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A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman

> When I was in school I was getting disgusted with the attitude of art being so religious or sacred, so I wanted to make something which people could relate to without having read a book about it first. 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.
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> Cindy Sherman[1]

Cindy Sherman had a full-scale retrospective in the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1987 and has recently had work on display at the Saatchi Gallery in London.* At a moment when the art market is rippling with the fallout from the Saatchis' recent decision to sell some conceptual and post-modern work in order to invest in late modernism, this location is a sign of her economic as well as her critical standing. Her art is certainly post-modern. Her works are photographs; she is not a photographer but an artist who uses photography. Each image is built around a photographic depiction of a woman. And each of the women is Sherman herself, simultaneously artist and model, transformed, chameleon-like, into a glossary of pose, gesture and facial expression. As her work developed between 1977 and 1987 a strange process of metamorphosis took place. Apparently easy and access-ible postmodern pastiche underwent a gradual transformation into difficult, but still accessible, images that raise serious and challenging questions for contemporary feminist aesthetics. And the metamorphosis provides a

hindsight that then alters the significance of her early production. In order to work through the critical implications of this altered perspective, it is necessary to fly in the face of Sherman's own expressly non-, even anti-, theoretical stance. Paradoxically, it is because there is no explicit citation of theory in the work, no explanatory words, no linguistic signposts, that theory can come into its own. Sherman's work stays on the side of enigma, but as a critical challenge not as insoluble mystery. Figuring out the enigma, deciphering its pictographic clues, applying the theoretical tools associated with feminist aesthetics, is—to use one of her favourite words—fun, and draws attention to the way theory, decipherment and the entertainment of riddle- or puzzle-solving may be connected.

A New Politics of the Body

During the seventies, feminist aesthetics and women artists contributed greatly to the questioning of two great cultural boundary divisions. Throughout the twentieth century, inexorably but discontinuously, pressure had been building up against the separation of art theory from art practice on the one hand, and the separation between high culture and low culture on the other. The collapse of these divisions, crucial to the many and varied components of postmodernism, was also vital to feminist art. Women artists made use of both theory and popular culture through reference and quotation. Cindy Sherman, first showing work in the late seventies, used popular culture as her source material without using theory as commentary and distanciation device. When her photographs were first shown, their insistent reiteration of representations of the feminine, and her use of herself as model, in infinite varieties of masquerade, won immediate attention from critics who welcomed her as a counterpoint to feminist theoretical and conceptual art. The success of her early work, its acceptance by the centre (the art market and institutions) at a time when many artists were arguing for a politics of the margins, helped to obscure both the work's interest for feminist aesthetics and the fact that the ideas it raised could not have been formulated without a prehistory of feminism and its theorization of the body and representation. Sherman's arrival on the art scene certainly marks the beginning of the end of that era in which the female body had become, if not quite unrepresentable, only representable if refracted through theory. But rather than sidestepping, Sherman reacts and shifts the agenda. She brings a different perspective to the 'images of women question' and recuperates a politics of the body that had, perhaps, been lost or neglected in the twists and turns of seventies feminism.

In the early seventies, the women's movement claimed the female body as a site for political struggle, mobilizing around abortion rights, above all, but with other ancillary issues spiralling out into agitation

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* This article was written while a selection of Cindy Sherman's work was on show at the Saatchi Gallery in London (an exhibition held in conjunction with Richard Artschwager and Richard Wilson from 11 January to 28 July 1991) and went to press before the opening of the Cindy Sherman retrospective at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (2 August–22 September).

[1] Sandy Nairne, *The State of the Art. Ideas and Images in the 1980s*, London 1987, p. 132.

over medical marginalization and sexuality itself as a source of women's oppression. A politics of the body led logically to a politics of representation of the body. It was only a small step to include the question of images of women in the accompanying debates and campaigns, but it was a step that also moved feminism out of familiar terrains of political action onto that of political aesthetics. And this small step called for a new conceptual vocabulary and opened feminist theory up to the influence of semiotics and psychoanalysis. The initial idea that images contributed to women's alienation from their bodies and from their sexuality, with an attendant hope of liberation and recuperation, gave way to theories of representation as symptom and signifier of the way problems posed by sexual difference under patriarchy could be displaced onto the feminine.

