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Photographic Images of Women in a Postfeminist Generation

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Introduction

Images of women in art and the media have historically always emphasised their role as a sex object for men. The influence of feminism since the 1970s has challenged the acceptance of this kind of imagery and called for a recognition of female individuality and sexual autonomy. The emphasis on sexual freedom and equality has since often been used to stand in for a more general equality for women. Sexualised images of women are justified as representing women's newfound independence, equating beauty and sexual display with success. This thesis will examine how and why women are still represented in popular culture as sex-objects, to the exclusion of other attributes.

Chapter One will examine key feminist texts which address how femininity is socially constructed, and how it is represented in visual imagery. It will describe how several female artists have challenged these constructs and representations.

Chapter Two will focus on the work of a fashion photographer, Ellen Von Unwerth, to evaluate how she presents the image of the sex-object in her work. Von Unwerth specialises in highly sexualised fashion images of women, often presenting them in traditionally degraded roles, such as prostitutes and strippers. I want to ask why a female photographer would choose to concentrate on this type of imagery and whether the fact of her being a woman alters their meaning. I will also compare her work to that of Helmut Newton, a male photographer famous for a similar type of imagery.

Chapter Three will consider the work of another female photographer, Inez Van Lamsweerde. Her fashion photography is superficially similar to Von Unwerth's in the exaggerated sexualisation of female models, but differs in its ironic detachment from the genre. I will also look at several of Van Lamsweerde's personal photography projects to examine how she uses current techniques in fashion photography to seriously critique the models of beauty and gender which it dictates.

In conclusion, I want to show how the continued preoccupation with sexualised images of women - by women as well as men - can offer the potential to transcend the traditional meanings associated with such imagery. Fashion magazine images, as mass-circulation media, can play an important role in altering the way women are generally seen and understood.

Chapter One

The female form has been one of the dominant images throughout the history of Western Art. From Classical Greek Sculpture to Modernist painting, she appears, unimportant in herself, but crucial as a vessel for meaning in a phallogentric society. "By long habit, we do not judge it as a living organism, but as a design." (Clarke, 1956, p.4). As a form of art, 'it' – the nude or clothed female form – is a composition of the (assumed to be) male artist. She embodies his desires, and his superior power. Her connection with real female bodies is tenuous. In *The Nude*, Clarke mentions "the wish to perfect" and "the body re-formed", meaning a female body in the person of the model, to be "reformed" by the male artist through an idealised image called a work of art. As men (and women) have become used to looking at images of women "not as a living organism, but as a design", so women have become used to being looked at thus, and to checking that their appearance conforms as much as possible to the "design". John Berger states that "men act and women appear" (Berger, 1972, p.47), summarising the traditionally male attributes of activity and power (the Artist) and the traditionally female attributes of passivity and dependence (the Model). A woman can be 'modelled' and shaped by men. "Her presence...defines what can and cannot be done to her" (p.46). How she is seen by men determines the success of her life. This statement may seem excessive in a postfeminist society where women have access to education and paid work, yet women still identify with what Berger calls the "surveyor" and the "surveyed" within, whereby a woman is not only constantly aware of how she looks but is also

constantly aware of how others (especially men) see her.

At the same time that *The Nude* appeared, other writing which directly opposed such an attitude to women was beginning to emerge. Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, drew attention to the constructedness of traditional images of femininity - "against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless. If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behaviour of flesh-and- blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine." (Thesander, 1997, p.7). She compares women's social presence amongst men to "a ceremonial" where "each [man] offers as a gift to all the others, the spectacle of the female body that is his property". (De Beauvoir, 1953, p546).

Germaine Greer, a vocal presence in the renewed militancy of 1970s feminism, returns to the stereotype of the Eternal Feminine in *The Female Eunuch*, stating that "she is the sexual object sought by all men and by all women. She is of neither sex, for she has herself no sex at all. Her value is solely attested by the demand she excites in others. All she must contribute is her existence. She need achieve nothing, for she is the reward of achievement." (Greer, 1971, p.58). The use of the word 'eunuch' suggests the repression of female sexuality in preference for the excitation of male sexual desire, as well as its obvious connection with what Greer calls the 'castratedness' of the feminine – its representation as a lack of masculinity, rather than as something different to masculinity.

Conventional femininity suppresses and negates female desire, resulting in an intense focus on the supposedly inherent 'lack' which requires the masculine for completion.

As the women's movement developed from the 1970s onwards, the critique of the image of women portrayed by male-produced art and mass-media became an important part of the deconstruction of this phallogentric worldview. At the same time, any notions of an essential type of 'real' femininity was rejected. The voices of women from many varying backgrounds joined in the discourse, resulting in the concept of 'postfeminism', which recognises that there is no 'good' or 'bad' femininity but rather a multiplicity of feminine experiences, all valid. Several key texts offer a deeper analysis of the constructedness of femininity and of the purpose of cultural images of women. I want to examine these writings in relation to the work of some female artists who have used traditional images of femininity to critique the repressive effect of those images on women.

The earliest text to formulate the idea of femininity as a pretence or an artificial image, was psychoanalyst Joan Riviere's article, written in 1929. In "Womanliness as a Masquerade" she asserts that "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and retribution feared from men." (p.1). By a "wish for masculinity", Riviere means women who pursue a career and compete with men intellectually in the professional world. She analyses one of her own cases as a psychoanalyst, that of a professional woman who feels apprehensive after public performances speaking to an audience and seeks reassurance afterwards by flirting with

men, recognisable as father figures, who were present at the event. Riviere identifies that although the woman wants reassurance that her performance was a success, indirectly she is also seeking reassurance of her sexual attractiveness. Since, in psychoanalytical terms, the woman's public display of intellectual proficiency signifies possession of a penis which she has obtained through castration of the father, her anxiety is a dread of "the retribution the father would then exact". Unconsciously, the woman is afraid of the impotence associated with femininity, of being beaten by a man, and is, beneath the mask, either 'castrated' or 'seeking to castrate'. Rather than her 'womanliness' being used as "a primary mode of sexual enjoyment", she uses it "as a device for avoiding anxiety", (p.4). Riviere's use of the image of castration emphasises the identification of power with male attributes, and the woman's difficulty in displaying her 'unfeminine' power. She also refers to another woman who "has to treat the situation of displaying her masculinity to men as a 'game', as something *not real*, as a 'joke'... she cannot seriously contemplate herself as on equal terms with men," (p.5). Riviere concludes by asking "what is the essential nature of fully developed femininity?" (p.6).

The concept of the masquerade has been incorporated into the body of feminist theory as a key characteristic of femininity. Whether it hides real femininity or it *is* femininity is contested. As a postmodern, postfeminist device for engaging with and destabilising the dominant patriarchal society it is welcomed by many feminist writers and artists.

One artist who has notably employed the device of the masquerade both to expose and

1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that this is crucial for the company's financial health and for providing reliable information to stakeholders.

2. The second part of the document outlines the procedures for handling customer inquiries. It states that all inquiries should be handled promptly and professionally, with a focus on providing excellent customer service.

3. The third part of the document describes the process for managing inventory. It notes that inventory levels should be monitored closely to ensure that the company always has enough stock to meet customer demand.

4. The fourth part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining a clean and safe work environment. It states that all employees should follow the company's safety protocols and keep their work areas clean and organized.

5. The fifth part of the document outlines the process for handling complaints. It states that all complaints should be taken seriously and investigated thoroughly to determine the cause of the problem and to prevent it from happening again.

6. The sixth part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate financial records. It states that all financial transactions should be recorded accurately and promptly, and that the company's financial statements should be reviewed regularly.

7. The seventh part of the document outlines the process for managing human resources. It states that all employees should be hired, trained, and managed in accordance with the company's policies and procedures.

8. The eighth part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate legal records. It states that all legal documents should be kept in a secure and accessible location, and that the company should consult with legal counsel as needed.

9. The ninth part of the document outlines the process for managing the company's reputation. It states that the company should monitor its reputation closely and take steps to improve it if necessary.

10. The tenth part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate environmental records. It states that the company should monitor its environmental impact and take steps to reduce it if necessary.

to challenge the phallogentric construct of femininity, is Cindy Sherman. Her "*Untitled Film Stills*" of the late '70s and later photography of herself throughout the '80s, reproduce endless female 'types' reminiscent of women seen in films, except that each character is Sherman in disguise, photographed in a carefully constructed set, with costume, gesture and location all combining to suggest a moment in a story particular to that character (Fig.1). As we know that Sherman is both the creator of the image and the object in it, the traditional distinction between artist and model is broken. Also, since the object constantly changes appearance, we know it is only an image, a series of performances, not who Sherman really is. However, such is our association of the female image with the image of the sex object, that her work is easily reabsorbed into the traditional canons of art and interpreted as a sexual narrative. For example, *Untitled 93* (1981) (Fig.2), an image which Sherman conceives of as a woman who has woken up with a hangover after a night on the town, has been interpreted as the image of a rape victim. Her later work recognises this problem in its use of deliberately unattractive images of herself, and of artificial body parts in place of her own body. *Untitled, 175* (1987) (Fig.3) depicts a mess of half-eaten food fragments, with the artist's image a tiny reflection in a pair of sunglasses amongst the debris.

This calls to mind Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, that which does not "respect borders, positions, rules", that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva, 1982, p4) and her association of the maternal body - the monstrous feminine - with abjection. This theory arises out of psychoanalytical concepts of the male child's process of









separation from his mother and his ambivalence towards the “nurturing horror”(p.209) of her body. The blood, milk, bodily wastes, stretch marks and sagging flesh of the mother evoke the horror of a femininity that would engulf or pollute the man’s emerging masculinity, “and yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master”(p.2). Kristeva sees the potential of art as a means of purifying abjection, something which the more disturbing later images of Cindy Sherman address.

Laura Mulvey's text “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” also looks at the female image in the cinema in relation to the male viewer, identifying specific types of ‘pleasure’ experienced by the viewer, which could equally apply to photographic images of women in art and mass-media. Mulvey also uses the castration analogy, specifically men’s castration anxiety in relation to women. “The paradox of phallogentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world... it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence.”

