How Cindy Sherman's Instagram works are making contributions to the Art Historical Canon

Cindy Sherman is one of the world's most renowned female contemporary photographers. Frequently identified as a conceptual photographer by critics and academics, Cindy Sherman's photographic practice has spanned decades; from her beginnings in the late 1970s to her most recent explorations of 'selfie culture' on Instagram. Subsequently, the prevalent theme firmly embedded within Sherman's practice is the exploration of identity and its social constructs; in particular, societal female archetypes, evidenced throughout Cindy Sherman's pre and post-internet practice.

In the summer of 2017, Cindy Sherman made her Instagram account public; since doing this, she has amassed more than 187,000 followers (May, 2018). This move to Instagram marked a seismic shift in Sherman's photographic practice; initially it provided the public with an insight into the 'real Cindy Sherman' and the introduction of a 'digital mask' in contrast to the other masks Sherman has worn previously throughout her forty year career.

In order to explore Cindy Sherman's move to Instagram, we must first ascertain why she has elected to use Instagram as a mode of operation. In addition to this, Sherman's shift in practice must be located within a contemporary critical and theoretical framework in an endeavour to understand her positioning. Sherman's Instagram works make a valid contribution to the art-historical canon, they examine and reference new developments in visual culture in the widest possible sense, whilst simultaneously referencing her historical practice.

Sherman's Instagram images reference contemporary 'selfie' culture; an interesting, yet not unexpected exploration for Sherman, who is one of the most important female artists of the twentieth century, to turn the camera on herself in dialogue with a wider cultural and historical vision. Arguably, Sherman's Instagram 'selfies' serve to continue the conversation as they confidently comment upon new representations of self in the digital realm; contributing to new knowledge regarding new taxonomies regarding new statements of femininity.

Sherman's handling of a new visual language; one of the internet, is compelling. Key characteristics of the selfie are examined, and ultimately subverted throughout Sherman's Instagram works. Methodically, she examines the tilt of the head, the upwards angle, the pouting lips and presents them as hallmarks of contemporary selfie culture. An analytical and visual enquiry is manifested in the work, in parlance with a new confidence and inquisitiveness seen as Sherman navigates new working methods.

Blending In, 2nd March 2018, depicts an elongated floating head that operates fully within the centre of the frame. *Blending In* mimics the shape of a classical bust, in particular, the triangle of the décolletage. Referencing unity and connoting insinuations of the golden ratio; further reinforced by the gold medallion that the figure wears around her neck. The character seems detached from reality, gazing down at the world below, one cannot help but wonder if this could be a metaphor for Sherman's relationship with technology.

Cindy Sherman, *Blending In*, March 2nd 2018

https://www.instagram.com/p/BfznLGBgRYW/?hl=en&taken-by=cindysherman

Marking a shift in tactics, Sherman uses a stock image of city scape, over which the head floats above; connoting the visual language present in digital collage. Upon closer inspection, it is understood that this is a study of a northern Italian town. Followers of Cindy Sherman's Instagram state that it is Sicily, more precisely. The reason for Sherman utilising this particular cityscape is ambiguous, but referencing the title of the piece, 'Blending In', it is apparent that the colours are incredibly similar in tone. The figure's head merges into the background: her red hair, garish eyeshadow and gold medallion punctuating the image, whilst simultaneously referencing a cornerstone of Renaissance thought and activity.

Blending In recalls Sherman's use of rear projections, a tradition stemmed from her interest in cinema; this image works in much the same way as Sherman's rear projections, although referencing digital culture as opposed to the cinematic. In Sherman's Instagram works we see her re-contextualising the aesthetics of the internet, using the language of the internet. In *Blending In*, we see a dialogue between the vernacular of the mac photobook filters and stock photo imagery in place of filmic traditions Sherman has utilised in earlier works. Similarly, the 'floating

heads' tropes insinuate a consideration of Renaissance painting, a dialogue between historical and contemporary narratives is evidenced. Many of Sherman's floating head tropes display resemblance to Renaissance tronies; particularly with regards to the positioning and isolation of the heads within a sparse background. The inhabited ground and the elongated facial features reference the Renaissance tradition of portraiture, which arguably, Sherman endeavours to recall through the work. Naturally there is a clear relationship outlined between Sherman's *History Portraits* and her new Instagram works.