Not surprisingly, this kind of theoretical/political aesthetics also affected artists working in the climate of seventies feminism, and the representability of the female body underwent a crisis. At one extreme, the film-maker Peter Gidal said in 1978 'I have had a vehement refusal over the last decade, with one or two minor aberrations, to allow images of women into my films at all, since I do not see how those images can be separated from the dominant meanings.'[2] Women artists and film-makers, while rejecting this wholesale banishment, were extremely wary about the investment of 'dominant meanings' in images of women; and while feminist critics turned to popular culture to analyse these meanings, artists turned to theory, juxtaposing images and ideas, to negate dominant meanings and, slowly and polemically, to invent different ones. Although in this climate Cindy Sherman's concentration on the female body seemed almost shocking, her representations of femininity were not a return, but a re-representation, a making strange.

A visitor to a Cindy Sherman retrospective, who moves through the work in its chronological order, must be almost as struck by the dramatic nature of its development, as by the individual, very striking, works themselves. It is not a question of observing an increasing maturity, a changed style, or new directions, but of following a certain narrative of the feminine from an initial premiss to its very end. And this development takes place over ten years, between 1977 and 1987. The journey through time, through the work's chronological development, is also a journey into space. Sherman dissects the phantasmagoric space conjured up by the female body, from its exteriority to its interiority. The visitor 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. The first process of discovery, amusement and amazement is completed by a new curiosity, reverie and decipherment. And then, once the process of bodily disintegration is established in the later work, the early, innocent, images acquire a retrospective uncanniness.

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[2] Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath, eds., 'The Cinematic Apparatus'. From the discussion that followed Peter Gidal, 'Technology and Ideology in/through/and Avant Garde Film: An Instance', New York 1980, p. 169.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK

Untitled Film Still, 1979

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Untitled Film Still, 1979

Parodying Voyeurism

The first series of photographs, which also established Sherman's reputation, are called *Untitled Film Stills.* In each photograph Sherman poses for the camera, as though in a scene from a movie. Each photograph has its own *mise en scène*, evoking a style of film-making that is highly connotative but elusive. The black and white photographs seem to refer to the fifties, to the New Wave, to Neo-realism, to Hitchcock, or to Hollywood B pictures: This use of an amorphous connotation places them in a nostalgia genre, comparable to the American movies of the eighties that Fredric Jameson describes as typifying the postmodern characteristic of evoking the past while denying the reference of history.[3] They have the Barthesian quality of 'fifties-ness': that American collective fantasy of the fifties as the time of everyone's youth in a white and mainly middle America setting, in the last moment of calm before the storms of Vietnam, civil rights, and finally feminism. But Sherman twists nostalgia to suggest its dependence on constructing images and representations that conceal more than they record. She also draws attention to the historical importance of this period for establishing a particular culture of appearances—specifically, the feminine appearance. The accoutrements of the feminine struggle to conform to a facade of desirability haunt Sherman's iconography. Make-up, high heels, hair, clothes are all carefully 'put on' and 'done'. Sherman-the-model dresses up into character, while Sherman-the-artist reveals her character's masquerade. The juxtaposition begins to refer to a 'surface-ness', so that nostalgia begins to dissolve into unease. An overinsistence on surface starts to suggest that it might be masking something or other that should be hidden from sight, and a hint of another space starts to lurk inside a too plausible facade. Sherman accentuates the uneasiness by inscribing vulnerability into both the *mise en scène* of the photographs and the women's poses and expressions.

