

Assembling Time:

Methods of Representing the Female Identity in Art

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*"Women are ridiculed if they wear too little and women are ridiculed if they wear too much."
-Avon Bashida*



1. Pech Merle Cave Paintings, 25,000 B.C

Themes of invisibility relating to Feminism, can be traced back to the earliest representations of the female body—handprints recorded on the walls of France’s Pech Merle cave paintings dating back to 25,000 B.C, (Figure 1).

These handprints, weren’t identified as female until recently by archaeologist, Dean Snow. Snow says, most scientists had incorrectly "assumed that it was a guy thing."¹ The assumption that the handprints were first identified as male illuminates the notion that we exist in a “man’s world.” This male-centric, female-invisible ideal has been used as the foreground for Feminist art to activate its audience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Modern and Contemporary art forms, for example, photography and performance, aid in engaging and immersing the viewer in themes of female identity. Woman artists such as Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman explore topics of female identity, sexuality, intimacy, and death surrounding “cultures” in their photography. Artist Charlotte Moorman broke boundaries of female constraints and radicalized art with her topless performances. These female, feminist artists manipulate how the public sees the female identity as a whole by both revealing and withholding iconic, abstract, formerly unseen representations of the female. Following in the footsteps of the feminist giants, we meet photographer, videographer, and performance artist Avon Bashida (b.1986), whose work in the exhibit, *Assembling Time*, reflects female identity in relation to degrees of visibility.

Female photographers who captured female identity issues enabled the quick advancement of such photography in the twentieth century. In comparison, painting was “a man’s world,” especially in the 1950’s. New York’s post-war Abstract Expressionist group of macho artists, such as William De-Kooning and Jackson Pollock, abstractly painted women in and out of their lives. For example, Lee Krasner, Pollock’s wife, painted in the shadows of her illustrious husband. As photography became an

¹ “Cave Paintings,” Accessed on December 1, 2016, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/06/photogalleries/cave-handprints-actually-women-missions-pictures/>.

accessible art field for women to pursue, examining the genres of female visibility, without competing with the past cannons of art history and their male clubs—for example, MiniMALEism.

Photographer Nan Goldin (b.1953) uses the camera's ability to document her friends with truth and strong visibility. Never hiding from the camera, her subjects visibly confront the beholder with their sexuality, intimacy, suffering, and raw situations. Goldin's most acclaimed work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, is a photo diary composed of as many as 700 photographs accompanied by a sound track. The film/slide show is composed of frames of photographs categorized thematically: women in front of mirrors, nude women, couples in intimate moments, and club scenes, to name a few.² One of the artist's



2. *Nan One Month After Being Battered*, 1984

most acclaimed photograph, *Nan One Month After Being Battered*, 1984, (Figure 2) is a self portrait of the violent relationship the artist became a victim of. The emotionally hurtful and physically painful bruises on her face are transcribed to her viewers, who look on with shock. The undeniable truth that Goldin captures is extremely visible, not only in the life of others, but in her own life narrative as well.

In contrast to Nan Goldin's approach to documenting women in their vulnerable states in society, Cindy Sherman (b.1954), reveals and criticizes the desired female state prescribed by culture at large. Her photography is often described as a tool "enable[ing] her to act out the psychoanalytic notion of



3. *Untitled (Film Stills)*, 1977-80

femininity as a masquerade."³ In her *Untitled (Film Stills)* from 1977-80, (Figure 3), Sherman poses as a career girl in various locations in New York. Shot with dramatic angles, creating tension and ambiguity, Sherman engulfs herself in the New York City landscape of powerful skyscrapers. These photographs are staged and fictional narratives of pre-conceived representations of American movie culture. Sherman creates an "invisibility" of her own female identity,

² Guido Costa, *Nan Goldin*, (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001) 7.

³ Whitney, Chadwick, *Woman, Art, and Society*, (London: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2007) 383.



4. *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, 1969

by using staged iconographic representations, never exposing her own true female identity. Thus posing the question of the female's role in society as to what is real or not.

While photography prevailed in documenting the female and their cultural stereotypes, performance art was a way for female artists to "reclaim the female body from what was seen as its muse-like status."⁴ Charlotte Moorman (1933–1991), known as the "topless cellist," was a radical artist who combined experimental art with her own female body. Her musical performances outside

the Institution of museums brought down "the boundaries between creative media and renegotiating the relationship between artist and audience."⁵ Moorman's most acclaimed work are collaborations with the video artist Nam June Paik where she combined sexuality, music, and technology, into her art. In *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, 1969, (Figure 4), Moorman placed Paik's small TV screens over her breasts while she played the cello abstractly. One of the themes surrounding *TV Bra* was the feminist activity of "bra-burning," or trashing the bra at the time; a feminist reaction against the Miss America Pageant in 1968. Moorman joined the feminists in shedding the historical baggage of the "bra" in her artistic performances.⁶ Moorman's performance art is a precedent of the female body being visible in the public

realm.



