

Reflection From A Fat Body

Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image,
Performance by Smith, S. and Watson, J.

A text by Sofia Mäkinen

Introduction:

The undressed body suggests it has been stripped of class and status, and the pants put on is part of the mask. The mask can either be sly and deceptive or what we would call the identity. The everyday face by which we present ourselves to the outside world. The idea of taking videos and photos of myself while taking my pants on arose out of a will to make the audience feel uncomfortable and awkward. Preferably the negative feelings arisen in the viewer will result in self reflection.

Looking through Interfaces by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson it was exciting seeing that one chapter was called Bodies of Evidence: Jenny Saville, Faith Ringgold and Janine Antoni Weigh In. To put my own work into context the search was for fat representation in women's self portraiture, and the essays I had read before approaching this one was, in my opinion, too focused on sexuality and the woman as an object. These are of course important subjects and I learned a great deal from these chapters.

Initial reflections:

“...[Wilkes] uses autobiographical material on her own body as a sculptural element...” (Smith and Watson, 2005, p. 55)

The photos taken during the project also have traces of doing this. Although my focus is not the same as Wilke's, by using clothing and especially underwear it created sculptural elements to the photos to highlight certain focuspoint. The too small pants dig into the flesh and create creases and shadows that the audience recognise and even get a physical reaction to.

“Masquerade (that is, the production of the self as exacerbatedly the thing most expected-but marking this thing as fake)” (Smith and Watson, 2005, p. 74)

My video piece is a clear example of masquerade. In it I am wearing the top and tote bag made by Maddie Dyer, clearly inviting people to focus on the breasts and especially nipples. A statement of feminism and feminine strength. The video is in itself juxtaposed with snippets of me dressing myself but also by the photos taken and shown alongside it.

“Now, when the fascinating figure of the femme fatale disintegrates into an inconsistent bric-a-brac of hysterical masks, he is finally capable of gaining a kind of distance toward her and rejecting her (65). (...) Žižek argues that what is so threatening about the femme fatale is not that she is immersed in deception but that she will let all the masks fall off. (...) what is really menacing about the femme fatale is... that she presents a case of a pure nonpathological subject fully assuming her own fate”.
(Smith and Watson, 2005, pp. 62–63)

Even though my own work is no commentary on sexuality the female body will always be sexualised in a patriarchal society and the analogy of the femme fatale can definitely be used for it. The idea of putting on masks and then letting them fall all at once, but totally under my control is exactly what the work is about. The video shows the ‘femme fatale’ existing in society with her masks on, but flashes in the video and photographs show the inner process of letting them fall in the domestic space.

“...the performative posing of the self, whether photographically documented or “live,” is always already a performance of the other. The screen - here the photographic self-portrait - is a site of exchange where the two intersect. [...] By so dramatically controlling the circuit of the gaze, looking directly at us, Sherman thwarts its demand that she remain its passive, unknowing object. She insists on herself as looking as well as showing, as subject as well as object. [...] This dynamic aspect of photographic meaning, when transposed onto the photographic self-portrait, can be seen as entailing subjectivity itself as processual - a formulation that Sherman’s reiterative self-performances in the Film Stills seem explicitly to surface.”
(Smith and Watson, 2005, pp. 83–84)

The performance of making the self in the project, just like Sherman, is to reflect back at the viewer. Sherman wanted to put the male gaze in the spotlight and make the audience reflect over how they look outwards. My photos instead are meant for the viewer to reflect on how they look inwards. By showing off the mask and the masked at the same time the outcome is to make the viewer think about who they themselves are and who they present themselves as. Do they view the world differently than others? How can their unique mind be portrayed in a similar way? What challenges do they face while existing in the everyday?

Even though using the male gaze was central to Cindy Sherman’s body of works, and that female sexuality is a disputed subject still today, the two initial chapters of the book got quite

repetitive reading about how these women get sexualised and compared to femme fatales. I borrowed Interfaces from the library because there was a need to contextualise my work and relate it to the women in art before me, especially the ones looking like me.

Saville & Aguilar:

A naked body in intimate and private situations can seem to be obviously sexual, but the mundane act of putting on pants does not connote sex but rather the organic property of the body. The awkward movements can seem unnatural and reflect the parts of yourself you keep private. The choice of a pair of too small pants is due to my own discomfort in social contexts due to mental health and body nonconformity to the ideal slim female body.

There was great enjoyment in reading about Laura Aguilar and Jenny Saville, because they were relatable. They felt othered because of their bodies weighing more than they were “supposed to”. Aguilar’s art touches on many other reasons to feel othered; race, sexuality etc. but she was the first person in the book that I felt I could relate to in terms of body image. Reading about these two women helped me put words onto my own feelings and experience in using my body as part of my art. The conclusion was that what I was feeling was othering, a word stigmatised due to its strong connection to postcolonialism. Here the nuances of othering became clear, and that their consequences were affecting me. It felt empowering.

While taking pictures of myself in revealing and intimate situations a lot of time has been spent looking at my own body. That is something I usually avoid to the furthest extent. By working autobiographically and confronting my own insecurities the outcome is a new skill of looking. The process of taking undressed photos of myself has been straining and emotional. There were questions if I was allowed to take up this space. After staring at my bare behind for hours, going through filmed material, photos both digital and on 35mm film, the material became more objective, and watching it became more enjoyable. These photos were taken to spark a conversation about mental health and neurodivergence and it became a healing journey for me. My body dysmorphia got better, my mood improved and I felt a purpose.