These *Film Still* scenes are set mainly in exteriors. Their fascination is derived from their quality as *trompe l'oeil.* The viewer is subjected to a series of double takes, estrangements and recognitions. The camera looks; it 'captures' the female character in a parody of different voyeurisms. It intrudes into moments in which she is unguarded, sometimes undressed, absorbed into her own world in the privacy of her own environment. Or it witnesses a moment in which her guard drops as she is suddenly startled by a presence, unseen and off screen, watching her. Or it observes her, simultaneously demure and alluring, composed for the outside world and its intrusive gaze. The viewer is immediately caught by the voyeurisms on offer. But the obvious fact that each character is Sherman herself, disguised, introduces a sense of wonder at the illusion and its credibility. And, as is well known in the cinema, any moment of marvelling at an illusion immediately destroys its credibility. The lure of voyeurism turns around like a trap, and the viewer ends up aware that Sherman-the-artist has set up a machine for making the gaze materialize uncomfortably, in alliance with Sherman-the-model. Then the viewer's curiosity may be attracted to the surrounding narrative. But any speculation about a story, about

[3] F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London 1991, p. 19.

actual events and the character depicted, quickly reaches a dead end. The visitor at a Cindy Sherman show must be well aware that the *Film Still* is constructed for this one image only, and that nothing exists either before or after the moment shown. Each pregnant moment is a cutout, a tableau suggesting and denying the presence of a story. As they pretend to be something more, the *Film Stills* parody the stillness of the photograph and ironically enact the poignancy of a 'frozen moment'. The women in the photographs are almost always in stasis, halted by something more than photography, like surprise, reverie, decorum, anxiety, or just waiting.

The viewer's voyeurism is uncomfortable. There is no complementary exhibitionism on the part of the female figures, and the sense of looking on, unobserved, provokes a mixture of curiosity and anxiety. The images are, however, erotic. Sexuality pervades the figures and their implied narratives. Sherman performs femininity as an appearance, in which the insistent sexualization of woman is integrated into style and respectability. Because Sherman uses cosmetics literally as a mask she makes visible the feminine as masquerade. And it is this homogeneous culture of fifties-like appearance that Sherman uses to adopt such a variety of same, but different, figurations. Identity, she seems to say, lies in looks. But just as she is artist and model, voyeur and looked-at, active and passive, subject and object, the photographs set up a comparable variety of positions and responses for the viewer. There is no stable subject position in her work, no resting point that does not quickly shift into something else. So the *Film Stills*' initial sense of homogeneity and credibility break up into the kind of heterogeneity of subject position that feminist aesthetics espoused in advance of postmodernism proper.

Soft-Core Pastiche

In 1980 Sherman made her first series of colour photographs, using back-projections of exteriors rather than actual locations, moving into a closer concentration on the face, and flattening the space of the photograph. Then, in 1981, she produced a series of colour photographs that start to suggest an interior space, and initiate her exploration inside the masquerade of femininity's interior/exterior binary opposition. The photographs all have the same format, horizontal like a cinemascope screen, so most of the figures lie on sofas or beds, or on the floor. As the series originated with a centrefold for *Artforum*, they give a strong sense of soft-core pastiche. These photographs concentrate on the sphere of feminine emotion, longing and reverie and are set in private spaces that reduplicate the privacy of emotion. But, once again, an exact sensation is impossible to pin down. The young women that Sherman impersonates may be daydreaming about a future romance, or they may be mourning a lost one. They may be waiting, in enforced passivity, for a letter or telephone call. Their eyes gaze into the distance. They are not aware of their clothes, which are sometimes carelessly rumpled, so that, safe alone with their thoughts, their bodies are, slightly, revealed to the viewer. They exude vulnerability and sexual availability like lovesick heroine/victims in a romantic melodrama. There are some precedents in the *Untitled Film Stills* for this series, but the use of colour, the horizontal format and

the repeated pose create a double theme of inside space and of reverie. The intimate space of a bedroom provides an appropriate setting for daydream or reverie, and combines with Sherman's erotic, suggestive, poses to accumulate connotations of sexuality. These photographs reiterate the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of femininity. While the *Untitled Film Stills* fake a surrounding narrative, so the camera does not draw undue attention to its presence; the 1981 *Untitleds*, on the other hand, announce themselves as photographs and, as in a pin-up, the model's eroticism, and her pose, are directed towards the camera, and ultimately towards the spectator. However, the spectator who looks back at the gaze that sometimes comes out from the image, or is drawn into voyeuristic involvement with the figure displayed, must then remember that the artist both poses herself in a mirror and photographs the scene herself by means of a remote control.

