternal language. Such transgressive mimicry, in its excess, precludes recuperation.[20] Benglis self-consciously images herself as a sex-object, but hers is a mimicry *with a difference* (her "difference" being her gesture of defiance). While Benglis's image is a self-conscious attempt to implode patriarchal logic from within, Sherman's is a playful dis-play of that logic.

Ostensibly a series of self-portraits, the *Untitled Film Stills* reveal an artist who adamantly rejects a search for the interior "self." As such, the very notion of the self-portrait is radically rearranged in this series. As David Rimanelli has stated, "Conforming herself to innumerable stereotypic personae, Sherman is everyone in her art and as such she is no one in her art" (187). Sherman is always masquerading as someone other than her Self. This schizophrenic shifting of identity repeatedly rejects the traditional notion of a fixed identity, or a "centered" self. Such a strategy could be understood as a celebration of multiple identities, or as a heralding of woman's infinite possibilities, thereby disseminating the Enlightenment notion of a single, "centered" self upon which patriarchal ideology is based. Such a strategy is lauded by the postmodernists and poststructuralists who believe subjectivity to be fictitious, and who believe that the deconstruction of fixed identities would foster a crisis in subjectivity which, in turn, would spawn a crisis in patriarchy.[21] A celebration of decentered subjectivities may be tempting from a feminist perspective insofar as the traditionally centered subject is male. In fact, one could read Sherman's multifariousness as relaying the message that femininity is a "take it or leave it" possibility. Her mimicry, therefore, may be understood as relaying the fiction of gender identity by positing that identity as illusory and unoccupiable.

However, some theorists have argued that as a feminist strategy, the decentering of subjectivity is highly problematic. They argue that "since men have [already] had their Enlightenment, they can afford a sense of a decentered self. On the other hand, for women to take on such a position is to weaken what is not yet strong" (Nicholson 6-7). In other words, without a unified concept of "woman," what would be the categorical basis for a feminist politics? As Judith Butler has inquired, "What [then

would] constitute the 'who,' the subject, for whom feminism seeks emancipation? If there is no subject, who is left to emancipate?" (327). Such theorists would perhaps argue against Sherman's multifariousness, or schizophrenic shifting of identity, in that feminism itself depends on a relatively unified notion of the social subject "woman," a notion postmodernism would attack. In short, the *Untitled Film Stills* raises interesting questions about whether or not the de-centering of subjectivity would be a successful maneuver for feminism.

To be politically effective, mimicry must produce its slippage, its difference. In order to have one's mime be identified as tactical, as transgressive, an artist must grant the viewer some "clue" or sign of his/her transgression from the source. One way in which mimicry can produce its difference is via a qualitative excess, or hyperbole. It is when mimicry reaches the hyperbolic that it becomes a kind of *talking back*. Such an image does not merely dis-play the stereotype, but it also transgresses it by mocking its "naturalness" to the point of absurdity. This is a reappropriation and amplification of the "feminine" for the purpose of problematizing intelligibility. For to "enact a defamiliarized version of femininity" (Doane 182) is to inhabit *uncomfortably* the system that binds us, and to displace and exceed the "logic" of gender.

This essay has emphasized Sherman's tendency toward reproductive or recuperative mimicry—her inability to relay visually her tactical mime. However, Sherman *does* emphasize her difference on several occasions vis-à-vis an important tactical device which involves her deliberate exposure of the shutter cord (e.g., *Untitled Film Still #6*, 1977, fig. 19).[22] In several images, she allows the shutter cord, the apparatus by which she actually "shoots" the photograph, to be seen. Upon recognition of the cord, the spectator is forced to become aware of the fabrication of the image. Sherman's conscious inclusion of the shutter cord is an attempt to reveal the theatricality of the scenarios as artistic constructs (and, by extension, the artificiality of such roles in society). The presence of the shutter cord is an example of how Sherman has not remained "loyal" to her sources. She is attempting to jar the viewer into recognizing the masquerade. Such a "reality effect" succeeds in guiding the perception of the image. This process of "aesthetic interruption" destroys illusionism, thereby forcing the viewer to feel a sense of estrangement, or to feel oddly about his/her relationship to the image.[23] The "visual shocks" resulting from the shutter cord preclude the spectator from identifying with the illusory and ideological functions of representation. From a feminist perspective, these are the most successful images in the series because they

Figure 19. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #6*, silver print, 1977

instantaneously make the viewer aware of the *tactical mime*. This results in a disruption of the (male) scopophilic viewing position in that the "reality effect" of the shutter cord disrupts any uncomplicated visual pleasure. Thus, the "reality effect" of the shutter cord relays the message that

this image is not a vindication of, but a reconstruction of, the gender codes for the purpose of social commentary.