“...in J. A. D. Ingres’s 1839-40 *Odalisque with Slave* become desirable in relation to the darker bodies that almost subliminally frame them. (...) Or, in Édouard Manet’s well-known spoof on the classicizing odalisque, *Olympia* (1863), the Black maid, melting into the darkened background, becomes a sign, again, of *Olympia*’s sexual desirability- a desirability that is ironized in the painting as inextricably tied to the market. [...] Aguilar’s 1991 self-performance as an odalisque in the image *In Sandy’s Room* (Self Portrait) (fig. 21) in obvious ways unhinges this trope of feminine sexual availability that is so endlessly reproduced in the history of post-Renaissance Western art. And yet Aguilar disarticulates the odalisque from the (white, thin, heterosexual) feminine ideal. [...] Aguilar offers herself in the self-portrait only to keep herself embedded in the flesh of the image. We reach in and only feel ourselves groping, looking for something recognizable to hang on to; and, in failing, we are opened to otherness, encouraged to see ourselves (to paraphrase Silverman) within this other to whom we would otherwise respond with avoidance.”
(Smith and Watson, 2005, pp. 89–92)

The book is over 20 years old and some of the phrases might be seen as quite dated. As the first third of the chapter *Bodies of Evidence*, treating Jenny Saville’s self portrait, ended we entered the sphere of Faith Ringgold and her quilts. My heart sank when the realisation was that this part of the chapter was about the artist’s weightloss journey. The last third of the chapter treated Janine Antoni battling bulimia. It is obvious that these two thirds of the chapter lift important subjects that need to be given attention, but fatness was not welcome any more.

Losing weight, diet culture and eating disorders are subjects of great gravity, but that does not take away from the fact that fat representation is still needed to the same extent. Making these three subjects share one essay is to me contra productive. For one it makes the subject of bodies of different sizes more stigmatised, and the chapter feels like an excuse to touch these subjects without having to actually reflect upon them in depth. Secondly, even if the dramatic output of going from fatness to dieting and eventually to bulimia is very effectful, it does also paint a picture of unhealthy societal standards.

“This cultural investment in the systematic visualization of perfection suggests why there is such a profound cultural aversion to the fat female body in the late twentieth century. [...]

Ellmann argues that the fat woman, particularly if she is nonwhite and working-class, has come to embody everything the prosperous must disavow: imperialism, exploitation, surplus value, maternity, mortality, abjection, and unloveliness. [...]

(Saville's) act of putting her own weighty body in the picture involves her in a game of hide-and-seek in which the hiding and the seeking gain their urgency around the stakes of exposing the improper, messy, and seemingly borderless body of the woman projected as gluttonous. Since gluttony, as Ellmann argues, has functioned, since the late nineteenth century, as the sign of uncontrolled excess and of the degraded femininity of impoverished women (8), to present oneself in largeness is to present oneself as troublingly corporeal and degraded. [...]

(Smith and Watson, 2005, pp. 133–134)

“Forced too close to this body of excess that threatens to dissolve into formlessness, viewers are left to weigh the body of evidence on the scale of self-representation and thus to struggle with what Rowley calls the “narrative of self-examination” it proposes.” (Smith and Watson, 2005, p. 138)

This is exactly what this project is trying to achieve without having to distort or exaggerate. By putting myself in an everyday position the viewer is supposed to reflect over themselves. Is this only possible with a bigger body?

The discussion of the sexualisation of the white female body is intriguing and well put, as an art historian I like how this has been traced back historically via Ingres and Manet. This part made for reflection over my own images. They are not meant to connote sex. They are undressed, yes, and show me in a situation that can be viewed as intimate, but they are not sexy. Can a white woman's body be depicted without everyone straight away thinking about sex and sexual liberation? Not even the pictures of the dying Wilkes covered in gauze and bruises were exempt from sexualisation.

When writing about Laura Aguilar and Jenny Saville the authors focus on something else than sex. Does it take a body that is not viewed as attractive to be able to read something else from autobiographical works? Are fat women not allowed to take up space even in literature? This implies that if a skinny woman took the photos that Aguilar posed in, they would immediately be sexualised. Instead the author uses the words “zafing flesh, overlapping on itself” (Smith and Watson, 2005, p. 91) to describe Aguilar as Olympia - this is supposed to be

non-sexy by default. And even if there is a positive side to the fact that we can view images of women without right away talking about sex and the male gaze, there is a certain ambiguity. I sense that my own images fall into the same pile as Aguilar's, which in a sense is positive for me since they are not supposed to connote sex, but at the same time it is no wonder my work partly wants to talk about body dysmorphia.

Outro:

"I wanted to use scale to make the viewer feel assessed by the image.... If you want to assess this body then you have to assess your own position. Not just how you look at the body, but how you look at beauty or images of the female body in art."

-JENNY SAVILLE, interview with David Brittain (Smith and Watson, 2005, p. 135)

Interfaces is a book containing a lot of valuable information and reflections from senior authors in the field. The texts made me reflect upon myself, my art and who I am to others in a way that felt empowering. It also made me loathe myself. Are fat bodies allowed to take up space in the contemporary art field? With the 1990's ideals coming back with idioms like 'heroin chic' we might see an increase in fat bodies in art responding to this trend. Let's wait and see.