The realisation of women’s difference does not focus on what she has that is different, but instead focuses on what she lacks, which the man has; “woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning,” (p.2). Mulvey outlines “a number of possible pleasures” offered by cinema

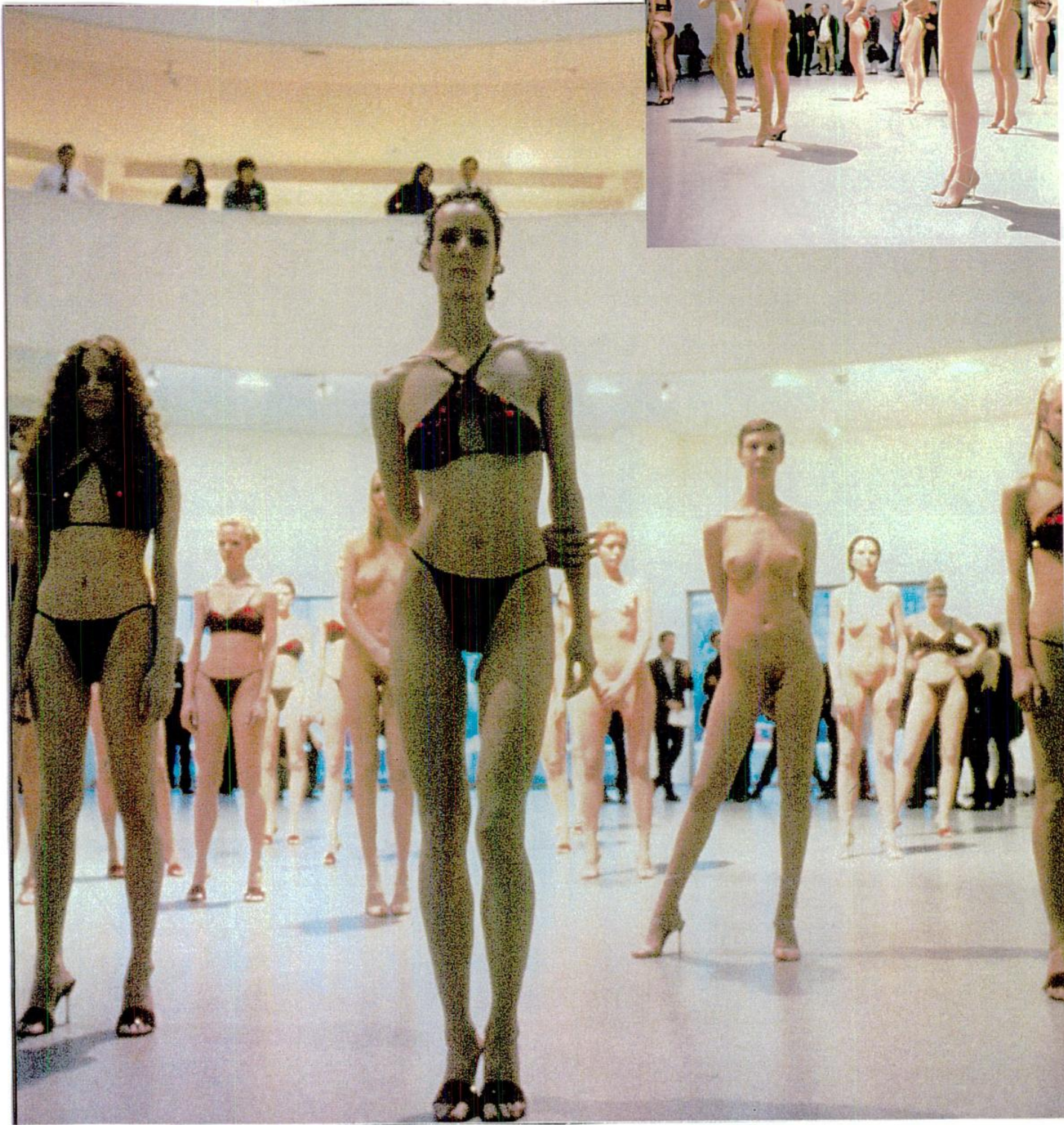
to the viewer, reducible to narcissism and voyeurism.

The voyeuristic experience is facilitated by the way in which the screen in the darkened cinema contains “a hermetically sealed world, which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy,”(p.4). Mulvey associates voyeurism with the libido and with the sadistic power to subject another person to the will, or to the gaze. Narcissism, alternatively, allows the viewer to identify with the image on the screen (a merging with instead of a separation from). She uses Lacan’s theory of the mirror phase – when a child first recognises itself in a mirror and imagines its mirror image to be more complete, and more perfect than its own body – to illustrate the mis-recognition of the image on the cinema screen as an ideal ego, a perfect superior self. Narcissism can become a masochistic experience, “hence is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image”(p.5).

The opposites of voyeurism and narcissism come together in the trauma of the castration complex which the image of woman in film represents for the male viewer. Since the female figure connotes sexual difference as well as sexual object, “the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (p.8). This castration anxiety can be subdued by “turning the represented figure itself into a fetish”, i.e. a substitute for the penis, so it is reassuring rather than dangerous. “Fetishistic scopophilia builds up the

physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself." The woman becomes the ultimate fetish, "a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look."(p.9)

This fetishised female figure reaches its ultimate conclusion in the figure of the fashion model, which has replaced the film star as the dominant 'role-model' for women, as portrayed in current mass-media imagery. Every woman, no matter what her occupation, is offered this image of female perfection as a goal. Vanessa Beecroft is a contemporary artist who has taken this image of visual perfection and has used it as a device to create performances in art galleries and museums. These performances involve the hiring of attractive women Beecroft finds on the street, who are then dressed in the same blonde wigs, (white)flesh-toned underwear and high-heeled shoes and are positioned in a group in the gallery space for people to look at (Fig.4). The women are not required to do anything except appear, and return the gaze of their viewers. While the artist's intention may be to confront the viewers with their voyeurism, again, as with Cindy Sherman's photographic performances, this may be interpreted as merely providing a pleasurable spectacle. A review of the piece (Christian Haye, 1998, p.53) exclaims that "the bourgeoisie are revelling in a retro foray into sleazy decadence" as "the Guggenheim's spiral was filled with art world denizens leering at Vanessa Beecroft's scantily and unclad models who returned the stares with attitude". This demonstrates how easily attempts to dislocate the image of woman as 'model' can be dismissed.



Much has been written about the position of the male viewer; what of the female viewer of images? Mary-Ann Doane, in *Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator*, asks “what is there to prevent [the woman] from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure?”(p.77) before answering immediately that the dynamic of male ‘looker’ and female ‘looked-at’ cannot be directly reversed.

Since the female spectator *is* the image- in the sense that the female character on screen appears only to be looked at whereas the male character conventionally is the one who ‘acts’ or carries the story forward by his actions – her desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism or auto-eroticism, where she identifies with the female image, becoming her own object of desire. She cannot look voyeuristically or fetishise the image of the woman. However, Doane does not address whether the image of the male hero can be appropriated to satisfy female desire, since his image is understood to be directed at the male viewer, as an ideal ego with which to identify. Instead, she quotes Mulvey’s *Afterthought on Visual Pleasure* which posits a “masculinisation of spectatorship” so that “for women... trans-sex identification is a habit that very easily becomes second nature” (p.80), resulting in a kind of transvestism, where women can easily put themselves in the position of the male viewer and see through his eyes.

Doane suggests the masquerade as women’s only means of holding their femininity at a distance. The masquerade, rather than becoming manlike to achieve distance from a depersonalising image of woman, involves “a realignment of femininity, the...simulation

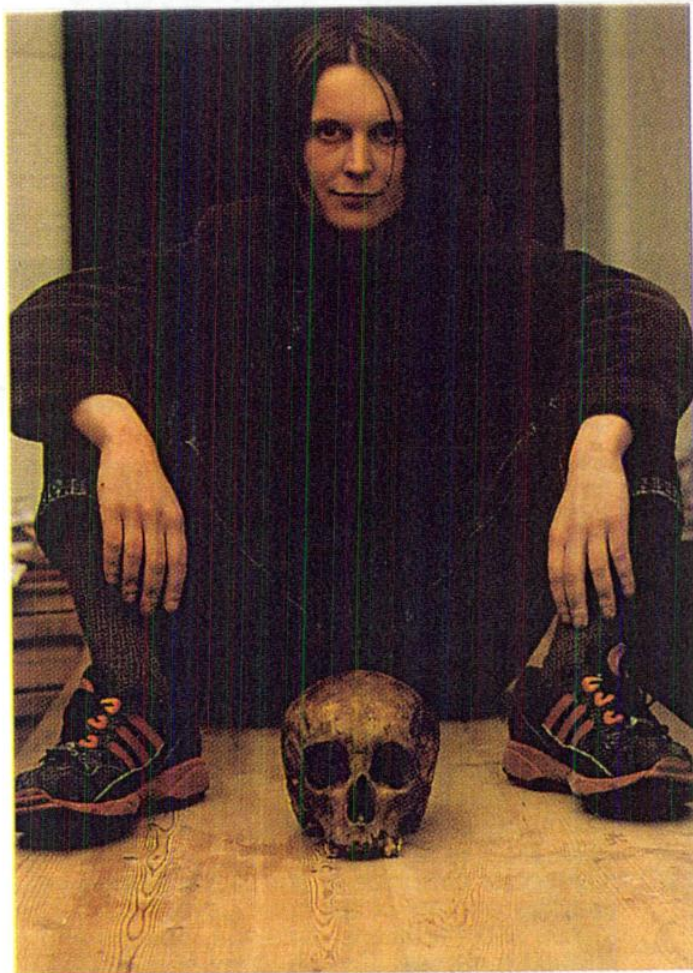
of the missing gap or distance”, so that the body of the woman becomes a disguise. This idea of simulation is very important to current feminist strategies, as it involves using the cultural heritage of femininity to undermine the traditional meanings associated with it, without provoking male hostility and without sacrificing the pleasures for women in masquerading.

Sarah Lucas is an artist who straightforwardly rejects the masquerade as a strategy, and whose work would instead be more readily associated with the concept of ‘trans-sex identification’ mentioned above. According to one reviewer, “you need balls to make art...if this is the case then Sarah Lucas certainly fits the bill”. (Carl Freedman, p.108, Parkett, 45, 1995.) In her practise, she assumes a male stance, presenting crude arrangements of mundane objects (*Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992) (Fig.5), *Au Naturel* (1994), *Bitch* (1995).) to suggest the female body at its basest level. Her collages, drawn from Page 3 photos in the British tabloid press, depict crowds of anonymous topless models, juxtaposed with contradictory text (*Great Dates* (1990-1991) (Fig.6), *Laid in Japan* (1991), *Chuffing away to Oblivion*). These images are confrontational in their rough, basic construction, representing a defiant and alienated attitude from the artist. Lucas’s own appearance is usually described in reviews as masculine and the unapologetic aggression of her imagery as being male. Her self-portrait photographs, unlike Sherman, do not involve a recognisably feminine disguise; instead she appears ‘as herself’, often in poses which are interpreted as mimicking masculine behaviour, “her...ultra-manly countenance”(Collier Schorr, *Parkett*, no45, 1995, p.96) as in the advertisement for her 1994 exhibition at the White Cube gallery, London. (Fig.7) More recent self-portraits upset this ‘masculine’ reading, with images of









the abjection of femininity (advertisement for The Old In Out exhibition, September, 1998) and of mortality (her steady gaze and enclosing legs in *Self Portrait with Skull*, 1997) (Fig.8). Lucas collapses the narrow and exclusive definitions of 'masculine' and 'feminine', as well as exposing the degraded image of women in society, what she calls "the constant innuendo" aimed at women in daily life. Her work approaches the possibility of a more inclusive individual, containing both 'masculine' and 'feminine', negative and positive attributes.