In her exploration of the cultural codes of female identity, Cindy Sherman masquerades in stereotypically "feminine" roles. As she says of the *Untitled Film Stills* series: "I wanted to imitate something out of culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it" (Nairne 132). Although she says she is doing it for fun, the effect is not so funny. In the actual act of appropriation, her copy's proximity to the original problematizes the critique. Sherman's reproductive mimicry does not always undermine the authority it seeks to negate; it often reasserts it. For instance, Sherman maintains throughout the *Film Stills* a nostalgic connection and ambivalent relationship toward the appropriated material—so much so that ambiguity is *built into* the project. It is this feeling of nostalgia, even fetishization, towards her source that keeps the *Film Stills* from ever being didactic, and which results in a diminution (if not a negation) of any critical edge. Thus, the nature of one's dependency on that which one critiques becomes the centrally valenced question.

As a strategy of resistance *from within*, reproductive mimicry will always be complicitous, and never transgressive. Indeed, all deconstructivist strategies are ambivalent and contradictory precisely for that reason—because they are doubly coded, because the "master's tools" are being utilized to dismantle the "master's house." In order to break from this paradox, the mimic must mime *with a difference*. She must *talk back* by refusing to repeat loyally the source. For mimicry becomes critical precisely at its most reflexive moment, when the apparatus or "constructedness" of the image is visually apparent (as is the case when the shutter cord is visible). It is this "slippage" that problematizes the spectator's relationship to the image, causing him/her to question his/her (gender) assumptions. Thus, it is only via a productive (versus a reproductive) mimicry that future resignifications can be spawned, or that a new "spin" on the familiar dialogues can be generated.

Sherman's *Film Stills* do not create resignifications or new texts but reproduce the old ones.[24] In relation to other women artists and performers such as Lynda Benglis, Carolee Schneeman, Barbara Kruger, and even the pop star Madonna, Sherman's refusal to *talk back* becomes more evident. These other artists, many of whom employ mimesis as strategy, and many of whom fall into the same polemic of negation/reaffirmation, do so from an aggressively defiant stance.[25] They create new ideologies, liberatory images which destroy the old visual pleasure and man-made entrapments of desire. In their passionate explorations of

gender identity, their works serve as optimistic endeavors: woman has the potential to determine her own ideology. In Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series, in her nonargumentative exploration of gender identity, woman is, and always will be, trapped behind the mask of "femininity."[26]

Notes

1. See, for example, Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983) 57–82; Janet Wolff, "Postmodern Theory and Feminist Art Practice," *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women & Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 85–102; Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism," *Praxis International* 11, no. 2 (July 1991) 150–165; Toril Moi, "Feminism and Postmodernism: Recent Feminist Criticism in the United States," *British Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. Terry Lovell (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990) 367–76; Susan Suleiman, "Feminism and Postmodernism: In Lieu of an Ending," *Subversive Intent: Bender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Susan Suleiman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) 181–206; Frances Bartowski, "Feminism and Deconstruction: 'A Union Forever Deferred'", *Enclitic* 4 (1980) 70–77; Margaret Ferguson and Jennifer Wicke, eds. *Feminism and Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

2. Film noir is a cinematic term used to describe and categorize a series of films made in America during World War II and the postwar era characterized by dark, fatalistic interpretations of contemporary reality.

3. The poststructuralists have posited Sherman as "code scrambler," in the Barthean sense. See R. Krauss, *Cindy Sherman* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1993) "Myth Today," pp. 109–159. Similarly, for critics such as Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, and Erik MacDonald, Sherman's "text" is deemed perfect postmodern posture, especially vis-à-vis Roland Barthes's notion of the "death of the author," which will be discussed later on in this essay, in which the reader alone lays claim to meaning and subjectivity. See Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* no. 8 (Spring 1979); Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism" *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983); Erik MacDonald, "Dis-seminating Cindy Sherman: The Body and The Photograph," *Art Criticism* 5 (1989) 35–40.

4. Rosalind Krauss (20) heralds Sherman as a "de-mystifier of myth." She argues that Sherman very self-consciously uses many different signifiers (internal frames, graininess, lighting, etc.) as a way of creating a "slide" between the multiplicity of unstable signifiers. In other words, Krauss believes that if one looks "under the hood" at the signifiers, then intelligibility (of, in this instance, gender identity) can be problematized.

5. *Ibid* 20.

