

The (Im)Mobile Trap of the Reflecting Surface Self-Construction and Image Construction in the Work of Joan Jonas

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"But all her life the woman is to find the magic of her mirror a tremendous help in her effort to project herself and then attain self-identification [...]. In woman particularly, the image is identified with the ego. Handsome appearance in the male suggests transcendence; in the female, the passivity of immanence; only the second is intended to arrest the gaze and hence can be captured in the immobile, reflecting trap."

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *The Second Sex*

In the beginning was the mirror. Or, at least, that is how one could paraphrase Jacques Lacan's famous essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", which details the development of ego consciousness. For the psychoanalytical idea of the origin of the self begins with the gaze of the infant into the mirror. Through this gaze, and through the discovery of his or her mirror image, the child acquires an imaginary image of the completeness of his or her physical ego. The metaphor of the mirror is thus connected with ego development – at least in the psychoanalytical version of this tale.

Whereas Lacan in this scenario placed the mirror at the beginning – namely, at the beginning of consciousness of the I, which thus proves to be historical consciousness – in *The Second Sex*, a key text of the modern women's movement, Simone de Beauvoir wrote of mirrors that have their effect on woman "all her life". *The Second Sex* was published in 1949, the same year as Lacan's text on the mirror stage. But the mirrors Beauvoir wrote about, which also produce an ego (the "feminine" one), were considered in the context of the sex of the person looking into the mirror.

The mirror images that we see thus clearly work in two ways: they show us, only apparently, who we are, because this "we" exists only *after* the gaze in the mirror. At the same time, the conception of who we are determines our gaze into the mirror. De Beauvoir and Lacan thus pointed to two different functions of the mirror. First, its position at the beginning of the development of the subject, in which the gaze in the mirror forms the basis of the later function of the I. Second, the chasm of this function along the axis of sexual difference, which splits the mirror into an object that is suited to affirm feminine immanence (vs. masculine transcendence).

In the aesthetic encounter the mirror marks the question of the function and process of perception, more specifically of the positions of the viewer and the presenters and of the resulting knowledge about the perceived. If one assumes with the American art historian Amelia Jones that artistic procedures like performance always imply the "performing of the subject"¹ as well, then this would seem to be that much more critical in the use of the mirror. For the mirror not only doubles the performance of the artist's body and that of the viewers, it also presents within the performance an additional "image" that emphasizes its representational character.

Many of Joan Jonas's works concentrate on the mirror as a motif and as a theme, from the early *Mirror Pieces* (1968–71) to video performances like *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972). On the one hand, by using a mirror Jonas builds on particular traditions that characterize the use of the mirror in media other than performance. On the other, employing the mirror *in performance* should be seen as a break with these traditions. What is interesting, then, is the extent to which the mirror is able to open up for discussion questions of the function of representation

and its connection to the self (of the artist and of the viewer) that are already inherent in the practice of performance. This question will be explored in the following text using the paired concepts of reality and representation, viewer and work, and mirror and self.

Reality and Representation

In one of Jonas's earliest performances, *Mirror Piece I* (1969), some fifteen women and two men move in patterns through the room while holding up full-size mirrors in front of them. During the performance, which followed a detailed choreography, what the viewers saw reflected and what they saw "live" was constantly changing. The mirror images that appear again and again in the performance recalled that those present were seeing images, that is, representations. This is significant because the performance, in contrast to classical artistic procedures like painting, seemed not to represent anything, but rather to be what it presented. It is easy to forget, therefore, that in performance too, something is offered up to be seen. In aesthetic staging, the body should not be equated with "life" nor does performance offer access to the "genuine" body. Jonas alludes to this set of problems in two ways. First, the mirror sees to it that a kind of distance is established for the audience members between themselves and what they are seeing and this distance is explained by the unforeseen confrontation with one's own mirror image. Second, the introduction of the video monitor that Jonas used in later performances like *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* is well suited to reinforce the distance established by the mirror and to serve as a constant reminder of the performance's representational status. Naturally, this includes the artist as well, who in the performance became an other – "distinctly someone else" – or, as Jonas put it, "(t)he video monitor's screen or the projected image was another mask for the construction and deconstruction of persona. Here there was also distance – even in the close-up."