In most of the *Untitled Film Stills* the female figure stands out in sharp contrast to her surroundings, exaggerating her vulnerability in an exterior world. In some, however, a visible grain merges the figure with the texture and material of the photograph. In the 1981 series, Sherman's use of colour and of light and shade merges the female figure and her surroundings into a continuum, without hard edges. Pools of light illuminate patches of skin or bathe the picture in soft glow. Above all, the photographs have a glossy, high-quality finish in keeping with the codes and conventions of commercial photography. While the poses are soft and limp—polar opposites of a popular idea of fetishized femininity (high-heeled and corseted erect, flamboyant and exhibitionist)—fetishism returns in the formal qualities of the photography. The sense of surface now resides, not in the female figure's attempt to save her face in a masquerade of femininity, but in the model's subordination to, and imbrication with, the texture of the photographic medium itself.

Metamorphoses

Sherman's next important phase, the *Untitleds* of 1983, first manifests the darkness that will, from then on, increasingly overwhelm her work. This turn was, in the first place, a reaction against the fashion industry that first invited her to design photographs for them and then tried to modify and tone down the results. 'From the beginning there was something that didn't work with me, like there was friction. I picked out some clothes I wanted to use. I was sent completely different clothes that I found boring to use. I really started to make fun, not of the clothes, but much more of the fashion. I was starting to put scar tissue on my face to become really ugly.'[4]

These photographs use bright, harsh light and high-contrast colour. The characters are theatrical and ham up their roles. A new Sherman body is beginning to emerge. She grotesquely parodies the kind of feminine image that is geared to erotic consumption, and she inverts conventional codes of female allure and elegance. Whereas the language of fashion photography gives great emphasis to lightness, so that its models seem to defy gravity, Sherman's figures are heavy in

[4] Nairne, p. 136.

body and groundedness. Their unselfconsciousness verges on the exhibitionist, and they strike professional poses to display costumes that exaggerate their awkward physiques, which are then exaggerated again by camera angle and lighting. There is absolutely nothing to do with nature or the natural in this response to the cosmetic svelteness of fashion. Rather, they suggest that the binary opposition to the perfect body of the fashion model is the grotesque, and that the smooth glossy body, polished by photography, is a defence against an anxiety-provoking, uneasy and uncanny body. From this perspective the surface of the body, so carefully conveyed in the early photographs, seems to be dissolving to reveal a monstrous otherness behind the cosmetic facade. The 'something' that had seemed to be lurking in the phantasmatic topography of femininity, begins, as it were, to congeal.

After the *Untitleds* of 1983, the anti-fashion series, the metamorphoses become more acute and disturbing. The series *Untitled 1984* is like a reversal of Dorian Gray; as though the pain, anger and stupidity of human nature left their traces clearly on human features, as though the surface was failing in its task of masking. In the next series, inspired by the monsters of fairy stories, the figures become supernatural; and, rather like animistic personifications, they tower above or return to the elements. By this time the figures seem to be the emanations of irrational fears, verging on terror, relics of childhood nightmares. If the 'centrefold' series conveyed, through pose and facial expression, the interiority of secret thoughts, now Sherman seems to personify the stuff of the unconscious itself. While the earlier interiority suggested soft, erotic, reverie, these are materializations of arxiety and dread. Sherman seems to have shifted from conveying or suggesting the presence of a hidden otherness to representing its inhabitants. This is a shift that differentiates between reverie and the stuff of the repressed, the unconscious. Increasingly grotesque and deforming make-up blurs gender identity, and some figures are horned or snouted, like horrific mythological hybrids. If the earlier iconography suggested a passive aspiration to please, deformation and distortion seem to erupt in some kind of ratio to repression. These figures are active and threatening.

Finally, in the last phase, the figure disappears completely. Sometimes body bits are replaced by prosthetics, such as false breasts or buttocks, but, in the last resort, nothing is left but disgust—the disgust of sexual detritus, decaying food, vomit, slime, menstrual blood, hair. These traces represent the end of the road, the secret stuff of bodily fluids that the cosmetic is designed to conceal. The topography of exterior/interior is exhausted. Previously, all Sherman's work had been centred and structured around a portrait, so that a single figure had provided a focus for the viewer's gaze. Surrounding *mises-en-scène* gradually vanished as though Sherman was denying the viewer any mitigation or distraction from the figures themselves as they gradually became more and more grotesque. Around 1985, settings make a comeback in the photographs, but diffused into textures. Natural elements—pebbles, sand or soil, for instance—develop expressive and threatening connotations. Colour, lighting, and the texture of the figures themselves merge them visually into their settings. The camera

angle now looks down onto the ground where the figures lie lifeless, or, perhaps, trapped in their own materiality.