Regarding the art-historical canon, the Renaissance aesthetic is also seen in *Head Space*, (December 15th 2017), where a bulbous head in profile floats against an image of a sunset, implying direct connotations with the literal idea of *Head Space* online. Sherman presents this as a metaphor for our fast-paced society, or perhaps rather how a new genre of internet imagery representing mindfulness are circulated on Instagram, and ultimately, the new vernacular associated with this. The faraway look in the eyes of the character and the soft focus around the edges connotes an ethereal element to the image, as though it in itself is questioning its positioning within the digital age.

Cindy Sherman, *Head Space*, December 15th 2017
https://www.instagram.com/p/BcvOOlMgP3n/?hl=en&taken-by=cindysherman

Head Space is also an exercise in artifice, created using the visual language of Instagram, yet presenting an enquiry into historical portrait. Formally, a link is established between formal Renaissance portraits of women and Da Vinci's grotesque drawings, which was arguably prevalent in Sherman's *History Portraits*. The floating heads tropes evidence an allegiance to the inclusion of the formal elements that are used throughout the art historical canon. The floating forms against the pale ground can be considered to be in-flux and open to accepting new events, and supporting the theory that Sherman is inspiriting discussion with regards to the positioning of apps and Instagram within a wider art-historical tradition.

Multiple Heads as a visual technique is frequently seen in Renaissance portraiture, and Sherman seems fully aware of this; Sherman's Instagram selfies become seemingly more contemplative than initially thought. References can be drawn back to Renaissance portraits, such as Da Vinci and Durer's self-portraits, in which they

position themselves as navigators of new scientific and cultural landscapes; it can be argued that this is also a motive of Cindy Sherman's through her Instagram works. A referencing to feminist standing is also evidenced in Sherman's Instagram works, as is a reference regarding authenticity and authorship previously explored in *Pictures Generation*.

Sherman's multiple heads shoot out from the original head, which normally exists within the centre of the frame in other Instagram works such as *Blending In*, or *Windy Day*. In *I feel so out of place…* Sherman utilises the lens flare app so the multiple heads feel rather transparent, yet clearly distinguishable from the head that exists within the centre of the frame. This difference in texture and the soft focus of the background highlights the eyes and the lips; again, the image is read rather abstractly. The highlights of the analogous combination of purple and green offsets the skin tone and the image feels comparatively tense and uncomfortable.

Cindy Sherman, *Windy Day*, February 4th, 2018

https://www.instagram.com/p/Bewo5YDgayj/?hl=en&taken-by=cindysherman

A reference to Charles I by Van Dyck can be located within Sherman's multiple head trope. *Charles I in Three Positions* (c.1635), saw Van Dyck depict three different views of the King to present to Bernini, as to inform the sculptor's creation of a marble bust of the King. This is particularly interesting in the sense that Bernini was working from a copy of the original, so the comparison lends itself to discussion surrounding authenticity, referencing some of Sherman's Instagram works where she raises discussions regarding the origin of the image and how it travels. The use of the multiple heads has also been explored in Sherman's *Society Portraits* and *Imitation of Life*. Brechtian in approach, arguably, a representation of a truth is seen in Sherman's photographic images; there are slight differences between the figures, revealing tension and dialogue and an exploration of the spaces between, however a stronger sense of artifice is undoubtedly more prevalent in Sherman's Instagram images.