A photograph of the performance of *Mirror Piece I* in Annandale-on-Hudson is particularly revealing in this context (fig. 1) Only with some effort does what we are seeing become at all clear: a woman sitting on the grass holding a full-size mirror below her hips and perpendicular to her body. This construction multiplies her legs by two,



Ilse Bing *Selbstporträt mit Leica* (1931)

resulting in a strange body that seems to be composed only of legs and two fragments of arms. The insertion of the mirror image is not, however, seamless. Around the mirror there is another, smaller border that, on closer observation, reveals where the "real" body ends and its "image" begins. Interestingly, however, this border is covered at one point where the real body intersects with its mirror image. This detail of the image is extremely disorienting, because it makes it impossible to distinguish between figure and ground – and thus between the real body and its mirror image. The – real and imaginary – reflections of the body that are necessary to produce and maintain identity are implied here in a figurative sense. However, *Mirror Piece* makes the identification with the *one* mirror image impossible. Thus it is not possible to predict the sequence of the reflections, but neither do the details traditionally preferred for self-portraiture result. Moreover the use of the mirror, in self-portrait for example, demands the exclusion of chance that plays a central role in *Mirror Piece*: who among those present comes to be reflected and how be entirely random.

Ilse Bing's *Self-Portrait with Leica* (1931) shows how much minute planning is necessary to create an image or self-image with the help of mirrors, and also how these necessary conditions in photography are not visible (p. 98). Bing took as her theme both the gaze of the photographer, which is seen twice, and our gaze as viewers by introducing the mirror into photography. Where the

observer of the photograph would have his or her imaginary place, there is yet a third mirror, this one not visible, which reflected both Bing and her mirror image so that she could photograph the latter. Although the mirror had to be placed, presumably by Bing herself, at precisely the angle at which this double reflection was possible – indeed, at which “something was to be seen” at all – this moment of manipulation is not visible. The mirrors seem to exist independently of what is mirrored, as its “immobile trap.” In fact, however, they are not immobile at all but must be moved constantly in order to retain this function of immobility/incorruptibility. If we now consider Jonas’s arrangements of the mirrors, it quickly becomes clear how Jonas used unplanned and random reflections to expose the ways in which the mirror functions. The movement of the mirror, which traditionally represents merely the preparation for the final mirror image, is freed of its subsidiary function in the performance: it has become the true theme.

What the photographs of the performances can only suggest, however, and what distinguishes them fundamentally from the experiences possible while attending the performances themselves, is the reflection of the audience members who see themselves now and again in the mirrors that are carried past. This experience interacts on two levels with conventional models of representation. First, it disturbs the relationship between representation and reality within aesthetic perception. Second, it radicalizes one feature of the performance method as a whole: the displacement of the boundary between the viewer and the work. I would like to explain this first aspect in more detail before treating the second in the section that follows.

In the tradition of Western intellectual history there are signs that the relationship between representation and reality was conceived in such a way that the highest goal of art was thought to be the representation of “nature” (or “reality”) in the way truest to nature, that is, most realistic. At the same time, however, this postulate operates with the idea of a strict separation between the two domains. Only in this way can one derive pleasure from blurring that distinction, that is, from producing illusionistic space. The numerous stages through which the debate on mimesis that have taken place in the twentieth century – for example, in nonobjective art – can demonstrate the

central role that the imitation of nature has played in aesthetics. The most recent debates about representation, which have proven to be especially fruitful for feminist approaches, have taken place against this background. Central to this discussion was the “challenge to the notion of real basis inherent in the representation and [...] the insistence that every reality that can be experienced is already shaped by the representation of reality.”²