The shift in perspective, to downward camera angle, heralds Sherman's final transformation. When the body, in any homogeneous or cohesive form, disappears from the scene, its traces and detritus are spread out on the ground, on pebbles or sand, or submerged in water. With the disintegration of the body, the photographs also lose any homogeneous and cohesive formal organization and the sense of physical fragmentation is echoed in the fragmentation of the images. Now the edge of the image may be as significant as any other section of its space. At the same time the photographs have become monstrously enlarged. The early series, *Untitled Film Stills*, were all in the format of eight by ten inches, while the late series have grown to dimensions such as seventy-two by forty-nine inches. The viewer could take in the early work with a glance and sense of command over the image; the late photographs overwhelm the viewer and force the eye to scan the surface, searching for a specific shape or pattern that might offer some formal reassurance against the disturbing content.

De-fetishizing the Female Body

From the perspective of feminist aesthetics, this narrative of disintegration, horror and finally disgust, raises, first and foremost, the question of the source, or origin, of this phantasmagoria of the female body, and, secondly, how it might be analysed. Sherman depicts a phantasmatic space, projected onto and then into the female body. A variety of issues are raised by the question of spatial metaphor. First of all, there is certainly a sense in which Sherman's ironic 'unveiling' also 'unveils' the use of the female body as a metaphor for division between surface allure and concealed decay, as though the stuff that has been projected for so long into a mythic space 'behind' the mask of femininity had suddenly broken through the delicately painted veil. This veil is exemplified by the myth of enchantress-turned-hag, out of which the dualistic mythology of the female body came to represent the opposition between truth and artifice. Barbara Spackman, in her discussion of the appropriation of the female body as metaphor by symbolist aesthetics, comments on this figuration: 'As a figure for hermeneutics itself, it may be read as enacting the discovery of essence that lies beneath appearance, truth beneath falsehood, reality beneath fiction, plain speech beneath cosmetic rhetoric. Indeed . . . Nietzsche uses this very topos in order to overturn it, in order to critique the hermeneutic model that would find an essence beneath appearance. These are, of course, valid interpretations. Yet they discard the literal in order to concentrate on the figural and do not ask why woman is favoured as the vehicle of the metaphor.'[5]

As Spackman argues, woman becomes 'the favoured vehicle of the metaphor' once she is seen as the site of castration, so the origin of this phantasmagoria of the female body may be found in the structure of the unconscious, and may be deciphered with the aid of

[5] Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Geneologies. The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio*, Ithaca 1989, p. 165.

psychoanalytic theory. A cosmetic, artificial appearance then conceals the wound or void left in the male psyche when it perceives sexual difference. In this sense, the topography of the feminine masquerade echoes the topography of the fetish itself. It could certainly be argued that the metamorphosis of the feminine in Sherman's work traces this mythic figuration, and, in parodying the metaphor, returns in the last resort to the 'literal', to the bodily fluids and wastes that become condensed with wounded body in the iconography of misogyny. But she also, dramatically, draws attention to the regime of representational and mythological contradiction lived by women under patriarchy. Although the origin of the image may be in the unconscious, and although the image may be a phantasm, these collective fantasies also have an impact in reality and produce symptoms that mediate between the two. The late photographs are a reminder that the female psyche may well identify with misogynistic revulsion against the female body and attempt to erase signs that mark her physically as feminine. The images of decaying food and vomit raise the spectre of the anorexic girl, who tragically acts out the fashion fetish of the female as an eviscerated, cosmetic and artificial construction designed to ward off the 'otherness' hidden in the 'interior'.

