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EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

The Body Which is Truly Ours. A Brief Three-Stage Approach to Mass Society Through Photography.

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Abstract. This article aims to analyse the role of women as the objects and subjects of desire in Western culture through self-portraits. To do so, we have selected three case studies which coincided with the development of mass society and the evolution of photography. A three-stage analysis of photographic images not only allows us to take a closer look at the selected artists' work but also enables us to understand the current situation of women in the art system. We will initially approach the first years of photography through the Countess of Castiglione. Then, we will focus on the figure of Vivian Maier, whose work was only recently discovered. Thirdly, the work of Linder Sterling has been chosen as an example of British counterculture during the 1970s.
Key words: Art Theory; Mass Media; Sociology; Photography; Gender Studies; Aesthetics

[es] El cuerpo que es verdaderamente nuestro. Una aproximación en tres etapas a la sociedad de masas a través de la fotografía.

Resumen. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar el papel de las mujeres como objetos y sujetos de deseo en la cultura occidental a través de sus autorretratos. Para ello, se han seleccionado tres casos de estudio que coincidieron con el desarrollo de la sociedad de masas y la evolución de la fotografía. Un análisis en tres etapas de las imágenes fotográficas no solo nos permite observar más de cerca el trabajo de las artistas seleccionadas, sino que también nos permite comprender la situación actual de las mujeres en el sistema artístico. Nos acercaremos inicialmente a los primeros años de la fotografía a través de la Condesa de Castiglione. Luego, nos centraremos en la figura de Vivian Maier, cuyo trabajo fue descubierto recientemente. En tercer lugar, el trabajo de Linder Sterling ha sido elegido como un ejemplo de contracultura británica durante la década de 1970.
Palabras clave: Teoría del arte; Medios de comunicación; Sociología; Fotografía; Estudios de género; Estética

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1. Introduction.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in women's role in the art system. Fostered by the development of gender studies within and outside academia, the analysis of women's role as objects of desire is perhaps one of the most controversial topics in the field of visual arts and media analysis. Regardless of this, at a time like the present when advertising has established itself as the backbone of the urban landscape, using photography to delve into the issue of desire becomes a highly interesting subject.

On the basis of the commodification to which women as objects are subjected by mass media, this proposal seeks to explore women as objects through photographic creation. In this sense, photography is not only regarded as a form of art, but also as an active medium which allows us to look at an image from a new perspective, equipping female photographers with the same creative and intellectual potentialities as their male colleagues. In order to do so, we will establish a three-level dialogue with three female photographers who knew how to read themselves as subjects, albeit in different ways, by means of this discipline, through their bodies' portrayals or playing with their symbolic content.

Regarding photography as a social construction in constant interaction with its surroundings leads us to understand this discipline as a social motor. Starting from this idea, we are particularly interested in delving into the connections between still image and the construction of desire. In order to do so, we will analyse the representation of the female body in the work of three artists who have, throughout history, contributed with their own vision on women's commodification and its role in our society. This is a cross-reading that seeks to go beyond a mere technical analysis, from an anthropological study and all the way to critical theory, perceiving photography as a medium which can empower women and give new meaning to their prominence in art history.

This is a three-level study which starts in the 19th century with the Countess of Castiglione, a peculiar figure of the Italian nobility who was photographed from different perspectives, an important number of which were of a strongly erotic nature. Even if she delegated the technical execution of said snapshots to others, it was she who set the guidelines to be followed, deciding on the framings, decoration and the type of frame which would go with each photograph. Her work on feminine eroticism would have a significant influence on 20th century visual artists such as Cindy Sherman.

From there, we will move forward to the 1950s, a time when the rise of advertising and the new media allowed the proliferation of images in print media, posters and television. The strong impulse experienced by mass society during that era, along with the strengthening of the traditional gender roles in North America during the post-war years, defined the new image of woman in the 20th century. Said image was a hybrid between Bizet's *femme fatale* and the household angel of England's Victorian era. This is when the self-portraits of Vivian Maier, a nanny and a photographer in secret, become interesting reflections of their author's contemporary society. Through self-portraits, Maier put on record the place she occupied in society as a woman.

By means of the study of the body, we shall continue with the post-structuralist discourse of the 1970s and 1980s. Linder Sterling, a British activist and artist, serves

as an example thanks to her work with collage and its artistic implications with photography and the advertising jargon. In her work, Linder Sterling reconfigures the gender archetypes by assigning a new meaning to fragmented bodies. She used pornographic publications and women's magazines to raise debate around the representation of women and men in mass media.