It is striking that this critique has often been formulated in close association with aesthetic positions that artists themselves have developed. *Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy*, too, should be understood as an autonomous contribution to this debate. Jonas called attention to the nature of reality as something composed of representations, that is, to the fact that the model of image/reproduction is not able to explain the role that representation plays in the creation of subjectivity, for example. The intimate intertwining of that which “is” and its representations thus also makes it impossible, for example, to understand the body and its movements in space as independent of the conditions of its representation. As the Italian film scholar Teresa de Lauretis has expressed it, “The body is continually and inevitably caught up in representation.”³ At precisely the moment at which the real body is introduced into the artistic process, the opportunity arises to explore the body’s independence from representations of it (and consequently the question of the subject as well). The arbitrary, uncontrolled reflections of bodies in a performance like, say, *Mirror Piece I* creates “images” of both the bodies of the performers and those of the viewers. For viewers, this means a parallel experience of looking at the artist and the “work” of art, on the one hand, and at themselves, on the other. The introduction of mirrors thus produces a disturbance of the boundaries traditionally drawn between what is done away with in the work of art and that to which it refers, even *ex negativo*.

In the video *Vertical Roll* (1972) Jonas shows the extent to which the media of representation themselves function as mirror, and in this way she extends the questions discussed above. *Vertical Roll* exploits at the technical level a phenomenon that, as a rule, is avoided as a distortion of the television image: the continual “rolling” of specific images across the viewing screen. Jonas uses these rhythmically fragmented images to connect formal prop-

erties of the medium to the subject matter. For example, in one sequence she strikes a mirror with a hammer and thus creates the illusion of a connection between the repeating sounds and the distortion of the image. Thus the spheres of the representation and the represented and of the ordering function of the medium of video can play here. The sound recorded on the video that lets us hear "what happened" suddenly seems to influence the formal sequence of images and thus to some extent transgresses the limit, medium, and content placed upon it. The "reality" that seems to be reflected in the recording becomes a structural part of the medium.

What are then the specifics of performance as an artistic method, in order to reveal the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic categories that come into question during a simultaneous presentation of bodies, images, texts, and sounds?

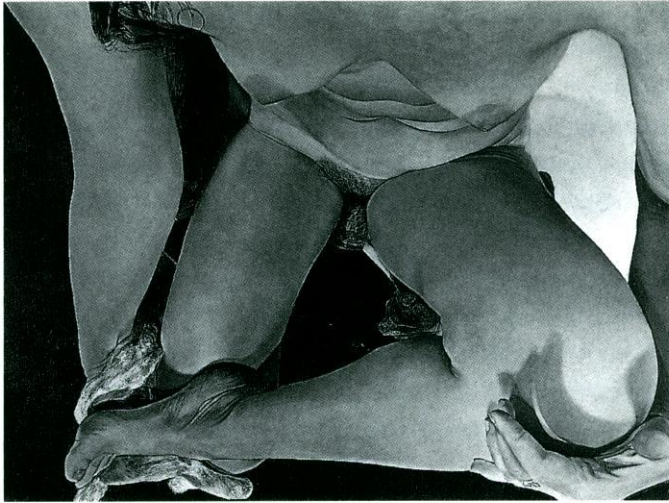
Vision Becomes Visible: Artist – Viewer – Work

In 1967, one year before the first *Mirror Pieces*, Michael Fried's influential article "Art and Objecthood" was published.⁴ In it Fried criticized, using the example of minimalism, something that he characterized as the theatricality of the works of artists like Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, and others. Central to this criticism is the relationship of the viewer to the artwork. In contrast to the ideal, associated with modernism, of the absence of time and space, Fried criticized the viewer-specific minimalist artworks for their dependence on the observer.

Joan Jonas's works and in particular the early *Mirror Pieces* can be seen as the beginning of a series of artistic strategies that with increasing intensity *consciously* introduce the theatricality that Fried criticized. However, the concept of theatricality not only draws attention to the significance of temporality for the form of the performance (in contrast to a painting, say, performance has a specific, usually brief, historical time frame, that is, it takes place and then it is over) but also alludes specifically to the relationship between the viewer and the work of art. The idea of a work of art independent of the viewer and especially that of the "disinterested" viewer is firmly rooted in traditional aesthetic discourse. These and other pairs of opposed terms are based on a series of related