Van Dyck, *Charles I*, 1635

https://www.rct.uk/collection/404420/charles-i-1600-1649

Cindy Sherman, *Imitation of Life*, 2016

http://historicaldesign.com/2016/07/06/hdi-exhibition-pick-cindy-sherman-imitation-of-life-at-the-broad-in-la/

Leading on from the multiple head tropes, Cindy Sherman expresses an interest in AI and algorithmic methods of the production of works through her Instagram images. *Oops!* and *New Hat* mark a change in approach for Sherman; they are made using the same image, and can be framed as investigation regarding authenticity and authorship within the digital age and the origin and peregrination of the online image. It also references the very timely dilemma of how the single image can be manipulated and re-contextualised through the nature of apps and filters, instigating rigorous theoretical discussion surrounding the networked image.

Cindy Sherman, *Oops!* June 3rd 2017

https://www.instagram.com/p/BU5QGPWAuvU/?hl=en&taken-by=cindysherman

Cindy Sherman, *New Hat*, June 3rd 2017

https://www.instagram.com/p/BU5PxVDA9QH/?hl=en&taken-by=cindysherman

Additionally, the idea of the male gaze, is further explored in Sherman's Instagram images, and latterly, *Imitation of Life* (2016). Interestingly, the work ages with Sherman and makes a comment on society's attitudes to the ageing female archetype. The filters and apps that Sherman uses in her Instagram works are associated particularly with younger women; indeed they show a desire to be younger by digitally enhancing skin tones and erasing blemishes. The culture of filters on Instagram facilitates the culture of youth, visible across a multitude of media platforms. The skin becomes sparkly, eyes become bigger and brighter; flower crowns and fairy filters all provide a desire to evoke a sense of youth, explored by the young. It could be argued that Sherman utilises this motif in order to inspirit discussion regarding the representation of the ageing woman in an online context.

Cindy Sherman also experiments with the aesthetic of the 'glitch' in her Instagram works; frequently represented as an aesthetic device within post-internet art. Here we see Sherman again use what is around her to make images that are symptomatic of the creative and contextual climate at the present time. It can be suggested that

Sherman's use of the glitch aesthetic is intentional as a visual strategy; it is an aesthetic that exists between the still and the moving image. In this case it is well-positioned to refer to this as Sherman's apparent desire to exist in-betwixt spaces. Certainly, Sherman's rear projections, most recently *Imitation of Life* have demonstrated this. Cindy Sherman's Instagram arguably exists somewhere definitively outside of the gallery space, and the use of such lo-fi visual strategies it could be ascertained that she is questioning their belonging within a gallery setting. Yet to utilise the 'glitch' as an aesthetic device is to endeavour to include mistakes in the work, and this was never the case with Cindy Sherman's previous work, in fact it could be seen as 'anti-mistake'.

Cindy Sherman, *It's so cold even my TV froze*, December 28 2017

https://www.instagram.com/p/BdQXyB_gwTK/?hl=en&taken-by=cindysherman

Supporting the idea of operating in betwixt disciplines. Cindy Sherman also uses Instagram to experiment with moving image through Instagram video. With Instagram allowing up to 60 seconds, on average, of video footage, and presenting moving image in a photographic context, it can be argued that Instagram operates between still and moving image; certainly, as an app it is continually evolving. In *Help Me*, (October 11th 2017), Sherman's first Instagram video addresses the camera, whilst her face distorts into zig zag shapes. Behind her we can hear her TV, which again adds to the everyday context of the video. Sherman's voice is also distorted, becoming reminiscent of Margaret Hamilton's voice of The Wicked Witch of the West, it references a specific kind of kitsch trope, with connotations of ageing and female representation. Connections are attached to Warhol's 1980 portrait of Margaret Hamilton *The Witch* and Sherman's 2016 series, *The Imitation of Life*. Sherman addresses the camera, exclaiming: "*Fuck, I'm so wrinkly*", imaginably as a comment on vanity and representation; amplified by Sherman misusing the technique to create a disturbing and grotesque façade through the overlaying of digital masks.