2. The Countess of Castiglione and the art of seduction.

In 1839, the year in which the daguerreotype became publicly available, industrial society was starting to settle in Victorian England. Queen Victoria's extreme decency created the conditions for a new discourse of double standards in which prostitution in poor neighbourhoods was combined with the strong sexual repression which came to characterize European society of that era. In this sense, the 19th century was a turning point for the codification of sexuality, which was limited to its reproductive function. Thus, a whole new imaginary of prohibitions regarding the body was created, as set out in Michel Foucault's *The history of sexuality 1. An introduction*:

> Nothing that was not ordered in terms of generation or transfigured by it could expect sanction or protection. Nor did it merit a hearing. It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. (…) Such was the hypocrisy of our bourgeois societies with its halting logic. It was forced to make a few concessions, however. If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere, to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance. (Foucault, 1978:4)

In this context, throughout the century photography would turn into an escape route for Victorian society. The first nudes in photographs started to stand out around 1850, particularly those by Gustave Le Gray and Charles Nègre. Nonetheless, it was not until the 1970s when nudes were clearly acknowledged as erotic. This was partly a result of the emergence of mass society, itself a product of industrial development and the evolution of the photographic technique, which allowed a wider dissemination of the still image.

In around 1860 Charles-François Jeandel began to spread small reproductions of his photographs through stereoscopic postcards. This peculiar format rendered the snapshots very realistic. Its protagonists were women tied up in different positions, completely naked or partially dressed, but either way rarely looking directly at the camera. In this practice, which reminds us of present day BDSM, Jeandel made use of wooden structures on which he placed his models in various positions, as shown in image 1. In several images, we can observe women who are tied to each other or hanging with their head down, simulating torture racks.

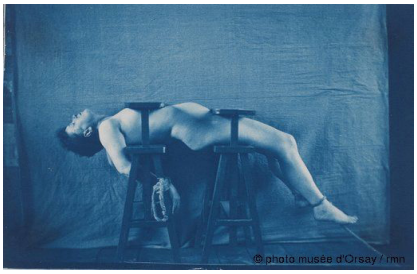

Image 1. Jeandel, F., ca.1890-1900: *Femme nue allongée sur deux tabourets, attachée, profil droit* [Source: Musée d'Orsay]

Along with Charles-François Jeandel, there emerged a more tempered type of erotic photographs, one in which women are shown having sexual relations or emulating mythological Greek figures. What is true is that the increase in consumption in the second half of the 19th century, combined with the technological advances in photography, led to an increased diffusion of these images, prompting the emergence of pornography[2]. So much so that, in an effort to control this new photographic expression, in 1857, the United Kingdom passed the Obscene Publications Act.

Likewise, the anatomical studies of Eadweard Muybridge or the hermaphrodite photographs of Félix Tournachon, better known as Nadar, show their century's eagerness to capture the peculiarities of unconventional bodies. In 1878, a professor and doctor called Jean-Martin Charcot, specialist of the nervous system, decided to install a photo studio at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital to study female hysteria in some of his patients.

The work which was carried out under Charcot's order —included in *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière*— shows patients going through various stages of female hysteria. In the last of the three stages, the so-called *terminale*, the patient goes from seizures to pure ecstasy. In this stage, the hysterical woman is described in a similar way to that of the Late Middle Ages, both as possessed by the demon and out of control. This rejection of female sexuality, reinforced by the iron Victorian morality, even led to a restricted use of sewing machines in households, out of fear that the rubbing of women's thighs while operating the machine's pedal could arouse them:

> The Journal des demoiselles frequently commented on the ongoing debate and counselled those of its readers interested in purchasing a home model to choose "la pédale magique", or single pedal model, which did not rub the legs together and was more "hygienic". The wide publicity given such worries created a dual challenge for advertisers: on the one hand they could exploit the erotic imagery in such writings; on the other they needed to assuage the fears it awakened. (Coffin, 1994:776)

2 According to Walter Kendrick, the term "pornography" was coined in the 18th century. In *El museo secreto*, Kendrick states that the Word has its origins in the work *Le pornographe*. Published in 1769, *Le pornographe* was a comprehensive study in which its author, Restif, proposes certain guidelines to regulate prostitution and its visibility. According to Restif, the term is composed of the words *porne* (prostitute in Greek) and *graphos* (writer).