concepts that are all intertwined. Thus viewer/work, interpreter/interpreted, and represented/representation are all related in the same way. Fried's text is so trenchant because it makes explicit these binary pairs of concepts within aesthetic practice. In this conceptual scheme the position of the viewer is clearly distinguished from the work; that is, it is seen as essentially passive and thus one of the key categories of modernist aesthetics. It is thus revealing that a series of postmodern counterproposals – theoretical or aesthetic – concentrate on the position of the viewer and emphasize the process-oriented character of the relation of viewer and work. Whereas Fried criticizes art that, in his view, abandons the ideal of modernism because it "includes the beholder," many of the *body-art* artists are consciously deconstructing the myth of the disinterested viewer. The moment at which the viewers of a performance become participants in it fundamentally changes the parameters of a more traditionally conceived aesthetics of reception that believes that the work can evoke different reactions but that can always maintain a clear distinction between the two parts. The reflections of those present are literally part of the performance. Thus not only are there various viewers who can perceive the work in different ways but the work cannot exist without them, or at least only in a fundamentally different way.

In the video performance *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* Jonas used various strategies to make these new parameters clear. It is seemingly paradoxical that in her video performances Jonas was primarily concerned with establishing distance. For example, the viewers were sometimes not in the same room as Jonas, and they viewed a video monitor with real-time images *from* the performance rather than the whole performance directly. But the distance thus established differs fundamentally from the sort Fried had in mind. This idea of presence is connected with the idea that the viewer ultimately plays a role in the significance, progression, and "meaning" of the artwork. And in the end one must speak of the work itself, which is, as we have seen, so closely connected to ideas of both artistic subjectivity and the subjectivity of the viewer. The experiments of artists since the sixties who, like Jonas, have introduced their own bodies into their work should be interpreted as undermining this concept of the artwork. The body of the artist takes the place of the (clearly delimited, self-contained) work. It is argued



Joan Semmel *Me Without Mirrors* (1994)

that they “appear [...] onstage solely with their bodies, which they use to occupy the place previously held by the work.”⁵ However, this formulation veils the fact that it is actually the *concept* of the work that is under debate. The point is not that the bodies of the artists take up the position that previously belonged to the work. That would merely mean that the body takes “what was once the meaning of the work upon itself,”⁶ and that it somehow does away with categories that were previously associated with the work.

In *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* Jonas created a kind of blank space in which is *no longer* the work but at the same time is *not yet* something else that could function as an alternative to what was. Because the live performance occurred simultaneously with its own recording and playback, *Organic Honey* made perception its theme: specifically, the perception of the viewer/participant. For the viewers, the performance was juxtaposed with the taped details that were shown simultaneously with the performance. The experiences garnered by means of this parallel vision of reality and representation are characterized not only by the simultaneity of the two visual experiences but also by their qualitative difference. Robert Pierce wrote in a review of *Organic Honey* from 1973: “The camera focuses our attention, allowing us subconsciously to block out our environment [...]” As a result, the experience of reality is ultimately suspended in the confrontation between the two visual experiences. The television image is experienced as “somehow more real than the original one.” Although it is possible today, as a result of

the widespread dissemination of digital image technology, for large numbers of people to see reality and (its) representation simultaneously, in the early seventies this was still an entirely new experience for the audience.

For the question under discussion – how the relationship between the viewers (who have long since ceased to be just viewers but are rather literally participants) and the work has changed – we can now provide a preliminary answer: Jonas took as her theme perception as a process in which the positions of the work and the viewer also change. Jonas wrote, “I am my own audience,” and one can add that the audience members are the work.⁷ The significance of this becomes clear in a sequence from *Organic Honey* in which a mirror where the viewers could see/reflect themselves was carried through the room. The artist's self-mirroring and the mirroring of the viewer were thus placed in direct juxtaposition. This juxtaposition or connection that reoccurred throughout the course of the performance functioned as a reminder of the changing “reflections” between the work of art and the viewer and of the contingency of both positions. Vision – the gaze – that constitutes the connection between the viewer and the performance is the theme: vision becomes visible.

In another context Peggy Phelan has written of the performative quality of all vision.⁸ This formulation also serves to remind us that vision is not passive absorption but a process that can neither be concluded nor entirely succeed. This is because even the direct view of the performance can only be a subjective one because each of the participants sees, in the strict sense, a different performance. In *Organic Honey* the viewers – their vision – become a part of the performance. It is *their* vision that is being presented. What once seemed to stand independent of the viewer as the work's meaning is now conceived as a gaze/reflection, that is to say, as performative, i.e., as the alternation between seeing and being-seen and thus between the position of the subject and the object.