6. See, here, for example: Judith Williamson, "'Images of Woman'—The Photographs of Cindy Sherman," *Screen* (Nov –Dec 1983): 102–116 and Abigail

Solomon-Godeau, "Suitable for Framing: The Critical Recasting of Cindy Sherman," *Parkett*, no. 188 (July-Aug 1991): 112–121.

7. See, for example, Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman," *Parkett* no. 188 (July-Aug 1991): 136–150; Margaret Iversen, "Fashioning Feminine Identity," *Art International* (Spring 1988): 52–57; Anne Friedberg, "Mutual Indifference: Feminism and Postmodernism," *The Other Perspective in Gender and Culture: Rewriting Women and the Symbolic*, Juliet F. MacCannel, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990): 39–58; Mira Schor, "From Liberation to Lack," *Heresies*, no. 24 (1989): 15–21; Jan Avgikos, "Cindy Sherman: Burning Down the House," *Artforum* (Jan 1993): 74–79.

8. For example, as Mira Schor states: "her images are successful partly because they do not threaten phallocracy, they reiterate and confirm it" (17).

9. Most of these critics have been highly influenced by Laura Mulvey's seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where the author insists that feminists must resist male visual pleasure by refusing the construction woman-as-object. According to Mulvey, women must refuse to become objects of fetishistic, scopophilic male desire.

10. As Laura Mulvey contends: "The visitor [of a Sherman retrospective exhibition] who reaches the final images and then returns, reversing the order, finds that with the hindsight of what was to come, the early images are transformed" ("A Phantasmagoria" 129). Mulvey argues that while the *Film Stills* emphasize the surface of the body as a facade, as a mask, the later works (namely the *Untitled* series of 1983 and the *Untitled* series of 1984) reveal the "monsters" behind the "cosmetic facade" (146). Sherman's *Untitled* series of 1991–92 is deemed superior to the earlier work as well. In the very grotesqueness of the imagery, and in the mere mutilation of the female form, some critics argue that Sherman has finally succeeded in disrupting the scopophilic gaze and in negating "visual pleasure." See Avgikos, "Cindy Sherman: Burning Down the House" (79).

11. To Sherman, "the subtitles made the individual images on the screen appear more separate, each with its own diegesis." Peter Schjeldahl, *Cindy Sherman*. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, Oct. 1987): 194.

12. "When we moved to New York, I had grown tired of doing these cutesy doll things and cutting them out. It was so much work and too much like playing with dolls." Sherman as quoted in Siegel (271).

13. For information regarding the equation of violence with beauty within slasher films, see Carol Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Misogyny, Misandry and Misanthropy*, R. Howard Block and Frances Ferguson, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 205.

14. ". . . it is man who speaks, who represents mankind. The woman is only represented; she is (as always) already spoken for" (Owens 61).

15. A term used by Whitney Chadwick in her preface to *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 1990).

16. A quote by Roland Barthes crystallizes these ideas: "A text is made of multiple writings drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author." "Death of the Author" in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and transl. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977).

17. As Simone de Beauvoir has noted: "Woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other." *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1952) xxii.

18. For more information on the "unruly woman" as the feminist *par excellence* via an analytic reading of Miss Piggy and Roseanne Barr, see Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995).

19. According to Benglis, her "intention was to mock the idea of having to take sexual sides—to be either a male artist or a female." Leslie C. Jones, "Transgressive Femininity: Art and Gender in the Sixties and Seventies," *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993): 52. See also Amelia Jones, 'Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art," *New Feminist Criticism: Art—Identity—Action*, eds. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra Langer and Arlene Raven (New York: HarperCollins, 1994): 16–41.

20. This image was so confrontational that several editors from *Artforum* magazine (such as Rosalind Krauss, Max Kosloff, Lawrence Alloway, and Annette Michelson) insisted in the following issue of the magazine that they had no prior knowledge of the advertisement. An excerpt from that editorial letter reads: "For the first time . . . a group of associate editors feel compelled to dissociate themselves publicly from a portion of the magazine's content, specifically the copyrighted advertisement of Lynda Benglis . . . In the specific context of this journal it exists as an object of extreme vulgarity" *Artforum*, 13, no. 4 (Dec 1974): 9.

21. Why should a "centered" self be rejected? As postmodern theorist Louis Althusser has explained, the *function* of ideology is to create the very category of the "coherent" subject. And since ideology can only exist by/for "coherent" subjects, a crisis in subjectivity (as would be produced via the celebration of "de-centered" subjects) would necessarily entail a crisis in ideology. See L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971): 127–186; Kaja Silverman, "From Sign to Subject: A Short History," *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983): 3-53; and especially, Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Batailles, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

22. Of the eighty-five photographs in this series, five reveal the shutter cord.

23. The images in which the shutter cord is revealed are excellent examples of Brechtian *distanciation*, as defined by Griselda Pollock in her essay "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice–A Brechtian Perspective," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988): 155–199.