Understanding the moral burden for women's sexual pleasure is vital in comprehending the extent to which the Countess of Castiglione's erotic photographs were a turning point for the 19th century's sexual culture. Virginia Oldoini, later known as Countess of Castiglione following her marriage to Count Verasis of Castiglione in 1856, was born in 1837. Her good relationship with the Italian Court, along with the reputation she had as a temptress, led her to travel to France in 1856 with the objective of seducing Napoleon III so that he would become a supporter of the unification of Italy. In 1858, she was obliged to return to Italy, but she would go back to Paris twice: in 1861 and 1893, six years before her death.

Her success among the French Court allowed her to establish contacts with the Mayer & Pierson photo studio where she would have more than 400 photographs of herself taken throughout the years she spent in the French capital. Even if those photographs were not, technically-speaking, "self-portraits", the Countess of Castiglione actively participated in every single one of them, choosing the decoration, clothing, frame and setting of every single photo. Driven by the fascination of her own reflection, the Countess of Castiglione did not limit herself to depicting the most emblematic moments of her French stay, but rather also recreated popular scenes from literature, the theatre and the opera.

As observed in image 2, the Countess of Castiglione breaks the barrier which separates her from the spectator through her direct stare into the camera. Her slightly forward inclination reveals a certain erotic game, enhanced by the fall of the upper part of her dress, whose veil practically occupies the lower half of the photograph. At this point, it is interesting to see how her body seems to hide between the wide garments, in a sort of mask behind which she hides herself, and thus enhances the image's latent eroticism.

Image 2. Pierson, P. L., ca.1856-1857: *The gaze* [Source: Musée d'Orsay]

At this point, the aesthetic game raised by Virginia Oldoini's photographs could be perceived as a rereading of desire from a feminist viewpoint. Through her interaction with photography, the Countess of Castiglione manages to present herself as an active object of desire. Although she appears as a mere projection of male sexual yearning, it is she who decides the frames and decoration. Unlike Jeandel's pornographic images, she looks at the spectator through the mirrors and masks which accompany her in every single snapshot, challenging the *voyeur* and seducing him. Thanks to her peculiar way of looking at herself as an object of desire, the Countess of Castiglione became one of the artistic references of 19th century's photography, coming to inspire 20th century artists such as Cindy Sherman.

3. Vivian Maier: the reflection of photography in the public space.

Through the first half of 20th century, the representation of women in mass media was influenced by different causes. The evolution of technology not only allowed an improvement of image quality but also the images' wider and faster distribution. In that sense, one of the most determining factors for the generation of the new archetypes of femininity which prevailed in the 20th century was advertising, influenced by the increasingly visible mass society.

By the end of the 19th century, Art Nouveau had already started to portray a new type of femininity through artists like Alfons Mucha. Drawing its inspiration from Victorian England's pre-Raphaelite school, Art Nouveau conditioned the archetype of femme fatale until it converted it into an advertising slogan. According to Erika Bornay's approaches in her work *Las hijas de Lilith* —"Lilith's daughters"— women's hair would become a mere decorative element for posters, losing part of its symbolic power:

> Alrededor del cambio de siglo, la difusión y la vulgarización del tipo femenino cuyo origen hallamos en los pintores prerrafaelitas, no sólo se había extendido por toda Europa, sino que se había visto reducido a repetido cliché. Aquella imagen misteriosa (…) se vació de contenido, perdió toda tensión y se disolvió en la más absoluta banalidad dentro de aquella "panfeminización" del arte que se produce en la última década del siglo XIX.[3] (Bornay, 1990: 381)

In the first decades of the 20th century, this reconfiguration of the *femme fatale* archetype which Bornay was referring to will be affected by the new consumption habits of western society, which shifted from Victorian morality to a certain liberalization of the body. In the 1920s, the arrival of the French *garçonne* and the English flapper presented a new lifestyle to young women, one in favour of personal

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3 Translated into English from the Spanish original: "Around the turn of the century, the dissemination and popularization of the female figure which had its origins in pre-Raphaelite painters had not only spread across Europe but had also been reduced to a repeated cliché. That mysterious image (…) became deprived of its substance, lost all its force and dissolved into an absolute banality within the feminization of everything in art that took place during the final decade of 19th century."

freedom and financial independence. With the outbreak of World War II, there was a great entry of women into the labour market, especially in the secondary sector.

This reality would change from 1945 onwards, due to the significant increase in birth rate during the 1950s, fostered by the financial growth experienced by countries like France and the USA. Having occupied leadership positions, many north American women returned to the private space, abandoning their professional careers. The number of marriages for the same period increased markedly, while at the same time the age at which young women got married fell.