It is hard to trace the collapse of the female body as successful fetish without re-representing the anxieties and dreads that give rise to the fetish in the first place, and Sherman might be open to the accusation that she reproduces the narrative without a sufficiently critical context. It is here that the *Untitled Film Stills* may be re-read with the hindsight of the future development of Sherman's work in mind. To return to the early photographs in this way is to see how the female body can become a conduit for different ideas superimposed, as it were, and condensed into a single image. For instance, the uncanniness of the women characters, behind their cosmetic facades, starts to merge with the instability of the photograph as object of belief. The structure of fetishism indicates a homology between these different ideas, and the theory of fetishism helps to unravel the process of condensation.

Between Knowledge and Belief

For Freud, fetishism is particularly significant (apart, that is, from his view that it 'confirmed the castration complex') as a demonstration that the psyche can sustain incompatible ideas, at one and the same time, through a process of disavowal. Fetishistic disavowal acknowledges the possibility of castration (represented by the female, penis-less, genital) and simultaneously denies it. Freud saw the coexistence of these two contradictory ideas, maintained in a single psyche, as a model for the ego's relation to reality: the 'splitting of the ego', which allowed two parallel, but opposed, attitudes to be maintained in uneasy balance. Switching back and forth between visual duping, followed by perception of the duping mechanism, a willing suspension of disbelief followed by a wave of disillusion—'I know . . . but all the same . . .'—the viewer of Sherman's *Film Stills* can almost physically feel, and indeed relish, the splitting open of the gap between knowledge and belief.

This 'oscillation effect' is important to postmodernism. The viewer looks, recognizes a style, doubts, does a double take, then recognizes

that the style is a citation, and meanings shift and change their reference like shifting perceptions of perspective from an optical illusion. This effect is, perhaps, particularly exciting because it dices with credibility in a manner similar to the fetish. In this sense, Cindy Sherman pushes postmodern play to its limits. When the viewer reaches the final photographs of disintegration and only reluctantly recognizes the content for what it is, the art aspect of Sherman's work returns. It is not so much that the colours of the detritus images are more 'painterly' and their reference is more to the shape of the frame than the figure, but that their place on the gallery wall affirms their status as art, just as the viewer is about to turn away in revolted disbelief. In this sense, they, too, create an 'oscillation effect', this time between reverence and revulsion. This kind of theme is present in Sherman's latest works, which are outside the 1978–87 'narrative' and return to the figuration of the human body, now refracted through art itself. She reproduces old masters, taking the role of the central figure, or impersonating a portrait. Again, she distorts the body with false additions, such as the breast in a Virgin and Child. Although these images lack the inexorability and complexity of her previous phase, she still plays on the structures of disavowal and draws attention to the art-historical fetishization of great works and their value.

For Freud, the structure of fetishism was not the same as the structure of repression. While providing a substitute and a replacement and literally a screen against a traumatic memory, the fetish is also a memento of loss and substitution. And in these circumstances, how the female body, the original provoker of castration anxiety, is represented may be symptomatic and revealing. When Sherman depicts femininity as a masquerade in her succession of 'dressings-up', the female body asserts itself as a site of anxiety that it must, at all costs, conceal. And it acquires a self-conscious vulnerability that seems to exude tension between an exterior appearance and its interiority. In this way, Sherman plays with a 'topography' of the female body. But the early photographs illustrate the extent to which this 'topography' has been integrated into a culture of the feminine. In order to create a 'cosmetic' body a cosmetics industry has come into being, so that the psychic investment the patriarchy makes in feminine appearance is echoed by an investment on the part of capitalism. And cosmetics are also, of course, the tools of Sherman's trade.

Fetishism depends on a phantasmatic topography, setting up a screen and shield, closely linked to the ego's defence mechanism, as Freud pointed out. At the same time, fetishism is the most semiotic of perversions, screening and shielding by means of an object that is, unavoidably, also a sign of loss and substitution. But its semiotic enterprise is invested in the deceit of artifice. The fetish is, as Nietzsche said of woman, 'so artistic'. As feminist theorists have noted, the female body not only reduplicates this structure—of a surface as screen and anxiety-provoking interior, the enchantress/hag dichotomy—but it can incarnate the fetish object itself. This syndrome came into its own with the Hollywood star system, the mass production of pin-ups, and the equation, in contemporary consumer culture, between the feminine and glamour.