Against the backdrop of the discrediting of “theatricality” as formulated by Fried, Jonas insists that the contingency of the artistic self be recognized. From a phenomenological perspective, we can thus conclude along similar lines: “Ultimately, the mirror says, Others have an image of me that I myself can never have; a part of me is, so to speak, in their hands.”⁹ The important aspect here is the transla-

tion of this insight into the artistic situation. In this context, "a part of me is in their hands" can only mean that the artistic process – specifically, performance – is made visible as the artistic self engaging with an other, with the public. In the performance, in the presentation of the self, the positions of two subjects are thus always dependent on each other. The artist presents her body and thus her "self" to be seen, and in this way Jonas makes this "offering up to be seen" a theme as an aesthetic category within her performance.

Mirror and Self

The mirror is – as was clear from the very beginning – not only a suitable means to present, in an artistic performance, the theme of the relationship of reality and representation and that of the viewer and the work but also plays a decisive role in making visible the creation and maintenance of the self. In *Mirror Check* the artist stood naked facing the audience at a distance of several yards. Using a small hand mirror she systematically inspected parts of her body. However, the mirror image could only be seen by her, not by the viewers, who could only see Jonas's reactions as she looked in the mirror. The continuing, repetitive movements as the mirror and her body change positions make it obvious that "self-knowledge" and thus the "self" have a performative character. Just as de Beauvoir said that the function of a woman's mirror has its effect "all her life," the duration of the performance enables us to see the gaze in the mirror not as a one-time glance that is subordinate to reality but as a part of that reality.

Mirror Check is, however, not simply an illustration of theories of identity in which the mirror occupies a central place. Rather, the work is interesting precisely because it must be understood as an aesthetic exploration that makes this status a theme of the performance and thus calls attention to itself *as a performance*. The introduction of the artist's body turns the gaze of the audience at the work into a gaze at the artist herself. What is unique about *Mirror Check* is that Jonas relates the mirroring of the gaze and its constitutive role in the formation of identity to the artistic exploration.

Consequently, the body of the artist plays a special role. The theme of the artist's own body – of the process of making it visible – is traditionally associated with a particular genre: the self-portrait. The use of the mirror, either as an indispensable requisite or as part of the portrayal itself (for example, in Ilse Bing's work), is a necessary precondition. In 1974 Joan Semmel painted *Me without Mirrors* (p.101). It testifies to the interest in the early seventies, among women artists in particular, in addressing the tradition of the self-portrait. The depiction of the "female self", which in this particular case is trying to get by without mirrors, alludes to the crossover between the gaze/vision and the representation of the female body as a traditional site of artistic and scientific investigation. This more intensive occupation with the self-portrait as a genre leads us to the conclusion that the reflection of the artist is first and foremost that of the male artist. This is because the self-portrait, too, must be understood as an expression of traditional images of the artist that are closely related to concepts of authorship and authority. These concepts, in turn, are "constituted in being delimited from what is considered masculine,"¹⁰ and thus they are (not) available to the female artist in a different way.

Jonas's interest in the mirror must therefore be contextualized in several respects. Her works are early examples of the problematization of the (self-)representation of the female body, which can be found as a theme in the work of other women artists. At a very early stage her work identified paradigmatically thematic areas that continue to be explored today in the experiments of other artists, for example, the connection between self-portrait, representation of the body, and construction of the "self". In *Mirror Check* the uniform repetition of gazing into the mirror and the systematic mirroring of specific parts of the body is a process that presents itself as temporally unique and not a fixed "image" that would provide the viewer with repeated visual access. Douglas Crimp has written of Jonas's works that "both performer and spectator are shown to be decentered, split."¹¹ He speaks of a crystallization of the self, which cannot be posited as the origin and vanishing point, neither for artists in general or the woman artist in particular nor for the work. In Jonas's works the mirror proves to be a metaphor for a self that is *not* reflected in the mirror but is independent of it in a fundamental way. The gaze (of artists, of the woman artist) points to the "deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) of the

subject within the structure of representation."¹²

With impressive rigor Jonas takes as her theme these circumstances and the sequence of "reflections" that are the basis of the structures of representation. For example, in *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* there is a sequence in which Jonas's *Organic Honey* tries to smash a mirror with a hammer. This attack on her own mirror image is seen simultaneously on the video monitor that is part of the performance. The aggression toward the mirror image (her own) should be seen as a depiction of the "violence of the gaze" with which every viewing subject is confronted in the field of representation: the gaze of the Other turns me into an object.