It is interesting to note how much of feminist writing has been concerned with the constructs of 'female' image and 'male' creator/viewer of image, using terms like 'the gaze', 'the masquerade', 'castration', which consolidate in language what feminism is supposed to undo – the image of woman as subject to male control. The necessity of exposing the social constructedness of these concepts is crucial, but for feminist thinking to progress as a positive force for women, some consideration of what women actually are, or can be, rather than what we are not, is also needed.

The French feminist Helene Cixous, in her influential essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", envisages a 'feminine writing' different to what she sees as the dominant 'male' language of most male and female writers. "By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display,"(p.250). She emphasises that "woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history –by her own movement", first "to break up, to destroy" and then "to project", (p.245). She acknowledges that there is "no one typical woman" and insists "write yourself. Your body must be heard." (p.250). She

asks “ wouldn’t the worst be, isn’t the worst, in truth, that women aren’t castrated?” (p.255). She asserts that “woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man” and that “it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within’, to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it,” (p.257). She imagines woman as “a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble” finding eventually “not her sum but her differences”. (p.264).

Artists such as Cindy Sherman, Vanessa Beecroft and Sarah Lucas attempt to “dislocate this ‘within’”, conscious of the risk that it will be reincorporated into the “discourse of man” but determined to reflect back the gaze of the male spectator, confronting him with the artificiality of his creation, while also reminding us of the multiplicity of female experience, which is not reducible to one “other” image, different to man's version.

Chapter Two

Ellen Von Unwerth is a commercially successful, contemporary fashion photographer whose work appears in well known magazines such as *Vogue*, *Elle* and *The Face*. She has also shot successful advertising campaigns for products like Wonderbra and Guess? Jeans. The selling point of Von Unwerth's work is its sexually provocative glamour. Her frequent use of semi-clad, blonde, curvaceous models has drawn comparisons with the work of Helmut Newton, whose work focuses on women as sex objects, often in sadomasochistic and pornographic situations. However, Von Unwerth does not consider her own, or Newton's work, to be sexist or offensive to women.

This chapter will consider examples of her work in magazines in relation to traditional representations of women in art and popular media. I will also compare some of her work to that of Helmut Newton, asking whether her position as a woman makes her imagery different to, or better than similar work by male photographers. Von Unwerth herself says "I do get criticism, but not as much as, say, Helmut Newton, because people excuse me on the grounds that I am a woman," (Smith, 1996, pp.16-19). Does the fact that the photographer is a woman change the meaning of the image - even if it appears to be the same - or is such an image of a woman equally sexist, whether created by a male or a female photographer?

Many of Ellen Von Unwerth's photographs have appeared in *Vogue* magazine, a

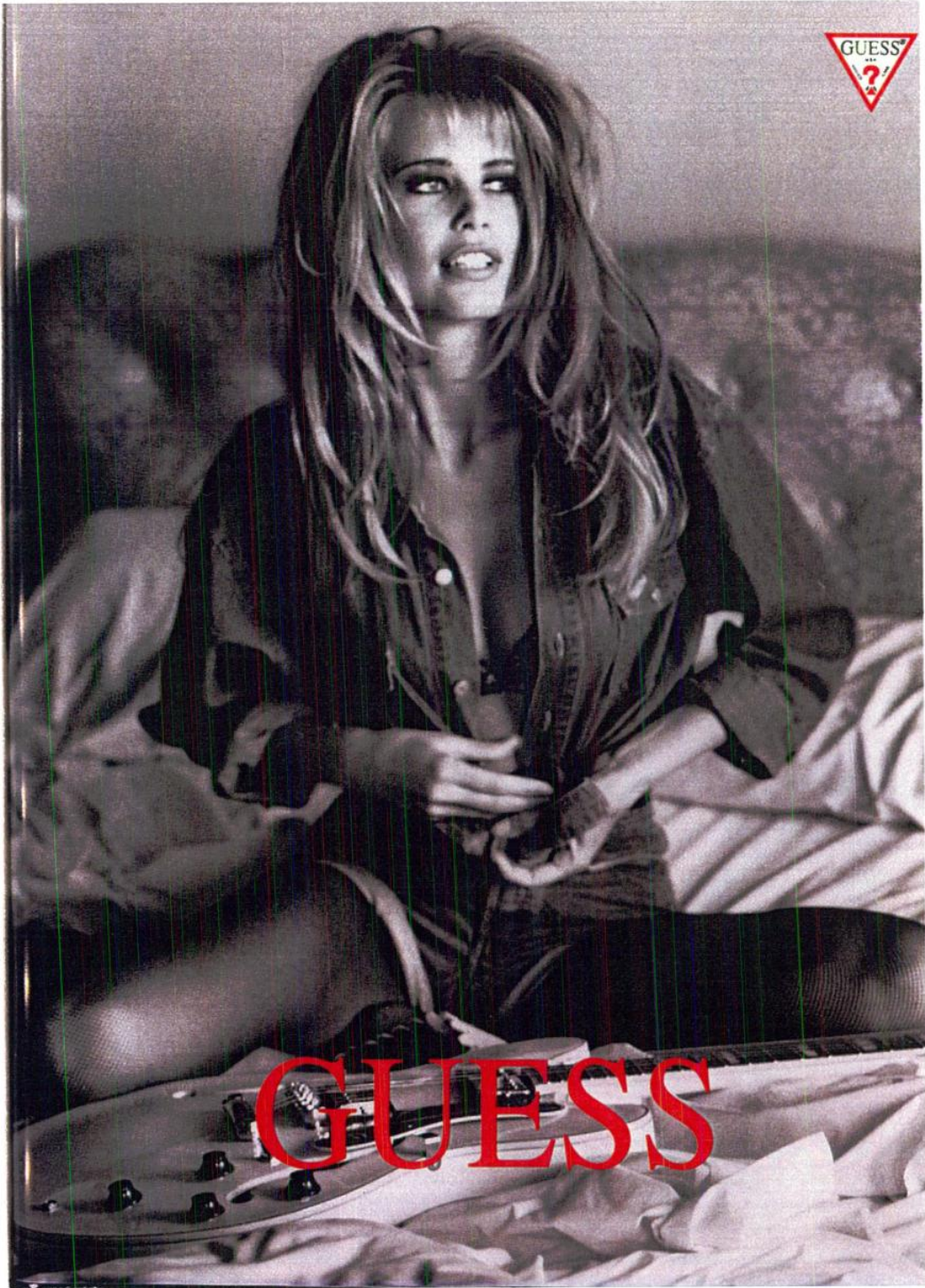
publication which prides itself on being in the vanguard of fashion photography: "in its constant surge forwards, it has acquired an unequalled cargo of valuable visual freight", (Lieberman, quoted by Devlin, 1994, p.18.) The metaphor used reinforces the status of the fashion image as a commodity to be sold. Lieberman praises *Vogue's* "historical importance...that illustrates and makes visible our yearning for roots in an attractive past". Whether this "yearning" really exists or is manufactured by the advertisers on whom magazines depend, is debatable. A recent article in *Vogue* (Spike, 1994, p.41) celebrates the lasting appeal of the "bombshell": "in the annals of feminine beauty, a bombshell is the archetypal objet de desir .. with flawless skin, luxuriant hair, swelling bosom, rounded thigh, elegant cheekbone, tapered calf". Numerous models and actresses are listed as examples of the "type" that "sends a shockwave through a man's body, bypassing his heart of mind, to quake the foundations of his courage". This dramatic language suggests that any woman with such an appearance is guaranteed to have a devastating effect on men and, by implication, a better life. As a type, the blonde bombshell constantly reoccurs as a symbol of voluptuous womanhood to counter the equally recurring fashion for skinny, underdeveloped models (eg. Twiggy in the '60s, Kate Moss in the '90s).

Most of Von Unwerth's favorite models fall into the "blonde bombshell" category; notably Claudia Schiffer, Eva Herzigova and Nadja Auermann. She helped to launch Herzigova's career with her photographs for Wonderbra in 1994, and raised the profile of Claudia Schiffer in America with her photos for Guess? Jeans in American *Vogue* in

1993. Both series of photographs play on the associations of the "blonde bombshell" for both women and men. Bringing to mind the "transvestism" of the female viewer mentioned earlier, these images superficially resemble the kind of shots to be found in men's soft-porn magazines. However, they are found in women's magazines and are aimed at female consumers. The only explanation for this is that such brashly sexualised images are still influential amongst women as being desirable and powerful images to emulate.

In the first, famous Wonderbra ad (Fig.9), Eva Herzigova appeared on huge billboards, as well as in magazines, in just her underwear, smiling delightedly as she looked down at the uplifting effect of her Wonderbra. Beside the photo is the caption "Hello Boys". This ad generated a huge amount of publicity and mixed opinion when it first appeared. Feminists called it sexist and demeaning to women. Men loved it. Nobody called into question the fact that it was created by a woman, or what the implications of that are - namely that the vast majority of women identify with such images, openly or not, and like the idea of being such a desirable woman. The fact that sales of Wonderbras subsequently rocketed suggests that women still are very susceptible to these images of femininity, regarding them as role-models. The perpetuation of such stereotypical images of women could be read as a cynical exploitation by Von Unwerth, knowing that the image of a blonde, beautiful young woman with prominently displayed breasts would be guaranteed attention and, hence, increased sales for the product. More importantly, the cheeky caption and the smiling face of the model upset the usually passive role of the









GUESS
BY
GEORGES MARCIANO

sex-object. This is an assertive, humorous display of sexuality, actively directed at men, in a confident and playful spirit. It exudes a youthful enthusiasm, and irreverence for the fossilised realm of the "bombshell".

The images of Claudia Schiffer for Guess? Jeans (Fig.10) again use stereotypical poses and styling, familiar from Hollywood pin-ups and Playboy-style soft porn. Although Schiffer's body is not exposed, the photographs are contrived to suggest that she is dressing or undressing, "justifying" the glimpse of her bra. Dressed casually, with tousled hair and natural looking make-up, Schiffer is styled to evoke the wholesome sexuality of the all-American girl. Her undone denim shirt and provocatively stretched apart bare legs give a strongly sexual flavour to her contrived innocence. This image is in marked contrast to another of the Guess? Ads which features American celebrity Anna Nicole Smith, posed and dressed in the expensive and obviously artificial style of a '50s filmstar (Fig.11). Her upstretched arms and hard, unsmiling stare off-centre, epitomise a different brand of blonde sexual object, which makes the image of Claudia Schiffer look spontaneous and "real", even though it is just as carefully contrived. The fact that Smith gained notoriety for snaring an elderly billionaire with her obvious attractions, illustrates the reality of attitudes towards women who too blatantly exploit their sexual currency.