Nevertheless, for Betty Friedan, the return of the soldiers following World War II was not the only factor to have determined this return to the private space. As the feminist theorist explains in her work *The Feminine Mystique*, the end of the military conflict was merely an excuse for many women to return to the household, motivated by the young housewives who were protagonists of women's magazines:

> Women went home again just as men shrugged off the bomb, forgot the concentration camps, condoned corruption, and fell into helpless conformity; just as the thinkers avoided the complex larger problems of the post-war world. It was easier, safer, to think about love and sex than about communism, McCarthy, and the uncontrolled bomb. (Friedan, 1974: 178).

Thus, living in a residential neighbourhood turned into the dream of many women who had been educated to behave according to classic standards of femininity by magazines, despite possessing a university degree and having seen their mothers engaged in activities outside the domestic space. Confined to their households and with a lot of free time, many women acknowledged experiencing a significant physical and mental discomfort, a generalised weariness without apparent cause. According to Friedan, this feeling of emptiness was related to the lack of responsibilities and the loneliness experienced throughout the day, while they were waiting at home for their husband and children to arrive from work.

At this point, the communication media played a determining role in shaping the new habits of women in countries like the USA, United Kingdom, France or Germany. Alongside women's magazines, advertising reinforced this return to the household angel, encouraging women to adopt a passive and complacent attitude. Focused on their roles as housewives, North American women satisfied this existential emptiness through the buying of electrical appliances and cosmetic and hygiene products: "Advertising collapsed feminist emphasis on women's range and choice into individual consumerism; the social-psychological professions domesticated feminists' assertion of sexual freedom and entitlement to the arena of marriage" (Cott, 1994: 90).

Even if this was the predominant archetype of women in mass media during the 1950s, there is no doubt that many women were far from having the financial power of these mothers in suburbs. Some of them did not even have a solid family unit to hold on to, which is why they ended up looking within these advertised families for the haven that they had not been able to find on their own. This is the case of Vivian Maier, nanny by profession and photographer in secret. Born in 1926 in New York city, she spent a great part of her youth in France, returning to the USA in 1951, where she would live, working as a nanny for the rest of her life.

It was in 1952 when Vivian Maier, who was already familiar with photography due to her final years as a young woman in France, began to dedicate an important

part of her free time taking photographs with her new Rolleiflex camera. In 1956 she moved to Chicago, where she started to work for an affluent family who provided her with a private bathroom, which she used as a dark room to develop her photographs. When the children of the family grew up, she was obliged to search for another family to work for, a situation she would repeatedly find herself in throughout her life. She passed away in 2009, in Chicago, leaving hundreds of negatives in her last house, which were discovered in an anonymous auction by John Maloof, who is currently managing the work of the deceased artist.

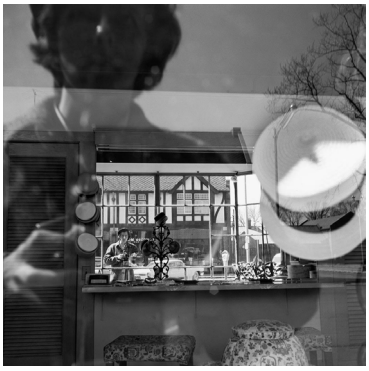
Among the hundreds of Vivian Maier's photographs, we find photographs of children playing in the streets, women talking in the market or elderly people who defy the photographer and her camera with their gaze. These are which are always taken from a proximity which can be even invasive for the present spectator. Along with her peculiar portraits of anonymous passers-by, she seemed to feel a peculiar attraction for all that society rejected, such as broken dolls or old magazines she collected from the street, an appreciation of the marginal, perhaps linked to her personal experiences. An introvert, Vivian Maier is described by an important number of families for whom she worked throughout her life as an unstable person and protective of her privacy.

Of her negatives, it is her self-portraits in mirrors and showcases which draw our attention, where her face is fused with that of two pedestrians or plays at confusing us with the multiplied reflection on different surfaces. In other photographs, Vivian Maier limits herself to offering us her shadow, either partial or full-body. This is a body forever framed by the context which determines it, from crossed legs to showcases and decorative objects. Vivian Maier's image is devoid of erotic tension and, as a result, the way in which she is perceived through the camera is particularly interesting to understand the position occupied in the public space by women like herself.