This violent act directed against the mirror image that Jonas presented in *Organic Honey* should not, however, be understood as an attempt at liberation or as a heroic gesture. Jonas works against such readings by introducing a parallel video monitor that functions as a live double, within the performance space, of the actions of the performance itself. The monitor/mirror cannot be destroyed by this attempt to eliminate the mirror image. That is to say, even this destruction that might otherwise be misunderstood as "liberation" is itself mediated by the medium, so it can never "succeed" fully. Jonas describes her interest in this necessary discrepancy between live performance and simultaneous representation as follows: "The audience sees in fact the process of image-making in a performance simultaneously with a live detail. I was interested in the discrepancies between the performed activity and the constant duplicating, changing, and altering of information in the video. The whole is a sequence of missing links as each witness experiences a different series by glancing from monitor to projection to live action."

Through the use of the mirror – more precisely, through the repeated gaze into the mirror in *Mirror Check* – Jonas evokes a topos of representation of the female body, which in turn takes as its themes both seeing and offering up to be seen. At the same time, she connects her interest with these topoi of representation with the related but hierarchically primary field of self-portraiture – and, as we have seen, with the mirror as metaphor for visual representation as a whole. By interweaving these various points of reference, her works refuse to be read in a way that would see them as explanations of specific theories.

At the same time, however, her works also indicate the theoretical contexts within which they should be seen. When Jonas in *Mirror Check* seems to dissect her body into the reflections of individual aspects, the "immobile, reflecting trap" has suddenly become mobile again in two senses. First, it liberates the static image of the woman embodying vanity and her gaze into the mirror as manifested in a mimetic depiction, because the viewers now see a "real" body that is moving in the same space that they are. Second, it fuses the gaze at the female body with the gaze of the artist herself; the latter gaze, however, is indeed a gaze at mirror images. The members of the audience, however, have no access to the mirror images that Jonas sees. It is not the reflecting body that can be seen in an act of being reflected which repeats itself. There remains a productive dis-illusion which reveals the illusions that underlie our gazes in the mirror/at ourselves and from which there is no escape.

1 Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis 1998

2 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Weiblichkeit und Repräsentation: Aus der Perspektive von Ästhetik, Semiotik und Psychoanalyse*, in: Hadumod Bußmann and Renate Hof (eds.), *Genus: Zur Geschlechterdifferenz in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Stuttgart 1995, p. 428

3 Teresa de Lauretis (ed.), *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, Theories of Contemporary Culture 8, Bloomington 1986, p. 12

4 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no. 10, 1967, p. 12–23
Reprinted in: idem, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago 1998, pp. 148–72

5 Hans Belting, *Das unsichtbare Meisterwerk: Die modernen Mythen der Kunst*, Munich 1998, p. 447

6 Ibid., p. 448

7 Joan Jonas with Rosalind Krauss, "Seven Years", in: *The Drama Review* 19, no. 1, March 1975, unpaginated

8 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London, New York 1993, S. 147

9 Thomas Fuchs, *Leib, Raum, Person: Entwurf einer phänomenologischen Anthropologie*, Stuttgart 2000, pp. 283–84

10 Silke Wenk, *Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit*, in: Silke Wenk and Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius (eds.), *Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert*, Marburg 1997, p. 24

11 Douglas Crimp, "De-Synchronization in Joan Jonas' Performances", in: *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968–1982*, (exh.cat. Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California; Eindhoven: Stedelijk Museum) 1983, p. 8

12 Sigrid Schade, *Cindy Sherman oder Die Kunst der Verkleidung*, in: Judith Conrad and Ursula Konnertz (eds.), *Weiblichkeit in der Moderne: Ansätze feministischer Vernunftkritik*, Tübingen 1986, p. 233