Cindy Sherman traces the abyss or morass that overwhelms the defetishized body, deprived of the fetish's semiotic, reduced to being 'unspeakable' and devoid of significance. Her late work comes close to depicting the Kristevan concept of the abject: that is, the disgust aroused in the human psyche by lifeless, inanimate bodily matter, bodily wastes and the dead body itself.[6] For Kristeva, abjection is closely associated with separation from the mother's body. The small child, of both sexes, in the process of establishing autonomous subjectivity, has to establish an autonomous 'clean and proper body'. While previously the child found pleasure in its bodily wastes and the satisfying undifferentiation between its body and that of its mother, when it needs to define boundaries and separations, feelings of disgust come into play. Barbara Creed's argument that abjection is central to the recurring image of the 'monstrous feminine' in horror movies is also applicable to the monstrous in Sherman.[7] Although her figures materialize the stuff of irrational terror, they also have pathos and could easily be understood in terms of 'the monster as victim'. Her photographs of atrophied figures (for instance, the corpse that lies like a soiled wax-work, eyes staring and blending with colour tones into the grass) could be collected into a lexicon of horror and the uncanny, just as the *Untitled Film Stills* are like a lexicon of poses and gestures typical of respectable, but still uncanny, femininity. The 1987 series suggests that, although both sexes are subject to abjection, it is women who can explore and analyse the phenomenon with greater equanimity, as it is the female body that has come, not exclusively but predominantly, to represent the shudder aroused by liquidity and decay.

Fifties America: The Democracy of Glamour

By referring to the fifties in her early work, Sherman joins many others in identifying Eisenhower's America as the mythic birthplace of postmodern culture. Reference to the fifties invokes the aftermath of the Korean War and the success of the Marshall Plan, American mass consumption and the 'society of the spectacle'; a time when, in the context of the Cold War, advertising, movies and the actual packaging and seductiveness of commodities all marketed glamour. Glamour proclaimed the desirability of American capitalism to the outside world and, inside, secured American-ness as an aspiration for the newly suburbanized, white, population as it buried incompatible memories of immigrant origins. In Sherman's early photographs, connotations of vulnerability and instability flow over on to the construction and credibility of the wider, social masquerade. The image of fifties-ness as a particular emblem of American-ness, also masks the fact that it was a decade of social and political repression while profound change gathered on the horizon—the transition, that is, from Joe McCarthy to James Dean. Rather than simply referring to 'fifties-ness' in nostalgia mode, Sherman hints at a world ingesting the seeds of its own decay. She is closer, therefore, to *Blue Velvet* than to *American Graffiti.*

It is interesting, in the light of the American postmodern citation of

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[6] Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, New York 1982.
[7] See Barbara Creed, '*Alien* and the Monstrous-Feminine', in Annette Kuhn, ed., *Alien Zone. Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, London 1990.

the fifties, to consider the pivotal place occupied by Marilyn Monroe, as an icon in her own right, and as source of all the subsequent Marilyn iconography, kept alive by gay subculture, surfacing with Debbie Harry in the late seventies and perpetuated by Madonna in the eighties (particularly, of course, her 'Material Girl'). In 1982 Cindy Sherman appeared on the cover of the Anglo-American avant-garde magazine *ZG*. She is immediately recognizable as Marilyn Monroe, in cover-girl pose. She is not the Marilyn of bright lights and diamonds, but the other, equally familiar, Marilyn in slacks and a shirt, still epitomizing the glamour of the period, hand held to thrown-back head, eyes half closed, lips open. But refracted through Sherman's masquerade, Marilyn's masquerade fails to mask her interior anxiety, and unhappiness seems to seep through the cracks. America's favourite fetish never fully succeeded in papering over her interiority, and the veil of sexual allure now seems, in retrospect, to be haunted by death.