This is an aesthetic approach in which the reflected body of the woman would surpass this lethargic state in captivity, which has been studied by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. According to Berger, the way in which the models of advertisements look at the potential consumer is similar to the attitude of the women portrayed by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, always seeking male approval. In Maier's case, the stability and head-on approach with which she is portrayed could be even read as an appropriation of public space. A space which, as Pierre Bourdieu very well defines in *Masculine domination*, is written from the masculine voice, confining women to the private space. In this sense, Vivian Maier presents a dialogue between the creative subject and the space that shapes it. In several of her photographs, we can see the portrait of Vivian Maier, reflected and almost encapsulated in shops' showcases. These are showcases which strongly remind us of the work of Eugène Atget (image 3**)** a 19th century photographer particularly interested in Parisian showcases. Although Atget limited himself to capturing these spaces, Maier goes beyond and is embedded in them.

Image 3. Atget, E., 1925: *Magasin, Avenue des Gobelins*
[Source: NGA, Washington]

In this respect, one of the most significant differences between the work of Atget and Maier could be the roles played by the city as a physical space and by female bodies. On the one hand, Atget limits herself to portraying the Parisian shop windows in an attempt to rescue nineteenth-century Paris from the inevitable passage of time. As opposed to the documentary function of Atget's photographs, those by Maier seem to go beyond, in a way establishing a dialogue with the city and what the city represents. On the other hand, the nineteenth-century photographer focuses on models as mere objects, while Vivian Maier converts them into her photographs' protagonists.



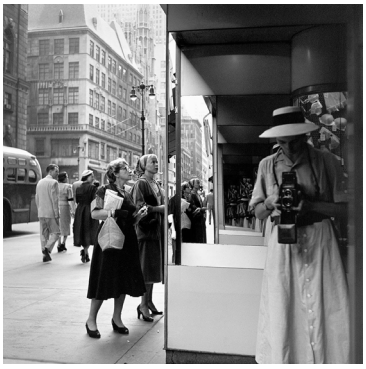


Image 4. Maier, V., 1961: *Self-Portrait* [Source: www.vivianmaier.com]
Image 5. Maier, V., ca.1950-60: *Self-Portrait* [Source: www.vivianmaier.com]

By doing so, Maier presented herself from a double perspective. As the author and protagonist of her photographs, she is both the creative subject and portrayed object. Nonetheless, the photographer's severe expression, who barely looks at the

lens, is far from the erotic play of the Countess of Castiglione. In her self-portraits, Vivian Maier limits herself to appearing just as she is, more focused on shooting the next snapshot than in captivating the masculine spectator.

Inside the self-portrait category, there are two types of positioning around the topic. Sometimes, the artist introduces themselves in the objects captured by the camera, from tyres of automobiles to showcases (image 4**)**. In other snapshots, the author presents herself to the spectator at the same level as the pedestrians, from absent-minded bystanders to groups of women who approach shops' showcases. This is the case of one of her photographs (image 5**)** the composition of which is divided into two clearly differentiated spaces. On the one hand, the author and her camera before the confrontation with the mirror. On the other hand, the profiles of two women appear, foreign to Maier's camera.

With all that, one of the themes which is repeated in some of Vivian Maier's photographs is the confrontation of her gaze with that of the camera. As one can observe (image 6) the photographer seems to avoid direct contact with the spectator, limiting herself to taking the photograph. As opposed to the Countess of Castiglione's seduction, Maier opts for a more serious register, confining herself to capturing the photograph and avoiding her reflection on the glass. Thereby, the spectator looks at a double gaze: that of the artist, which remains distant; and that of her lens, which captures the photograph. The image, with its certainly symmetric structure, could be interpreted as the reaffirmation of the photographer as the creator and not simply a mere spectator. Vivian is able to make this symbolic journey thanks to the help of the camera, which allows her to convey with images what she might not be able to communicate with words.

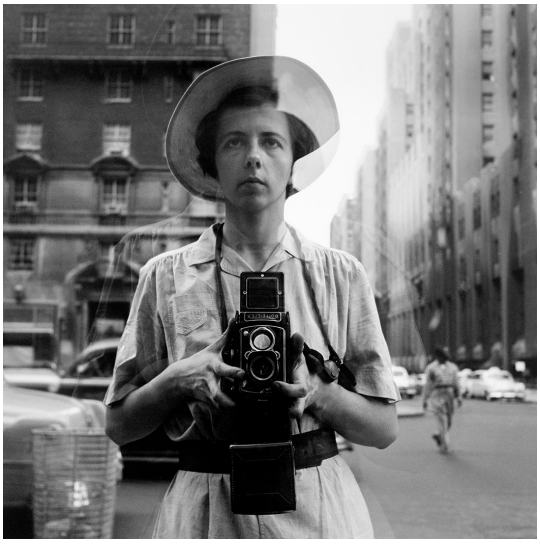


Image 6. Maier, V. (Undated): *Self-Portrait* [Source: www.vivianmaier.com]

This interest of Vivian Maier for the shops of the big North American cities can be equally understood from a sociological perspective. Within the dynamics of the

society of consumption, already present in the 1950s, women were not only perceived as objects of desire, being equally recognised by the market as potential customers[4]. Compared to them, the author is presented to us as an active object, embedded in this reality, yet far from the masquerade imposed on women by the patriarchal system.