5. *Long Exposure of a Sex Act*, 2013

The work of Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman and Charlotte Moorman's substantially correlates to Avon Bashida's photography and performances. Themes of female identity, intimacy and self-reflection are visibly and invisibly threaded throughout Bashida's work. Bashida and the women in her work have the choice to either be absent from representation or nakedly, vulnerably present. These

⁴ Kathy Battista, *Renegotiating The Body, Feminists Art in 1970's* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2013), 53.

⁵ "Charlotte Moorman," accessed on December 2, 2016, <https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/exhibition/a-feast-of-astonishments-charlotte-moorman-and-the-avant-garde-1960s-1980s/>.

⁶ "Charlotte Moorman," accessed on December 1, 2016, <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2014/charlotte-moorman-paik-topless-cellist>.

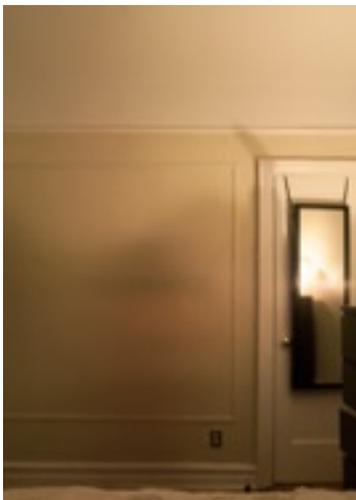
choices powerfully document the role of the female, with its many conditions attached, in the twenty-first century. In *Long Exposure of a Sex Act*, 2013, (Figure 5), Avon records couples' intimacies with long exposure photography, producing vanishing memories of scattered private moments. While Avon's couples are invisible in the photographs, the viewer knows they are physically present in the act. Her ghostly photographs of empty beds and veils of human forms are reminiscent of Nan Goldin's provocative photographs. Goldin sees sex, "as a mirror into the soul."⁷ In *Rise and Monty Kissing*, 1988, (Figure 6), Goldin captures the visible essence of sensuality through a couple in a private and erotic moment. And in *Empty Beds*, 1979, (Figure 7), Goldin transforms the empty bed into a portrait, remembering the "place as well as the people"⁸ who shared intimate moments there. Visibly present or not, Goldin and Bashida continue the conversation of intimacy.



6. *Rise and Monty Kissing*, 1988



7. *Empty Beds*, 1979



8. *Oh land, Pink, Robyn (Sunset Park)*,

In *Oh land, Pink, Robyn (Sunset Park)*, 2016, (Figure 8), Bashida used long exposure again to capture a portrait of a nude women moving in time. Given an exposure of 10 minutes, the invisible woman disappears into her domestic setting—the bedroom. The viewer is left searching for the female figure in her bedroom and considers the stereotypical connotations attached. Cindy Sherman's photograph, *Untitled*, 1979, (Figure 9), is a portrait of Sherman lying in bed with a dreamy, flirtatious pose. Sherman portrays fictitious images idealized by the male gaze and culture. The obsessive male desire to "fix the woman

⁷ Guido Costa, *Nan Goldin*, (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001)

⁸ Costa, *Nan Goldin*.



9. *Untitled*, 1979



10. *175 to 350 5th Ave*, 2016



11. Charlotte Moorman arrested, N.Y., 1967

in a stable and stabilizing identity"⁹ is reflected in her critical photographs. Both Sherman and Bashida examine female choices of visibility in domestic settings, revealing their hidden messages of a woman's right to be present or not in those roles.

In Bashida's performance, *175 to 350 5th Ave*, 2016, (Figure 10), she walked topless on Fifth Avenue combating the ideals of "neutrality" and "equality" of the female body compared to the male. The male body is continually seen as "neutral" in the 21st century, as it is socially acceptable for them to walk around topless in public spaces. Bashida felt liberated during her walk, embracing a "neutral (man's) perspective" in life. In New York it is legal for men and women to be topless in public. However, in 1967, Charlotte Moorman was arrested for performing topless in Paik's *Opera Sextronique*. (Figure 11) Moorman's art was an investigation with goals of being visibly heard by her audience. Bashida's goal or intention for her walk was for the public to perceive her body as neutral, "My body is female, it isn't necessarily sexual."¹⁰ Bashida, suffering from the verbal abuse received during her performance, stayed in bed the day after. Her walk, which was supposed to liberate her from the conditions of the female body, made her feel more trapped by male expectations regarding the female body. Feeling ugly and small-chested, she sulked all day in her bed.

The societal roles, perceptions, and obligations of the female that Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman, and Charlotte Moorman explored in their art created an important Femenist dialogue. Woman have

⁹Whitney, Chadwick, *Woman, Art, and Society*, (London: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2007) 383.

¹⁰ Avon Bashida, (artist), in discussion with the author, October 2016

choices in their representations—to be visibly truthful like Nan Goldin’s self portrait, or invisible and fictitious, like Cindy Sherman’s cultural narrative. Bashida’s art forces the viewer to visibly imagine themselves in her body of work, in the empty beds or exposed and vulnerable on the public avenue. *Assembling Time*, records Bashida’s emotions, actions, and thoughts on woman’s rights, domestic roles, and their most intimate moments without ignoring the fragility of the female soul surrounding societal pressures. Perhaps, in another 25,000 years, women will leave more than just a handprint behind.

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