It is her reputation for portraying female sexuality as spontaneous and autonomous that makes Von Unwerth's fashion photography so attractive to the readers and creators of women's fashion magazines. It creates an aspirational image of glamorous, sexy femininity, which appeals to a generation of women who have grown up since the

women's movement of the '70s, taking for granted the rights which had to be fought for by others. In this postfeminist context, provocative sexual displays can be read as empowering and celebratory of female pleasure, rather than simply pandering to male fantasies. The image, any image, can be recognised as just that; an appearance or "masquerade" which is not to be taken as reflecting all that the woman concerned is. Since the postfeminist woman has other choices in life, and does not have to be a sexual object, so this image becomes something that, in theory at least, can be played with or discarded at will.

"The truly resistant female body is not the body that wages war against feminine sexualisation and objectification but the body...that 'uses simulation strategically in ways that challenge the stable notion of gender as the edifice of sexual difference.'" (Schwichtenberg, 1993, in Brooks, 1997, p.157). This "simulation" engages with the products of the mainstream culture, examining and deconstructing them, rather than ignoring them in favour of a different image that would leave the stereotypes unchallenged and intact. Whether it is Von Unwerth's intention to do any such thing is unlikely. As an ex-model, she identifies with the idealised world of the fashion image and finds nothing oppressive in women's exploitation of their attractiveness for their own gain. Her images have a joyful tone which emphasises the model's own pleasure and confidence. In this, at least, she subverts the usual passivity of the sex object, and invites the identification of the female viewer with the model's attitude, if not her physical beauty. This identification does not have to be narcissistic, although the context of the

1. The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

2. The second part of the report deals with the financial situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

3. The third part of the report deals with the social situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

4. The fourth part of the report deals with the educational situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

5. The fifth part of the report deals with the health situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

6. The sixth part of the report deals with the economic situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

7. The seventh part of the report deals with the political situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

8. The eighth part of the report deals with the cultural situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

9. The ninth part of the report deals with the scientific situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

10. The tenth part of the report deals with the legal situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

11. The eleventh part of the report deals with the administrative situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

12. The twelfth part of the report deals with the military situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

13. The thirteenth part of the report deals with the foreign relations of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

14. The fourteenth part of the report deals with the internal security of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

15. The fifteenth part of the report deals with the environment of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various committees and the work of the different departments.

fashion magazine encourages it to be so. In a small way, female sexual pleasure is recognised, while still remaining within the constraints demanded by conventional fashion photography i.e. that the model be impossibly beautiful, thus associating sex with beauty, and beauty with hard work and effort (diet, exercise etc.).

Current thinking in the area of cultural studies defines popular culture as a social "zone of contestation", examining "not how people are in a passively inherited culture...but what they do with the cultural commodities that they encounter and use in everyday life.. and thus what they make as 'culture'", (Brooks, 1997, p.142). This allows for the possibility of taking what appeals from the imagery in magazines, and rejecting what doesn't, acknowledging the reader's ability to choose and assemble her own image(s). Women are used to the process of extracting positive interpretations from the often negative, stereotyped imagery of themselves found everywhere in popular culture. The women's fashion magazine, as one of the few media products which takes women's interests seriously, "takes on a burden of significance and responsibility - that would otherwise be spread over half the 'serious' periodicals on the market." (Wolf, 1990, p73). As such, fashion models become role-models, and the pressure to emulate them distracts women from devoting their energies to more important ends. This is not to say that all women succumb to the 'beauty myth', many do not, but an attractive (to men) appearance is still more of an asset to a woman than a man, and is still considered a necessary part of a 'feminine' appearance. Women's magazines deliberately concentrate on this obsession with appearances, in order to sell the products of their advertisers. A delicate balance is

maintained between the illusions sold in the glossy adverts and editorial photography, and the articles in between which may advocate a more assertive, independent femininity and deal with issues of real importance to women. Since magazines like *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Marie-Claire* etc. are dependent on their advertisers for their survival, they avoid articles which would jeopardise sales of advertised products. This limits the range of such magazines, giving a false reflection of women's lived experiences and interests, and relies on the reader's discernment to separate what is advertising patter and what is worthy of serious attention.

The pages and pages in women's magazines devoted to fashion spreads create the illusion of a choice of images and styles of dress available to the female reader. In reality, the choice is not so wide; all of the models are tall, thin, young with symmetrical features and clear, usually white, skin. Other real-life 'models' of female appearance do not see themselves reflected in magazine imagery. Often using exotic or luxurious locations, or the glamorisation and sexualisation of mundane situations, these images appeal to the fantasies of escape and excitement in the reader. Ellen Von Unwerth excels at such imagery, concocting sexy fantasy lives from mundane or even degrading female situations. Her spread, featuring 'supermodel' Linda Evangelista, in American *Vogue* (August 1994, pp.220-227) sexualises the image of the office worker, with long, sheer-stockinged legs stretched out on her desk, pointed black stiletto heels on her feet, triumphantly stretching her arms (Fig.12). In the next image, she leans provocatively against the desk, breast bursting from her 'serious' business suit, skirt bunched up, and

Designers are making fall headlines by giving a stylish edge to the staple of the working woman's wardrobe. The news: to-the-knee skirts cut into feminine A-lines and paired with curve-conscious, fitted jackets to form suits chic enough for a modern-day Lois Lane.

Photographed by Ellen Von Unwerth

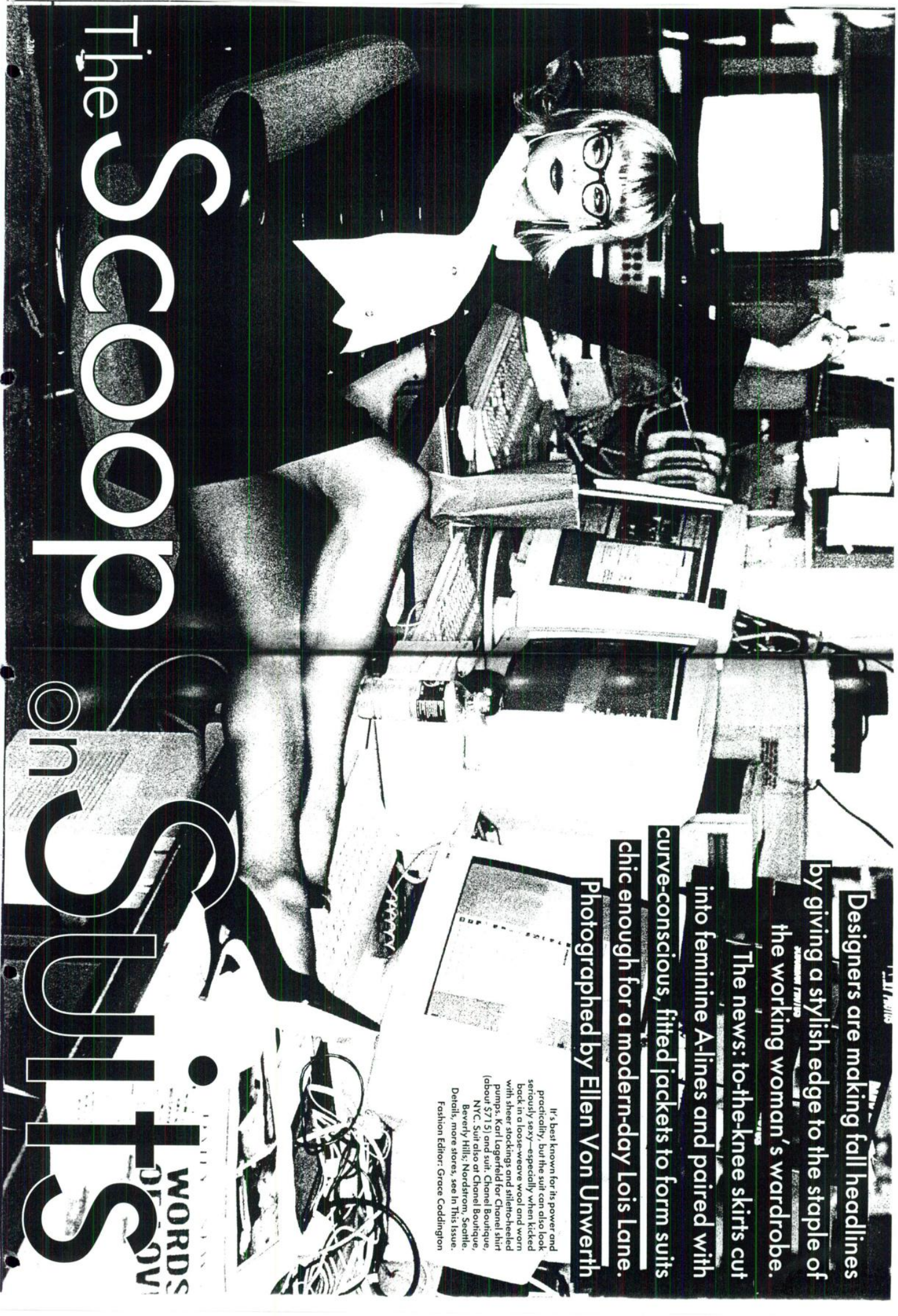
It's best known for its power and practicality, but the suit can also look seriously sexy—especially when kicked back in a loose-weave wool and worn with sheer stockings and stiletto-heeled pumps. Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel shirt (about \$715) and suit, Chanel Boutique, NYC. Suit also at Chanel Boutique, Beverly Hills; Nordstrom, Seattle. Details, more stores, see in this issue.