4. Linder Sterling and the art of decoupage: revisiting mass media.

From the 1970s onwards, the outbreak of the *Woman's Liberation Movement* in the USA was a turning point in the history of North American women. In Europe, the French *Mouvement pour la Libération de la Femme* was born in May 1968 as a vindication of women's voice in the social and political fight. In the United Kingdom, the sense of discomfort experienced by the younger generation before the more conservative sectors of society led to the emergence of punk, an artistic movement which sought to break all dominant sociocultural structures. With music being one of the movement's clearest expressions, its power permeated a great part of artistic areas, from literature to plastic art.

In this respect, the artistic explosion which occurred in the United Kingdom in the 1970s was linked with the strong social mediatization to have taken place in the second part of the 20th century. It was then when mass society, rooted in the beginnings of cinema and the evolution of photography, reached a peak point thanks to the technical improvements, allowing for a vaster spread of images. This was a fact which was linked with the financial growth experienced by the West from the 1950s onwards, along with the fixation of traditional archetypes through women's magazines, as was mentioned earlier through Betty Friedam.

This whole series of changes would determine a new concept of society. In this way, in the 20th century the mass media were converted into the new social reference. In this regard, in his work *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes reflects on the influence of mass culture in the reshaping of Western society. Among the subjects covered, we should highlight the philosopher's reflection around striptease as a new mass phenomenon. For the philosopher, this social event would seek the commodification of women through banality, depriving her of all her humanity:

> There will therefore be in striptease a whole series of coverings placed upon the body of the woman in proportion as she pretends to strip it bare. Exoticism is the first of these barriers, for it is always of a petrified kind which transports the body into the world of legend or romance (...) all aim at establishing the woman *right from the start* as an object in disguise. (Barthes, 1957: 161)

Thus, female body would wear a sort of mask by means of clothes and jewellery, destined for the enjoyment of male eyes. Such commodification was ensured in the public imagination of mass society through advertisements and articles in women's magazines. This type of publication, already present in the early 19th century, became more popular following the working women's return to the household. As we have already discussed with regards to Betty Friedman's work, the classical representation

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4 As Nancy F. Cott claimed in *The Modern Woman of the 1920s, American Style*, women were the main target for the markets, especially those focusing on households:

of femininity, close to the Judaeo-Christian archetype of the Virgin Mary, regained its vigour from the 1950s onwards.

Against this, the femme fatale is modernised through men's magazines' pornography. By means of communication media, the duality of *femme fatale vs* "virginal woman" adopts new forms and language. Compared to the housewives who starred in the advertisements for household products, the *femme fatale* is subjected to a higher degree of sexualisation due to pornography. Consequently, from the 1970s onwards, publications such as the French *Lui* (1963) or the English *Penthouse* (1965), *Fiesta* (1966) or *Escort* (1980) played a decisive role in reshaping what is feminine, a new representation closer to Charles-François Jeandel and his tied models than to the Countess of Castiglione and her proper seduction. Just as Barthes pointed out in *Mythologies*, this new concept of sexuality and erotic play turns nudity into an authentic masquerade[5].

Thus, the femme fatale is fragmented and presented in close-ups of mouths, breasts and vulvas adjusted to patriarchal male pleasure. Such decomposition of femininity, before savage and now tamed, could be read in parallel with Roland Barthes' analysis of striptease. Both in men's magazines and striptease, female nudes are biased and commodified. This way, the body moves away from the subject and is transformed into a commodity product. Thanks to this, the male gaze achieves control over this femme fatale and converts her into an alluring object.

In this new hyper-mediatized context, the British artist Linder Sterling seeks to reread the archetypes of femininity in the 20th century through collages and photography. Born in Liverpool in 1952, Sterling's first contact with the art world was through the punk movement. Following her studies in graphic design, she started to become interested in music, creating one of her first photomontages for the English band *Buzzcocks*. This interest would then lead her to form her own group, *Ludus*, in 1978.