Cindy Sherman's impersonations predate, and in some ways prefigure, those of Madonna. Madonna's performances make full use of the potential of cosmetics. As well as fast changing her own chameleon-like appearance on a day-to-day basis, she performs homages to the artificial perfection of the movie stars and also integrates the 'oscillation effect' into the rhythm of her videos, synchronizing editing, personality change and sexual role reversals. Although Madonna, obviously, does not follow the Cindy Sherman narrative of disintegration, her awareness of this, other, side of the topography of feminine masquerade is evidenced in her well-documented admiration for Frida Kahlo. Frida depicted her face, in an infinite number of self-portraits, as a mask, and veiled her body in elaborate Tehuana dresses. Sometimes the veil falls, and her wounded body comes to the surface, condensing her real, physical, wounds with both the imaginary wound of castration and the literal interior space of the female body, the womb, bleeding, in her autobiographical painting, from miscarriage. Frida Kahlo's mask was always her own. Marilyn's was like a trademark. While Cindy Sherman and Madonna shift appearance into a fascinating debunking of stable identity, Marilyn's masquerade had to be always absolutely identical. Her features were able to accept cosmetic modelling into an instantly recognizable sign of 'Marilyn-ness'. But here, too, the mask is taut, threatened by the gap between public stardom and private pressures (as was the case for everyone caught in the Hollywood Babylon of the studio system's double standards) and also by the logic of the topography itself.

In becoming the democracy of glamour, fifties America completed a process, through the movies and through mass-produced clothes and cosmetics, that had been launched in the thirties and interrupted by the Second World War. It was also a paradigmatic moment for commodity fetishism. Baudrillard has noted the origin of the word 'fetish' in the Portuguese *feitiço*, derived from the Latin *factitius*: 'From the same root (*facio, factitius*) as *feitiço* comes the Spanish *afeitar*: "to paint, to adorn, to embellish" and *afeite* "preparation, ornamentation, cosmetics".'[8] He suggests that this etymology from the artificial and

[8] Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the political Economy of the Sign*, St. Louis 1981, p. 91.

the cosmetic implies a homology between the fetishized figure of bodily beauty and the fetishism of the commodity. The commodity, too, is haunted by the gap between knowledge and belief. By exploiting the gap between knowledge and belief, inherent in the complexity of value, the commodity can erase its origin in the labour of the working class, at the production line, and turn a phantasmatic, cosmetic, face to the world. And, as feminists have so often noted, the seal and guarantee of its success in the market place is so often the veneer of sexualized glamour generated by juxtaposition to the sexualized glamour of femininity in advertising. Although Cindy Sherman's work is not about the commodity, the citation of the fifties brings to mind this complex network of homologies. The failure of the fetish, which she traces through images of the feminine, is similar to the polarization of gloss in the shop window, and disavowals of the factory that flourish when society cannot find a way of narrating the contradictions in its history.

In refusing the word/image juxtaposition, so prevalent in the art of the seventies and eighties, Sherman may draw the accusation that she is, herself, stuck in the topographic double bind of the fetish and its collapse. Although she may be thus unable to inscribe the means of decipherment into the work itself, her use of *Untitled* to describe her works turns inability into refusal. Her work does, however, vividly illustrate the way that the human psyche thrives on the division between surface and secret, and that, standing for repression of all kinds, this recurring spatial metaphor cannot be swept away. The wordlessness and despair in her work represents the wordlessness and despair that ensues when a fetishistic structure, the means of erasing history and memory, collapses, leaving a void in its wake. The fetish necessarily wants history to be overlooked. That is its function. The fetish is also a symptom, and as such has a history which may be deciphered, but only by refusing its phantasmatic topography. Freud described the structure of the psyche through spatial metaphor to convey the burying action of repression, but he analysed the language of the unconscious, its formal expression in condensation and displacement, in terms of signification and decipherment. In the last resort, decipherment is dependent on language. The complete lack of verbal clues and signifiers in Cindy Sherman's work draws attention to the semiotic that precedes a successful translation of the symptom into language, the semiotic of displacements and fetishism, desperately attempting to disguise unconscious ideas from the conscious mind. She uses iconography, connotation, or the sliding of the signifier, in a trajectory that ends by stripping away all accrued meaning to the limit of bodily matter. However, even this bedrock—the vomit and the blood for instance—returns to cultural significance: that is, to the difficulty of the body, and above all the female body, while it is subjected to the icons and narratives of fetishism.