Fashion Editor: Grace Coddington

The Scoop

on Suits

WORDS BY JENNIFER



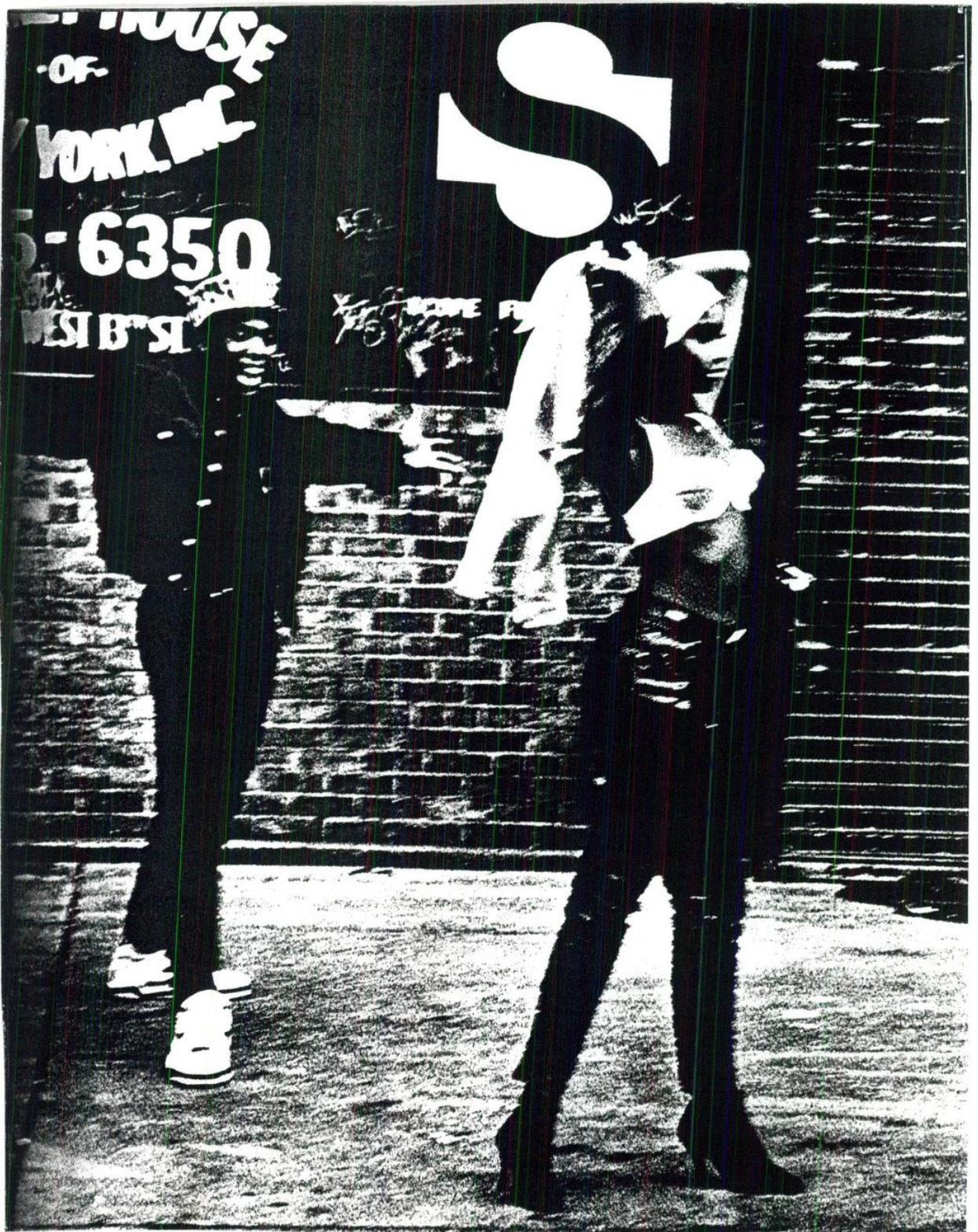


Thought-provoking style:
The constructed, double-breasted jacket in a fluid fabrication dispels the suit's too-serious image. Donna Karan New York jacket (about \$1,400) and skirt (about \$450). Bergdorf Goodman; Saks Fifth Avenue, NYC; Nordstrom, Sacramento. In this story: hair, Ward; makeup, Mary Greenwell. Details, see In This Issue.

pen suggestively poised at her mouth (Fig.13). These photos, in a practical commercial sense, liven up the usual dreary array of conservative office outfits, but in a symbolic sense demean the value of female workers. Von Unwerth often uses situations suggestive of prostitution in her work (Fig. 14), where women line up in seedy interiors, as if waiting for customers, or strut their stuff in strip-clubs and on the street (Fig.15). This glamorisation of the sex worker reduces women to their sexual role, a masochistic, degraded version of that role. The model - as - prostitute exaggerates women's identification with the passive sex-object role, while disguising it as a powerful and pleasurable position to be in. It is this type of work which has led to comparisons with Helmut Newton, yet there is a clear difference in the way these two photographers depict the 'sex-object'.

Helmut Newton's work dominated 1970s fashion photography, a time, also, of militant feminism. His sexualised images of women could be seen as an aggressive reaction to the demands for social equality by feminists of the day; yet in his opinion, they are not anti-women. Indeed, his wife is closely involved in the styling of his work, encouraging him to shoot pornography. A recent profile in *The Observer* (Barber,1998, pp.6-13) -written by a woman - celebrates "the beauty and strangeness and sheer obsessive vitality of his vision." His models, when they are dressed, appear in elegant, tailored dresses and suits (Fig.16). Their expressions are severe and aloof, their poses highly stylised and often pornographic (Fig.17). The body of the model is objectified in fetishistic detail. His 'type' has a statuesque, Germanic beauty, with large breasts and well-developed









bodies. He does not like to photograph 'waif' type models. Photographs from the '70s, such as *Saddle 1* (1976) (Fig.18) - a woman on a bed, crouched on all fours with a horse's saddle on her back - and *Bergstrom over Paris* (1976) (Fig.19) - a nude woman stretched out on a bed looking at herself in a mirror, with the city stretched out below, through the large window - are overly voyeuristic and depict the model as passive and exhibitionist, despite her expressions of contempt. Newton claims that this work is "a document of how a certain woman of a certain class lives - or how I would like her to live." (Barber, 1998, p.11). This indicates that he would like women to live as motionless sex objects, compliant with his voyeuristic fantasies. His photographs are quite cold and distant, perfecting the 'look' of the sexualised female body in quite a harsh, confrontational way, while refusing any contact, any implication of sexual engagement with the woman.

A photograph which appears in his book of collected photos, *White Women*, shows two nude female bodies, one crouched, one sprawled, beside a pool (Fig.20). The lighting suggests glaring, hot midday sun. In the background a garden hose snakes along the ground. Neither of the models' faces are visible. A similar situation in the hands of Ellen Von Unwerth shows two models, heads cropped, in bikini tops, tiny shorts and high-heels, in a tiled area, one holding a toy bucket, the other pouring water from a hose into it (Fig.21). Whereas in Newton's image the models are anonymous, almost lifeless bodies to be pored over, in Von Unwerth's image there is a mischievous sense of humour between the two models, and a more spontaneous feel to the styling of the image. The background is cluttered and colorful, the clothes are funky and 'lived in'. Helmut









Lean and Leggy

Another scene from summer's leg-and-midriff show, made possible by a muscle-toning and defining regimen. LEFT: Marc Jacobs for Perry Ellis silk bra top (about \$95) and shorts (about \$105). Bloomingdale's. RIGHT: GapKids T-shirt, about \$11. GapKids stores. Betsey Johnson short shorts, about \$54. Betsey Johnson stores.

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Newton's images, in contrast, are rigorously composed. His poolside, like his interiors, is bare, minimal and reduced to a few blocks of color. The models' poses look unnaturally awkward. Even the hose in the background looks strategically positioned. While Von Unwerth's images are often blurred, showing bodies in motion (Fig.22), Newton's are always sharply focussed and precisely composed (Fig.23). As Newton is a man, his image of women has to be different to Von Unwerth's, even if they both choose to create sexualised images which draw on established stylistic conventions. Von Unwerth brings a more tactile, sensual quality to the image of the 'sex-object', especially in her exuberant use of colour, pattern and movement. Her groups of women interact with each other, laughing and fooling around (Fig.24). Newton's women, even together, are isolated and emotionally detached (Fig.25). Both photographers prefer strong, sexually confident models, but interpret how that image looks, differently. For example, Von Unwerth's images of actresses Drew Barrymore and Sharon Stone (Figs.26, 27) play up the 'femme fatale', 'blonde bombshell' image, but in a relaxed, untidy way. Hair is a mess, clothes are askew, yet they return the gaze of the camera with personality and sex-appeal. Newton's models, even when named, do not express individuality. They become interchangeable, serving the vision of the artist. While Von Unwerth also confines her imagery to a recognisable 'type' of woman and situation, which projects sexual appeal above all else, she does so in a less remote, voyeuristic, way. There is a complicity between her and the model which does not exist between a male photographer and female model. While the model/photographer relationship is often compared to a sexual relationship (see photo of photographer Mario Testino and Madonna, Fig.28) with photographers describing the



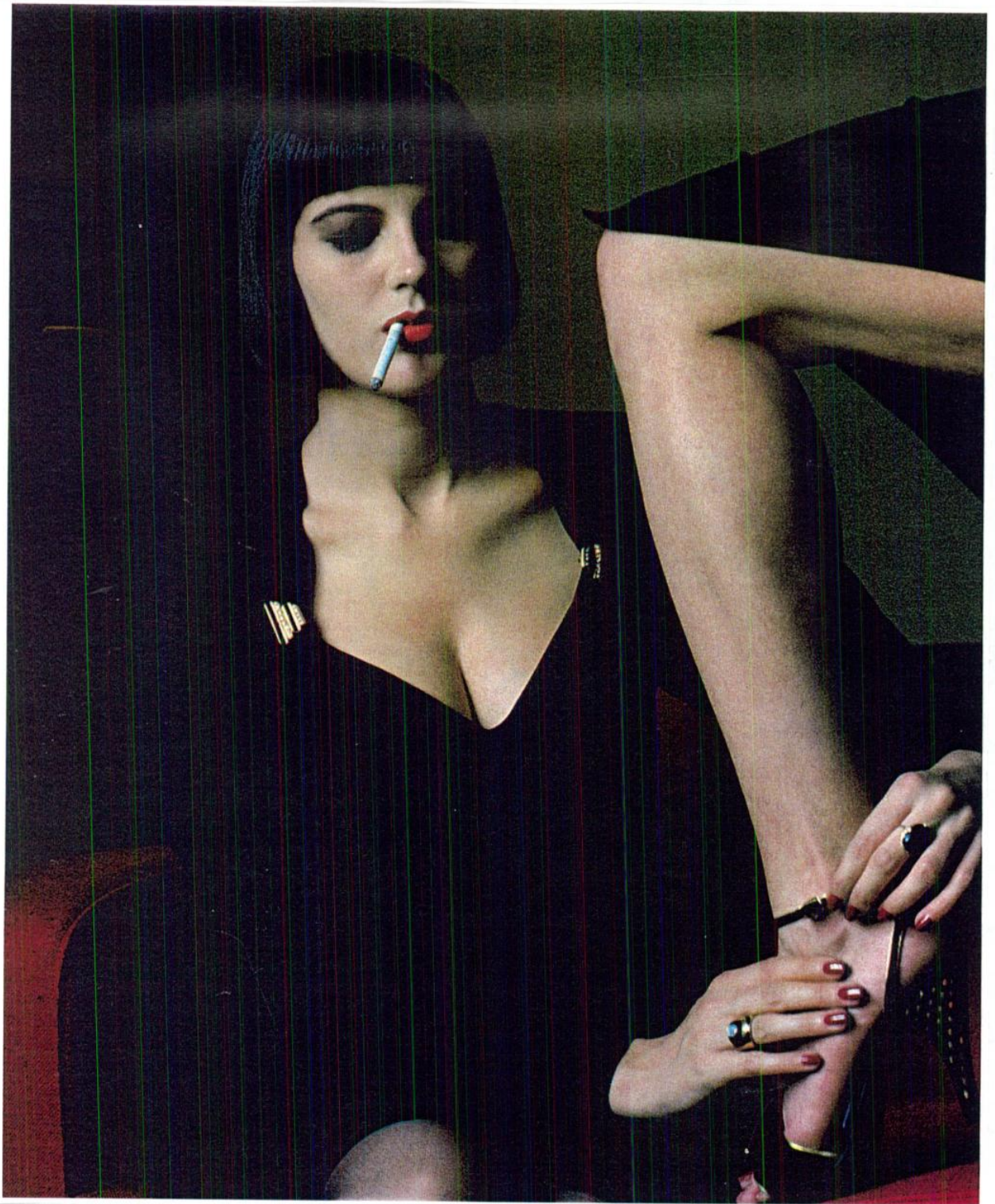


Beauty and the beach



Hot Numbers

Flower children for the summer of '93. Tropical color and blooming prints give simple shapes—an A-line dress, a carved-out bikini—a lift. Alpana Bawa dress, about \$110. Style Swami, NYC; Mac, San Francisco. Eres Paris bikini, about \$158. Galleries Lafayette New York.