Linder Sterling's work revolves around the representation of gender archetypes in contemporary mass media. This is a discourse which works with different artistic techniques, from photography and performance to video art. Her work has been exhibited in numerous cities, from New York to London, as well as Paris, Prague or Geneva. Sterling's work combines photography with collage, seeking to revise the binary gender categories which she deemed exploited by the media.

In her projects, Sterling takes the Countess of Castiglione's approach to a new level. By doing so, the iconic image of women's magazines' housewives is distorted with disproportioned breasts and lips, as well as with various everyday objects of modern life, such as televisions and irons. This is an aesthetic game through which the artist seeks to address controversial topics such as sexism, consumerism or women's commodification.

In order to continue with the analysis of self-portrait from a feminist perspective, we have chosen the series *She/She*[6] for its prolific path. In this, the artist reflects upon the representation of women through her own experience (image 7). From the fourteen photographs in black and white which comprise this series, nine are snapshots of Sterling's face, taken by the photographer Christina Birrer. In those,

5 Term coined by Joan Rivière in a 1929 essay, *Womanliness as masquerade*.

6 Created using negatives taken in 1981.

Linder appears wearing a shoulder pad dress and a pearl neckless, following 1980s trends.

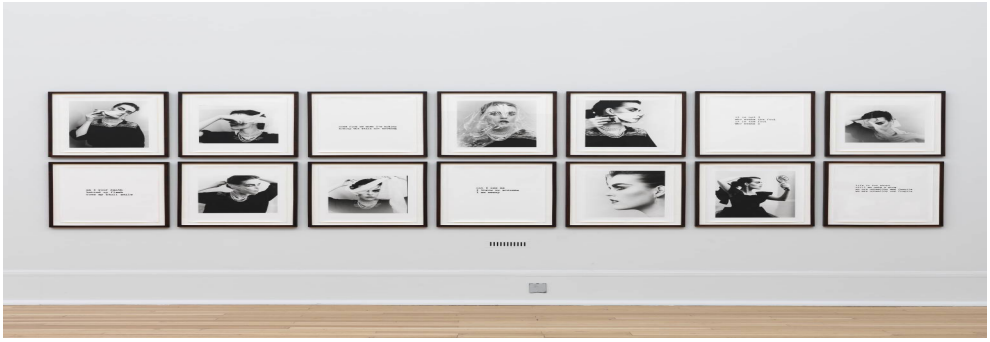

Image 7. Sterling, L. (2007): *She/She* [Source: Tate]

One of the most striking aspects of Sterling's work is how the decorative elements get an almost suffocating dimension. Sterling seeks to reflect the pressure to fit into the socially enforced archetypes of femininity to which women were subjected by covering her eyes with scarves and gagging her mouth with pieces of fabric and plastic. In this symbolic game, the mirrors are also present, in a layout certainly similar to the one used by the Countess of Castiglione.

In her work *She/She*, Sterling presents herself to the spectator through a double mask. On the one hand, the robes and make-up seem to confine her within the dominant parameters of beauty of 1980s England, when these photographs were taken. On the other hand, the elements which surround her, from magazine clippings to scarves, give Sterling's *mise-en-scene* a differential value.

By superimposing these objects over her face and covering it with them, she reveals the symbolic value of such everyday objects, which invade the woman until they suffocate her or hide her behind a fictitious mask. The cropped mouths and eyes pay homage to *collage*, one of the artist's favourite techniques. This method allows her to question the real weight of female archetypes, imposed by mass society. In this scarf, which appears to be about to strangle Sterling, we can read the reference to these unreal representations of femininity which condition women's existence.

The work of Sterling could be equally interpreted from the work of theorists like Judith Butler. In her work *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler discusses Michel Foucault's concept of *assujetissement*. One of the aspects stressed by the theorist is the necessity to understand the relations of power from a psychoanalytic perspective. The subordination of the body to the gender binary, translated into the beauty canons dominating Western society, could be read from this idea of submission of the body to power.

In this vein, Butler establishes a comparative framework between the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, an approach which is directly linked with the arguments of Jacqueline Rose surrounding identity. According to Rose, the main responsibility for the failure of identity is the unconscious, a failure which is constantly repeated throughout our lives and would explain a certain resistance to

identity as something unwavering. This idea brings Butler to link Rose's approach to that of Foucault, for whom there would be no symbolic resistance, but rather multiple resistances focused on different aspects of the established power which would be their cause and consequence. This leads Butler to consider the extent to which humans can appropriate those categorical and offensive interpellations as a practical demonstration of resistance against the law:

> Consider the force of this dynamic of interpellation and misrecognition when the name is not a proper name but a social category, and hence a signifier capable of being interpreted in a number of divergent and conflictual ways. To be hailed as a "woman" or "Jew" or "queer" or "Black" or "Chicana" may be heard or interpreted as an affirmation or an insult, depending on the context in which the hailing occurs (where context is the effective historicity and spatiality of the sign). If that name is called, there is more often than not some hesitation about whether or how to respond, for what is at stake is whether the temporary totalization performed by the name is politically enabling or paralyzing, whether the foreclosure, indeed the violence, of the totalizing reduction of identity performed by the particular hailing is politically strategic or regressive or, if paralyzing and regressive, also enabling in some way. (Butler, 1997: 96)

At this point, the question arises as to whether art could be a valid channel for redefining certain interpellations. Still, on Butler's discourse, it would be interesting to question whether Linder Sterling's proposal could be seen as an attempt to redefine the concept of "woman", strictly formed through mass society on the basis of the established archetypes. By means of appropriation, it appears that Sterling seeks to break with the archetypical constitution of femininity. In that sense, the collage would allow artists like Sterling to break away from gender binary, established as a fixed and inexorable identity with patriarchal system.

Through her work, Sterling adopts this archetypical role and deconstructs it. In other words, it is the symbolic assimilation which allows her to overcome the role imposed by mass society. It is this imposition that she mocks through the performativity of her proposal. In She/She, the artist adopts the female mask to denounce and overcome the archetypical role. Thus, the archetype is reduced to kind of an aesthetic monstrosity which leads the spectator to question the gender roles, as well as the system which determines and legitimises them.

5. Conclusion. Reading oneself through self-portraits: beyond the male gaze.

As we have been able to observe through the three case studies presented in this article, the view of sexuality and desire which persists the current Western society largely originates in the social, cultural, financial and political changes which happened in the 19th century and coincided with the emergence of mass society. This has only just enhanced some behavioural canons which have defined a binary conception of our reality, delegating the action field to men through their occupation of public space while reserving the public space for women who were destined to the roles of mother and objects of desire. This perspective has been questioned and worked through by feminism throughout the 20th century, in favour of a more equitable and fair representation of all.

Through the study of these three artists, we have shown the extent to which women were able to read themselves as subjects, questioning the strong social frameworks which limited them. An analysis which was carried out seeking a certain formal and aesthetic coherence and having self-portrait[7] as the axis of our essay. The fact that these three authors have decided to represent themselves could be linked to a certain need to overcome the submission to the male gaze and, hence, its desire.

As John Berger claimed in *Ways of Seeing*, the way in which the woman is represented in the art system restricts her to passiveness, a state which would even lead to her being judged from a masculine perspective: "the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object–and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (Berger, 1972:47). Based on this interpretation, the self-portrait could be considered as a medium through which one can take ownership of one's own view[8]. By capturing their own images, these women showed a sort of resistance to the art system, reclaiming their stance as active subjects.

In this sense, one of the main reasons which led us to choose these three artists was their ability to transgress, both as artists and in their personal lives. First of all, the Countess of Castiglione, married and separated, did not hesitate to use her beauty to achieve her aims. In doing so, she appropriated her condition as an "object" in order to be able to mediate in favour of the unification of Italy. Secondly, Vivian Maier sought in photography the contact she had been denied in her everyday life. Away from her family, her peculiar personality could have been nothing but the consequence of never having had her own space. Thirdly, Linder Sterling has broken with the established norms, taking interest in punk, one of the most subversive movements of the last few decades.

Of the three cases we presented, that of Vivian Maier is perhaps the most paradigmatic. Despite her prolific work, her creations went totally unnoticed until her death. Currently, the international scale of the interest shown for her work has positioned her in the spotlight. Sterling, as opposed to Maier, decided to approach art as a medium of subversion, through which to question the gender categories and social codes of the West. In that sense, the erotic game of the Countess of Castiglione could be read more as an appropriation, rather than a reshaping, of desire. Regardless of the differences, the three presented cases are proof that photography has served both as a medium of domination and of resistance. Contrary to Jeandel's tied women, photography can also be used as a medium of subversion through which to reconsider our society.

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7 Even if both the Countess of Castiglione and Linder Sterling delegated the technical side to third parties, the two of them played a decisive role in said photographs. In this sense, we can also talk about "self-portraits" from a theoretical stance, since it was them who created that photographic space.

8 Nonetheless, Berger's approach should be rather read from a symbolic perspective, dealing with the performativity of the gender. The formal rigour imposed by this code of study lacks the different ways of being read as a subject outside the binary code imposed by the patriarchal system.

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