24. As Martha Rosler has observed, "If the woman artist, [as] prisoner of phallocentric language, refuses to try to speak, her refusal, coupled with her continuing to seek the validation of critics, curators and buyers, [will confirm] the image of woman as bound and impotent" (73).

25. I have already argued extensively in favor of Benglis's "unruliness." Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (staged in 1975)—in which the artist, naked, her body painted decoratively, pulled a long scroll from her vagina, and read the narrative text to the audience—is another example of an aggressively defiant act which negated the fetishizing process by emphasizing the taboo concept of woman-as-lack. Barbara Kruger, whose works include such statements as "Your gaze hits the side of my face," or "Your body is a battleground," offers feminists an enlightening, liberatory ideology. Madonna, an artist whose "feminism" has been highly debated, is a powerful female icon, I believe, in her active, defiant production of her own image. Woman-as-producer, woman-with-phallus, via its oxymoronic implications, is necessarily transgressive according to paternal logic. As Anne Friedberg has commented, "Madonna's reenactment in her 'Material Girl' video of the 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' number from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (in which she appropriated the Monroe image) was according to [Madonna], 'knowing, defiant, successful' . . . The text accompanying these photos, producing a written image of Madonna, claims: 'Instinctively she positions herself. Beautiful but strong. A feminist's Marilyn'" (Friedberg 51).

26. Sherman was well aware of the polemic inherent within the *Film Stills*. As she said in a 1988 interview, "After viewing the problems with that work [the *Film Stills*] and the way people interpreted it, I consciously switched to a vertical format featuring strong, angry characters, women who could have beaten up the other woman, or beaten up the men looking at them. . . . That's when I got tired of using makeup and wigs in the same way, and I started messing up the wigs, and using makeup to give circles under my eyes or give five o'clock shadows, or hair on my face – to get uglier" (Siegel 276). A recent show at Metro Pictures (1992) exemplifies this shift in self-perception. Her critical posture in these more recent works is radically different than in the earlier, nonargumentative pieces. In the *Untitled* series, 1991–92, Sherman transformed the innocent, docile women of the *Film Stills* into mutilated plastic dolls. The images portray scenes of rape, mutilation and S/M: used condoms are ubiquitous amidst disseminated body parts. In the very grotesqueness of the works, and in the mere mutilation of the female form, Sherman has succeeded in disrupting the scopophilic gaze. However, ultimately, one is left wondering whether the negation of "feminine" stereotypes and the disruption of the Male Gaze can only be achieved via an "uglification" of the female form.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Pyschoanalytic Discourse," *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Doane, Mary Ann. *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Goldberg, Vicki. "Portrait of a Photographer as a Young Artist," *New York Times* 23 Oct. 1983: H-29.

hooks, bell. "Feminist Theory: A Radical Agenda," *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press, 1989: 35–41.

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London/New York: Routledge, 1989.

Iverson, Margaret. "Fashioning Female Identity," *Art International* (Spring 1988): 52–57.

Johnson, Ken. "Cindy Sherman and the Anti-Self: An Interpretation of Her Imagery." *Arts Magazine* (Nov. 1987): 47–53.

Jones, Amelia. "Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art," in *New Feminist Criticism: Art–Identity–Action*. Eds. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra Langer and Arlene Raven. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. 16–41.

MacDonald, Erik. "Dis-seminating Cindy Sherman: The Body and The Photograph," *Art Criticism* 5 (1989): 35–40.

Marzorati, Gerald. "Imitation of Life," *Art News* (Sept. 1983): 78–87.

McClary, Susan. "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly," *Genders* (Spring 1990): 1–21.

Mulvey, Laura. "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman,"*Parkett* 188 (July-Aug 1991): 136–150.

———. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Brian Wallis, ed. *Art After Modernism* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984): 361–373.

Nairne, Sandy. *State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980s*. London: Chatto & Windus, Ltd., 1987.

Nicholson, Linda. "Introduction," *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990. 1–16.

Rimanelli, David. "Cindy Sherman." *Artforum* (May 1990): 187.

Schjeldahl, Peter. *Cindy Sherman*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

Siegel, Jeanne, ed. *Artwords 2: Discourse on the Early 80s*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988.