Barrymore in a pure Hollywood guise, THIS PAGE: A lace-and-feather wrap top and satin pants styled à la Marilyn Monroe. Top (about \$172) and pants (about \$207) by Anna Sui. Anna Sui Downtown, NYC; Les Habitudes, Los Angeles.

OPPOSITE PAGE: More playacting—on Coney Island's deserted beach, the actress shows off her free-spirited signature style in a men's trench, a little ribbed top and shorts, and her own combat boots. Emporio Armani trench, about \$615. Emporio Armani, NYC, Boston, San Francisco. Liza Bruce top (about \$125) and shorts (about \$105). Barneys New York; Caron Cherry, Bal Harbour FL; Fred Segal Feeling, Santa Monica. Details, more stores, see In This Issue.

Fashion Editor: Grace Coddington



After sashaying down the spring runway for Valentino—her acknowledge “glamour master”—Stone escapes the frenzy of fashion week (and the attendant mob scenes) in her suite at the Ritz. She’s right at home, though, wearing the designer’s lingerie-inspired evening dress in siren red. Valentino Boutique, NYC, Beverly Hills. Details, see In This Issue.

Fashion Editor:
Carlyne Cerf de Dudzele

people are talking about

photography

madonna & mario

What happens when the celebrated photographer of Any Objections? is interviewed by one of his most celebrated subjects? Ask MADONNA and MARIO TESTINO

UP CLOSE AND
PERSONAL:
PHOTOGRAPHER
MARIO TESTINO
AND MADONNA

m

Madonna: What inspired you to publish this book? Was it an idea that you've been working on?

Testino: Well, I started working on a book of nudes because I had no work. I mean, I went through a period when nobody wanted me. All the publishers said *no, no, no*. You know, you go to any bookstore and there are a hundred nude books and the public goes, "Oh, another nude book." So we finally hit upon the idea of a book inspired by a portfolio I did for a magazine called *Dutch*. That portfolio, like the book, is a juxtaposition of images that "talk" to one another. Basically I see *Any Objections?* as being the view of a South American boy, properly raised, documenting the wildness around him.

M: Do you consider yourself a very spiritual person?

T: Yes, I'm religious in my own way, and I think that religion has a lot

to do with your spirituality, no?

M: Well, you're Latin.

T: Yeah. I don't go to church. I don't do a lot of things that probably a good Catholic should.

M: But Catholics should be bad.

T: Catholicism has a sense of morals and of values that I learned as a kid, and that I have applied to my life. And my main thing in life is "Don't do to others what you wouldn't like them to do unto you." And I live by that.

M: Do you think that artists have the responsibility to inspire, educate, or elevate their audience?

T: I think that they do. I think that as a photographer I also have an obligation of documentary. I respect

photography • 224

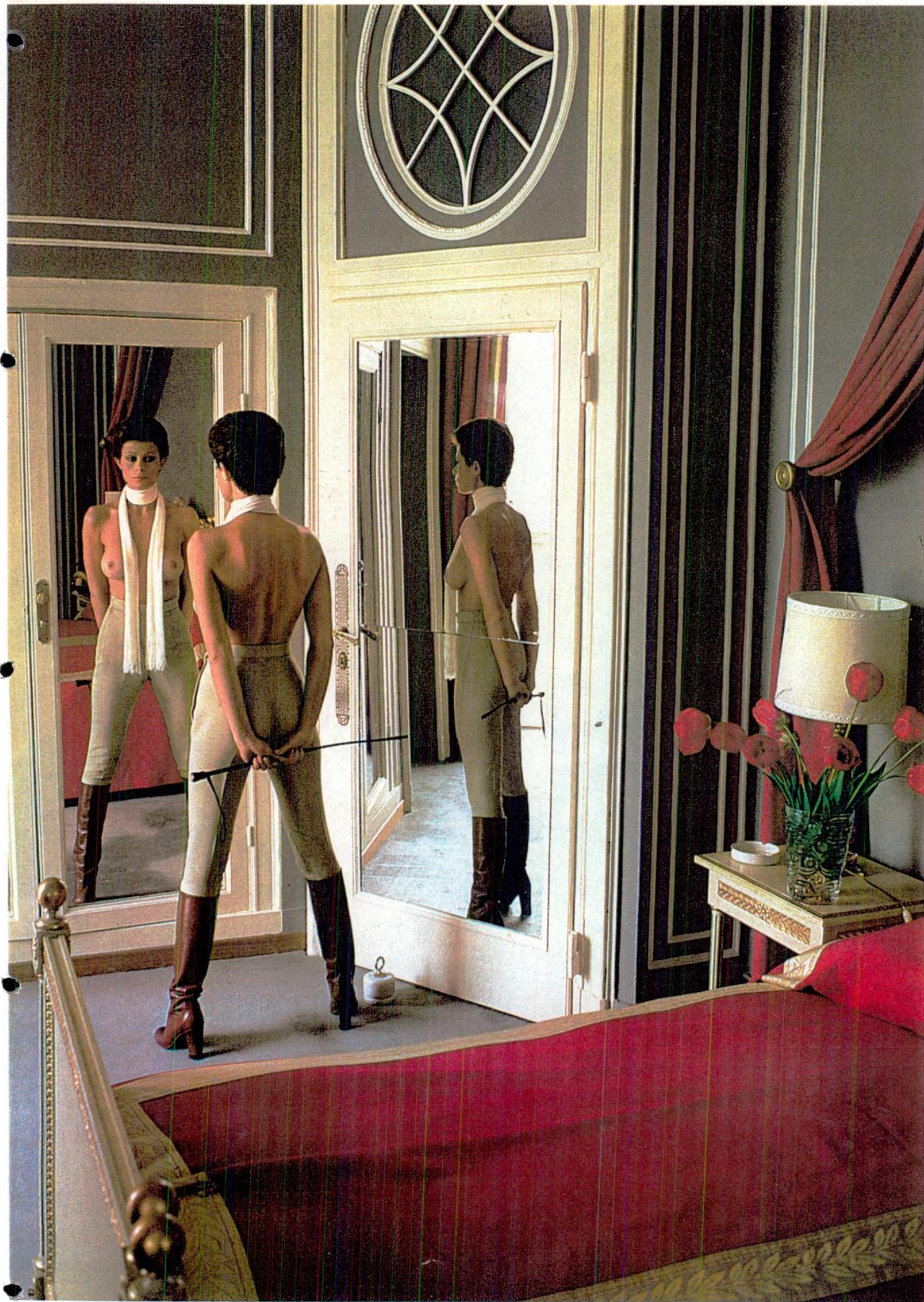
'chemistry' between them and certain models, with a female photographer this relationship is different. As Von Unwerth is also 'one of the girls', so her photographs offer a view from the model's perspective, having fun with the 'sex-object' role, exaggerating it, emphasising its positive aspect, and playing with its aesthetic possibilities. While the models are iconic and exceptional in physical form, far removed from ordinary women, there is no suggestion from Von Unwerth that this is how women are. Despite the fact that her vision of female beauty and power is dependent on such an explicitly sexual physical display, her work also offers the possibility of transcending the negative associations of such imagery, to revel in the pleasure of being a beautiful woman.

Both photographers have elements of sadomasochism in their work. In the case of Ellen Von Unwerth, women are seen 'dominating' men, but in a humorous, slightly ridiculous way. For example, *Antonio and Friends* (Fig.29) shows many women's legs wearing high-heeled shoes tentatively stepping on a man in swimming trunks who is lying on the floor, laughing. *Darrick and Dancer* shows a man's face looking upwards, smiling, at the long legs of a stripper who appears to be looming over him. In *Karen and Robert John Burke* (Fig.30) a woman in black bra, knickers, stockings and gloves stands over a man lying on a bed, dangling a bow-tie at his open mouth. These images call to mind Joan Riviere's case of the woman who could not take her own 'masculinity' seriously. There is nothing remotely threatening or dangerous about these simulations of sadomasochism and fetishism, which is what makes them funny. In contrast, Newton's









topless model with whip gazes at herself in a double mirror, the implied violence reflected back at herself (Fig.31).

It is difficult to decide which, if either, of these photographers is offensive to women. At a superficial glance, both reproduce the familiar, dehumanised, sexually 'powerful' female model. Her body is arranged and displayed to satisfy male sexual desire. His 'controlling gaze' defines how she will appear. Yet, on closer viewing, the work becomes less about sex and more about how women can be depicted 'powerfully', which paradoxically, is as a sex-object, the role traditionally offering women the most power. This sexual aspect is exaggerated by Von Unwerth and Newton so that it becomes the woman's dominant characteristic. Whatever else she may appear to be doing, it is her rating as a sex-object which counts most. If fashion photography provides "a visual history...of our yearning" as Alexander Liberman asserts, does that mean that women's main interest is to appear sexually enticing, to "send a shockwave through a man's body", as if this is still the only way she can make an impact? If 1970s feminism, by proposing outright rejection of traditional femininity, caused a backlash in the 1990s against what is construed as an 'anti-men', 'unfeminine' agenda, is women's only recourse then to wear the mask? By reverting to traditional femininity in its most sexually assertive aspect, and taking it as far as it can go, can provocative clothes and a confident stance be used as a weapon and a shield to improve one's status, without fear of 'punishment'? This is just one image of women among others to be found in magazines, yet it is currently a dominant image. Both Von Unwerth and Newton insist that the type of models they

photograph and the way in which they are posed is powerful and a positive depiction of women. It is not the job of fashion photography, after all, to document real women and how they live.

In conclusion, it would appear that Ellen Von Unwerth prefers to take a light-hearted, look at the female sex-object, whereas Helmut Newton is darker, and perhaps closer to the truth, in the sense that he shows how women are seen by men, who ultimately judge and define what is to be considered sexually attractive in women. Von Unwerth refuses that truth, and looks towards the creation of a sexual image that can work for women, that hands back control of the image to them. The exercise of 'control' or 'power' in creating this image passes back and forth between the model, the photographer and the viewer, in the end. The model projects a certain quality, the photographer arranges how the model will appear, and the reader interprets it according to his or her perceptions. Taken in context, sexually objectifying images of women can be harmless. When they start to become the only images of women, they become harmful. Although Ellen Von Unwerth's style of photography, like Helmut Newton's, keeps recycling and representing 'sexist' or 'sexy' images, there are other images of women to put them in context and reduce their negative impact.