Cindy Sherman, *Help me!* October 11 2017

https://www.instagram.com/p/BaFtU61A9-h/?hl=en&taken-by=cindysherman

In summary, Cindy Sherman's Instagram works are incredibly interesting. It is both unexpected, and also expected, that Cindy Sherman would utilise the Instagram platform, as her work is so deeply embedded in the cultural context of its time. Previously, we have seen Cindy Sherman respond to filmic tropes, art-historical tropes, so it seems fitting that she would explore the digital tropes that have emerged from the advent of new media. Sherman's Instagram images contribute to the canon of art history directly. Visually, it references Renaissance and Baroque aesthetics in particular, serving to unite two of the most important revolutions seen in humankind: the Renaissance and the Digital Age. Furthermore, Sherman's Instragram works are situated within a new theoretical framework; the advent of digital theories. Through her Instagram works, she explores a new media infrastructure in relation to her Instagram images; Sherman's Instagram works are playful and experimental, she seems comfortable to allow them to find their own place within the physical and digital realm.

Cindy Sherman is a master of implying connotations through dress codes and cultural codes; this is seen right throughout her practice, her Instagram works certainly evoke a strange and peculiar approach to cultural and self-referential references through her use of apps. In much the same way she would physically apply accessories and make-up in series such as *Society Portraits*, she continues this digitally through the application of programs such as makeup 365 and facetune. Sherman's consideration of fashion, makeup and accessories can change the meaning attached to her images; they are fundamental to the essence of Sherman's characters. The use of apps to create 'digital masks' is incredibly interesting; Sherman's practice becomes self-referential, recalling earlier works such as *Clowns* (2003). Interestingly, dialogue is formed regarding Sherman's handling of a new media; *Clowns* marked the first time that Sherman used digital photography as a production method, and Sherman's Instagram is the first time that Sherman uses the traditions associated with the internet as a visual strategy.

The examination of the digital Instagram tropes infer connections between earlier works, in particular, *Untitled Film Stills*, *Clowns*, *Society Portraits*, and *Imitation of Life*. The Instagram works contribute to the already-established works, and Instagram extends the reach of Sherman's historical series' and invites them to be recontextualised and open to accepting new narratives.

As much as Cindy Sherman's pre and post-Internet works contribute to the wider canon of art history, it also contributes to new discussions surrounding Instagram as a mode of operation within the art world. Effectively, Cindy Sherman's presence on Instagram raises interesting critical debate regarding the presentation of photography in the twenty first century. In theoretical terms, Cindy Sherman's Instagram works incite discourse surrounding new media curation, participation, dissemination and authenticity.

Subsequently, the trajectory of contemporary art through Instagram becomes an incredibly interesting discussion. Interestingly, the internet, and Instagram as platforms, enable Sherman to refigure existing relationships with critics, theorists and the art-world press, who have interestingly migrated to Instagram around the same time as Sherman. Certainly it is curious to see how Sherman's Instagram works are received from a generation of critics who have played such an important role in the development of her pre-internet practice, from the 1970s onwards. Compellingly, we also see critics interact with Sherman on her feed, namely Jerry Salz from New York magazine. On March 2nd 2018, Jerry Salz publically commented on Sherman's Instagram image *Blending In*, comparing Sherman's digitally manipulated selfie to *Republican Representative Trey Goudy* (Salz, 2018), marking a shift in contemporary art criticism in response to the changing climate of exhibiting photography in the digital age.

Through Sherman's Instagram works we see her continuing investigation of the representation of feminine identity, which historically has formed the crux of her practice. In particular, possibly the most prevalent female identity seen in the Instagram works is the identity of the ageing female, which is largely under-

represented in a contemporary art and photographic context. It could also be suggested that Sherman's work fits within the three waves of feminist thought: second wave, third wave and fourth wave feminism, associated with the advent of social media; theoretically, this links back to Sherman's associations with Laura Mulvey and the notion of subverting the male gaze. Referring back to Sherman's exploration of ageing women in digital media, the work appears to reflect her own concerns about ageing; as Sherman ages, her practice ages. The Instagram works provide a way for Sherman to reconfigure her practice amidst the digital revolution whilst ultimately making important contributions to the art historical canon.

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