Chapter Three

Inez Van Lamsweerde is a contemporary Dutch photographer who works predominantly in the fashion genre (*Vogue*, *The Face*) but also produces work which has been widely exhibited in art galleries. Van Lamsweerde, like Ellen Von Unsworth, is influenced by the style of photographers such as Helmut Newton. However, her use of digital technology to manipulate her images, and their posed, hypersexy styling, extends her work beyond straightforward eroticism into the realm of parody and pastiche. The technology of Quantel Paintbox allows her to alter images in a way that is not discernible, so that models bodies can be elongated, incongruous backgrounds can be inserted, skin can be "corrected", etc. in a completely convincing way. Paradoxically, this emphasis on artificiality in her photographs actually heightens their documentary value, as ironic commentaries on the conventions of the fashion/beauty image. This focus on the constructedness of gender images is developed further in Von Lamsweerde's personal photography, which uses the same digital technology to confuse accepted definitions of femininity, masculinity and infancy. This chapter will look at a particular fashion spread by Inez Von Lamsweerde which appeared in *The Face* magazine and at her personal projects, to examine how she deconstructs "ideal" images of beauty and gender, infusing them with the more disturbing undertones of those socially imposed ideals. The use of a widely disseminated - and readily believable - medium such as photography is an important element of this deconstruction.

Photography, as a medium, has a mimetic power that convinces us of its "truth". Even

though we know the photograph has been contrived to some degree by the photographer, and that the perfect appearance of a model relies on a team of hairdressers, make-up artists and stylists, it still looks more 'real' than a drawing or a painting. "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (Sontag, 1973, p.4). Recent developments in digital photography, while expanding the creative possibilities, call even more into question its truth as a documentary medium. The potential for creating composite and virtual 'models' has been discussed and experimented with in various magazines. In *The Face's* May 1995 issue, Jean Baptiste Mondino digitally exaggerated the most famous characteristics of several well-known "supermodels"- Naomi Campbell's legs, Nadja Auermann's breasts, Kate Moss's head- to create "a race of impossibly -proportioned super girls," (Burgoyne, 1996, pp.39-42). Virtual models, created entirely by the computer have also appeared, such as Kyoto Date, a Japanese creation with thousands of fans, and Lara Croft, a superheroine who first appeared in a video game called Tomb Riders and has since become a cover girl for scientific, fashion and style magazines, as well as starring in U2's Popmart Tour, (Piccinini, 1998, p.50). This phenomenon of the posthuman fashion model has both alarming and potentially creative implications. In "Manifesto for Cyborgs" (Haraway, 1985), the prospect of "creatures simultaneously animal and machine" (p.66) is welcomed, referring to the cyborg as "a condensed image of both imagination and material reality" (p.66), the fusing of which she envisages "structuring any possibility of historical transformation" and a world in which "people are not afraid of...partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (p.72). Innocence and

victimhood are rejected as valid positions for the cyborg woman. Instead, Haraway asserts the creative potential of digital tools and virtual creatures to envisage a more flexible reality.

Inez Van Lamsweerde's digitally enhanced images appeared in a special issue of *The Face* (September, 1994) which contained stories by various photographers, all involving some degree of computer manipulation. Together with stylist Vinoodh Matadin, she photographed the fashions of Veronique Leroy, a Belgian designer with a style reminiscent of 1980s *Dallas* glamour excess. There is an obvious affinity between Leroy's reworking of the fetishistic, eroticised fashions of that decade and Von Lamsweerde's revisioning of Helmut Newton's fashion photography of the 1960s and 1970s. Both share an ironic approach to the conventions of glamour.

In one image, titled "Well basically Basuco is coke mixed with kerosene" two models are posed against the background of a space shuttle taking off (Fig.32). Both models are dressed identically in red sequined hotpants and white tops. One model stands astride a racing bicycle holding out an ice lolly to the other model, who leans forward to take a bite. The image abounds with tired, *Athena* poster style erotic cliches. The tiny red hotpants scream 'sex' and, in case the message is lost, there is the strategic placement of the bicycle seat between the legs. The ice lolly and the rocket are further phallic objects to add to the bikes and the models' buffed, gleaming legs. This camp overloading of sexual innuendo makes the image ridiculous, a parody which satirises the aesthetic it



imitates. The incongruity between the spectacle of the space shuttle in the background, and the spectacle of the models apparently out for a spin on their bikes in the foreground, adds to the sense of absurdity. The position of the model facing the camera is unlike the typical stance of the glamour model. Her dominant posture, legs apart, hand on hip, defiantly eyeballing the camera, contradicts the usual passivity of eroticised female figures. Her proportions, in comparison with the distant rocket and the lolly she holds, diminish the position of the phallus in the image. The model's cool, superior stare, reminiscent of Newton's models, interrupts the voyeuristic display of both models' bodies, as if daring any viewer to look upon them as mere sex objects.

This theme is continued in the other photographs. One shows an office worker at her desk, digitally lengthened legs outstretched as she lights a cigarette, with the caption "My mother? I'll tell you about my mother" (Fig.33). The sleek, clean appearance of the model contradicts the bitter tone of the caption. The suggestion of an uneasy personal history gives the viewer a sudden jolt, which is just as quickly dispelled by the comforting flawlessness of the model. The image also mocks the typical eroticisation of "the working girl" as seen earlier in the work of Von Unswerth. Another, more subversive image in the spread replaces the doctor in a stock shot with a provocatively dressed model, who appears to be in the throes of sexual ecstasy (Fig.34). Her hands are on the doctor's patient, a small boy, who is laughing. Her statuesque body and erotic pose again remind one of Newton's soft porn images of women but the situation in a doctor's surgery - apparently fondling a young boy - upsets all accepted sexual and social



MY MOTHER? I'LL TELL YOU ABOUT MY MOTHER



conventions. The unlikeliness of such a scenario makes it a joke, as the little boy shows, but it also prevents the woman from being seen in her usual passive, harmless role and introduces a new kind of "sex object", who, like Von Unwerth's models, has her own sexual desires. This desire seems more focussed on a tactile, almost autoerotic pleasure, rather than being primarily concerned with the look of a sex object (the boy). The little boy is not eroticised and in fact seems quite superfluous to the woman's pleasure. The fact that two separate photographs have been combined is not obvious, creating an odd distance between the woman and the boy, which is contradicted by the apparently sexual experience taking place.

Subsequent fashion work by Van Lamsweerde continues with the eroticised, fetishistic tone, but without such obviously mocking and ironic juxtapositions. Her work for the designer Vivienne Westwood reworks the tacky photography of pin-ups and soft porn magazines without making any radical statements. She emphasises the masochistic connotations of Westwood's clothing, placing models in interiors redolent of cheap hotels, styled and posed to resemble prostitutes (Fig.35). The drab colors and lewd expressions of the models are in contrast to Ellen Von Unwerth's handling of the same situations, suggesting a less complacent, subtly subversive attitude to this version of feminine beauty.

Van Lamsweerde's personal photographic work is also subversive in intent, but looks more at the insidious damage caused by excessively idealised and manipulated images of



women. The work also confronts the restrictions imposed by narrowly defined representations of gender. The first series of photographs, entitled *Thank You, Thighmaster* was made in 1993 (Fig.36). In each photograph, a naked model is posed against a blank white background, and titled with her name. The nipples and pubic hair have been airbrushed out and the poses and expressions of the models are strangely inhuman. On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the 'models' are shop mannequins. Van Lamsweerde has used techniques made possible by Quantel Paintbox to graft the skin of real women over the bodies of plastic dummies, to create a disturbing hybrid. The title refers to a piece of exercise equipment, the Thighmaster, as if to suggest that through the obsessive use of special machinery, women can make themselves as perfectly plastic as these models. The model's sexless skin, free from any blemish, hair or excess fat and uniformly white in color, is all the clothing that is needed. This representation of the cyborg casts doubt on its transformative potential for women. Instead, Van Lamsweerde reminds us of the weight of social control, which imposes its ideals on the individual, to create bodies such as these. Her use of personal names for the 'models' emphasises the contradiction, being no more representative of individual identities that the names of mass-produced dolls.

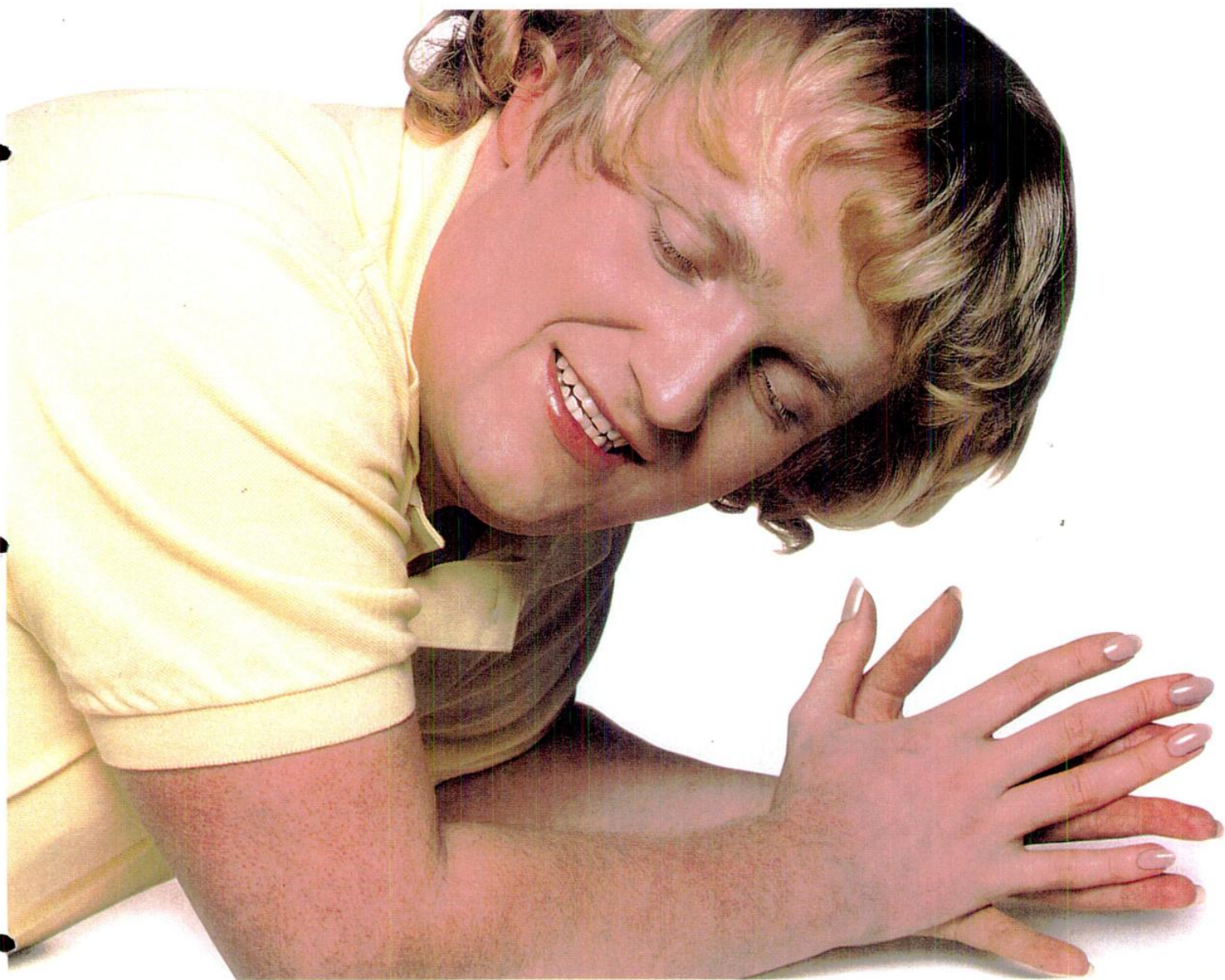
The next series, *Final Fantasy* (1993), focuses on another disturbing aspect of the fashion industry. These images also consist of a model posed on a blank white background, except in this case the models are 3 years old, hired by Van Lamsweerde from a professional model agency. Each model is posed sitting on the ground, pressed up





against what appears to be a glass wall (Fig.37). Their odd smiles are explained by the fact that the leering mouths of grown men have been inserted digitally in place of the girls' own mouths. This work was inspired, according to Van Lamsweerde, by the controversy caused by Corinne Day's photographs of skinny supermodel Kate Moss for English *Vogue*, which were widely condemned as being child pornography. The name *Final Fantasy* is taken from a video game, reminding us of how technology enroaches further on our 'real' reality. These images also challenge our conception of children in a world where innocence is eroded early on through exposure to the sexualised content of mass-media images. The men's leers on little girls' faces also uncomfortably represent the usually invisible gaze of the archetypal 'male viewer'. Seeing his mouth imposed on the object of his gaze is disturbing, especially since this 'object' is an infant. Compared with the spoofish absurdity evoked by Van Lamsweerde's fashion image of a woman with a small boy, this image is less palatable. It has an uncomfortable ambivalence that destabilises notions of male lechery as well as childhood innocence by offering the grotesque spectacle of a lecherous child. The trend towards using teenage models in magazines aimed at women in their 20s and 30s is brought to its ultimate conclusion here. The presence of male mouths repeats the question of who the 'real' viewer is, the woman who buys fashion magazines or the imaginary man who will look at her?

In *The Forest* (1995), Van Lamsweerde switches her focus to male models. Again, there is something incongruous about them (Fig.38). They are reclining, eyes half-closed, mouths smiling, all wearing pastel coloured polo shirts, with hair carefully styled

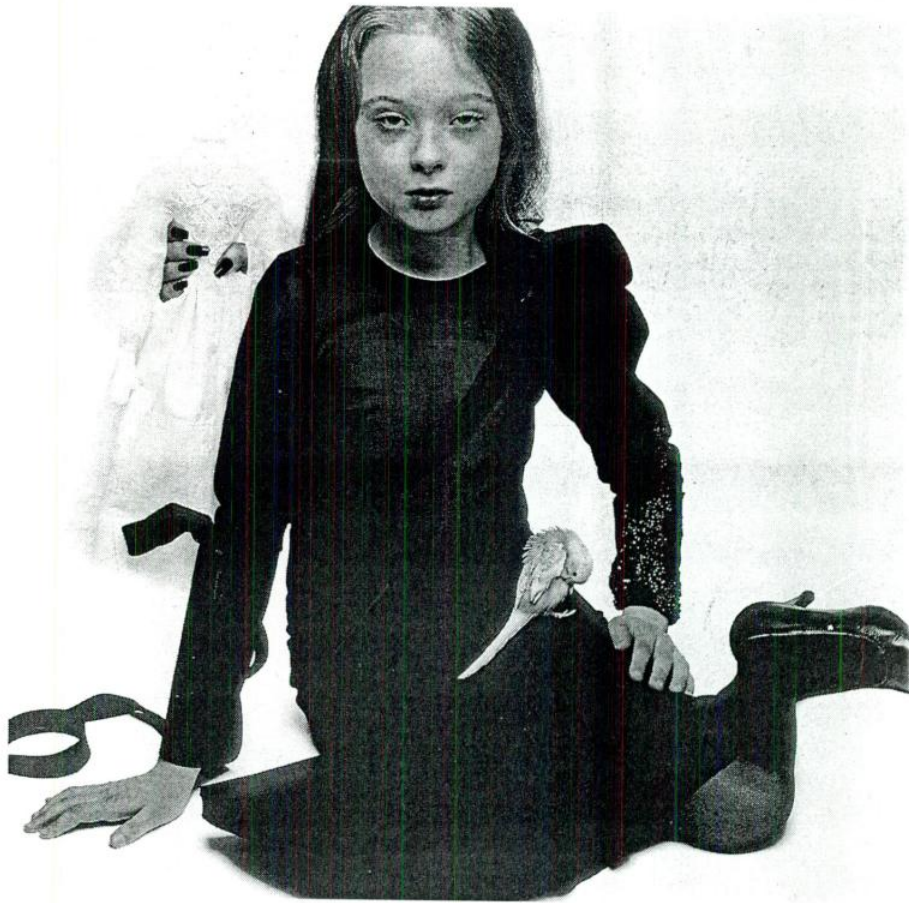


and coloured. The incongruity is most apparent in the fact that the men all have the delicate, manicured hands of female models, again digitally grafted on. Their lascivious expressions and docile poses do not correspond with typical male role models. They seem to mimic the poses routinely enacted by female models. The delicacy of their hands adds further to a sense of emasculation. The images are subversive precisely because they equate 'feminine' characteristics with passivity and weakness, negating the powerful 'masculinity' that would be more aptly embodied by active men with purposeful expressions and a more rugged appearance. The qualities that here denote 'femininity' - make-up, hairstyle, passivity - diminish them. The imposition of 'feminine' characteristics on men emphasises more starkly how the same qualities can also diminish women, yet because such images of women are so familiar, their disempowerment is less obvious. Such lack of power in men is vastly more disturbing to the viewer; the suggestion of vanity and ineffective self-absorption almost make them seem deformed.

In her most recent series of photographs, *The Widow* (1997), Van Lamsweerde uses the same model throughout. Kirsten, aged 8, appears in 4 images, 3 of them forming a lifesize triptych. This depicts the girl in 3 distinct situations; first as a solemn bride with a blackened face, next as a blank-eyed Madonna in a blood-red dress, holding a Christ-like man slumped in her arms, and finally as a worldly little girl in a black dress, with a disembodied woman's hand in the background holding a headless doll. These mysterious compositions reference symbolism found in religious paintings over the centuries. The gestures of the girl recall the suffering of the Virgin Mary and various saints







mythologised in those paintings. Yet the contemporary, couture style of dress and makeup evoke a material, secular world. The title *The Widow* and the sexual awareness and detachment of the imagery is unsettling in the context of the girl's youth. The triptych format, again reminiscent of religious art, unfolds a story. In the first image (Fig.39), she appears like a sacrificial offering, her blackened face and blood-red rosette reminiscent of burning and wounding, her spotless white dress like a shroud enfolding her. Her heavily lidded eyes and set mouth gaze at the camera piously, as if resigned. The dress and flower evoke a religious ceremony, like a first communion. The second image (Fig.40), mimicking the pose of a pieta, suggests some kind of sacrificial death. Here, the connotations of the "black widow" imply that she is the cause of his death, as if her sexual awakening somehow requires his dying. In the third image (Fig.41), she appears poised and triumphant, wearing a sophisticated black dress and high-heeled shoes, as if responsible for her own widowhood. The combination of historical, religious picture-making references and contemporary fashion styling suggests that the 'trade' in sexually precocious youth and beauty is the current religion, with its own rituals and sacrifices. Van Lamsweerde goes beyond commentary on the sexualisation of children in fashion, to a commentary on sexuality itself, especially on a 'brand' of sexuality which is socially imposed. In the case of a woman, this would imply a passive, pleasing sexual role, which is challenged in this work. Whether "The Widow" is the disturbing consequence of sexual submissiveness, or the alternative to it, is uncertain.

Inez Van Lamsweerde's use of both straight fashion photography and 'fine art'

photography to make her statements deliberately transgresses the boundaries between 'art' and 'commerce' or 'truth' and 'artifice', to defy any definite categorisation. Referring to the 'partial identities and contradictory standpoints' of Donna Haraway's cyborg woman, she reflects the impossibility of imaging the 'real', 'untainted' body in a culture so immersed in the imaginary products (models, celebrities) of the mass-media. Unlike Ellen Von Unwerth or Helmut Newton, she is not satisfied to simply perpetuate sexual stereotypes of women. Instead, more in common with Cindy Sherman, Sarah Lucas and Vanessa Beecroft, she uses stereotyped sexual imagery to question the meanings traditionally associated with these images.

Conclusion

The medium of fashion photography is usually dismissed as being the most superficial of photographic genres, "a parasite [that] borrows and mimics from every genre of photographic and cultural practise to enhance and alter the meaning of lifeless objects - commodities" (Wells, 1997, p.154). Despite this, it often reflects the social dreams and aspirations of the day, recording where the culture is at any particular time. Ellen Von Unwerth and Inez Van Lamsweerde focus on a specific type of fashion imagery, which brashly sexualises the fashion model and the imaginary situations in which she is photographed. Although the primary purpose of this trend for sexualised imagery is to sell products to consumers, it also subconsciously proposes an image of femininity which associates female beauty with explicit sexual display. Whereas Von Unwerth finds this image of femininity liberating and entertaining, Van Lamsweerde detects the subtle heteronomy of such images, and the oppressive and dehumanising effect they can have.

Artists such as Cindy Sherman, Vanessa Beecroft and Sarah Lucas are aware of this external control over women's 'self-image' and work to expose it. However, the rarified domain of the art world does not allow their images as widespread an influence as the images mass-produced and circulated in popular media such as fashion magazines. While the esoteric ideas of 'the gaze' and 'the masquerade' and the psychoanalytic concepts of castration, abjection, voyeurism and narcissism may be unknown to the average magazine reader, clearly the cultural constructs these ideas deal with are codified into cultural images of women. They then operate visually to maintain the traditional gender

power structure. Accessible imagery which alters the familiar codes - such as Inez Van Lamsweerde's photography in *The Face* and, to a lesser extent, Ellen Von Unwerth's photos - makes known to us the inherent artificiality of the typical 'feminine' images. While it is usually not the intention of magazine publishers to threaten the social order, subversive imagery sometimes slips through. Lamsweerde and Von Unwerth, by concentrating on ironic simulations of accepted sexual imagery by Helmut Newton and others, manage to create images which are both commercially acceptable and culturally challenging. Of course, the freedom of the fashion genre is limited, and often the most challenging imagery is edited out. The work that Van Lamsweerde displays in art galleries would not be acceptable in most fashion magazines and many of Von Unwerth's most striking images have only appeared in book form. However, since popular culture rather than fine art disseminates the society's values, it is imagery that appears in popular media which can most readily alter those values.



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