

Essays Author: Laura Elliott (written 2003– 2007). No material from this site may be used without [requesting](#) my prior permission and must include a full reference to this page. All sources of information are referenced within the essays which have been written for academic assignments for my Art and media BA (Hons). All other copyright is hereby dually acknowledged.

---

“Discuss the representation of the female body as a self portrait within contemporary visual culture.”

---

Visual culture contains a vast array of imagery, ranging from cityscapes to the human form. The representation of the female form contains a complex set of “signifying practices and symbolic systems through which meanings are created” (Woodward, 1997:14). Female artists have used their own self image to challenge and explore the understanding of the female form and the feminist issues and societal attitudes contained within. A self-portrait is defined as “a picture, photograph or piece of writing that you make of or about yourself” (Cambridge Dictionary). Contemporary visual culture represents female self-portraiture in many different mediums; including photography, sculpture, painting, film and drawing. These representations often highlight extremely complex and diverse issues and themes, including representation, identification, meanings contained within visual culture and the body politics within society’s expectations of the female form. Dykstra (1995: 18) states that: “Metaphoric and symbolic uses of the body often reflect particular ideologies and relations of power within society.” This essay will focus on the intended and consequential signifiers and signs within Saville’s and Spence’s

representations of self, with supporting key texts, to identify third meanings denoted within their work; how they have represented self within their work, how this has been perceived by others and what society and individuals deem to be acceptable/ unacceptable within self-portraiture, including the male and female gaze.

Saville's work features large-scale paintings based on photographic images of herself in varying poses and positions. Her later work is influenced by photographic images of injured or unusual figures, with her face superimposed on the image, in place of the person in the original photograph. Her work explores a range of themes and concepts and Saville states that she is fascinated by "...the stories that imprint themselves on the body. Whether it's fat, injured, or scarred body, it has undergone a journey to get that way" (Holmes, 2003:144). Her work received public attention in 1994 when the London Saatchi Gallery held a solo exhibition of her work. Saville's work "...delves into the domains of plastic surgery, gender ambiguity, and disease, victimized, and brutalized bodies, all rendered in large-scale canvases with a candor that blatantly flouts conventional notions of taste." (Holmes, 2003:144)

Holmes states that Saville highlights and challenges the 'conventional notions of taste' and this can be clearly seen when we look at the first visual representation of the self by Jenny Saville titled 'Propped' (1992). This painting is on an enormous scale and towers over the viewer. Her over-weight body sits on top of a type of seat or pedestal, implying instability and insecurity within the piece. Her thighs are in the foreground which allows

every detail of the malleability of her own flesh to be seen. When this painting is viewed, a visual dialogue is developed between her body and identity. Her head is tipped backwards, in a way looking down her nose at the viewer, creating a type of arrogant confrontation. Holmes states that in this piece Saville "...rejects patriarchal clichés of female representation" (Holmes 2003:146) by the way that Saville scratches backward into the paint the words; "If we continue to speak in this sameness, speak as men have spoken for centuries, we fail each other again." Holmes raises a question of why she places her own face within the final painting of another as this "...avoids the relationship between the objectifying artist and the passive, often abject muse" (Holmes, 2003:146). This representation suggests Saville as the one with power; the viewer as powerless. Saville states that her "...overall objective was to try, visually, to find a female language and a feminine space" (Holmes, 2003:146). Her aim was to enable the female form, no matter what size that may be, to receive the same acknowledgement and support as that of the "...use of slender models, bordering on anorexic" (Sumner, 2003:22). Popular fashion and the slender body have "...remained a popular choice in fashion because these images are aimed at the female gaze" (Sumner, 2003:22) as 'slender' can be a representation of success; control over your weight will mean control in life. Woodward discusses these concepts by separating two concepts, the body and the self by stating that "...managing the flesh that we make visible to ourselves and others our inner intentions, capacities and dispositions" (1997:122-123). Sumner continues to develop the concept that the slender body implies success by stating "Women admire other women's bodies, judging their own sexuality and beauty by the images

produced in mass media” (Sumner, 2003:22). Saville produces a dichotomy within these issues by challenging the advertising industries’ normal signifiers of the conventional aesthetic female form by painting an over-weight female with such implied power (or for the female gaze). Contrast and conflict arises when are compared: two areas of popular cultural representations of the female form, that of fashion photography and glamour modeling. Fashion dictates that women should be “...lighter than the average woman...” (Summer, 2003, 22) but in contrast glamour models are somewhat “fleshier” (Summer, 2003, 22) where the focus is placed on breasts and other features. This raises the question of ‘gaze’ and the influence on such women if it is the ‘female gaze’ or the ‘male gaze’. The male gaze is of paramount importance for visual representations in glamour modeling. On the other hand the female gaze influences and guides the way women are portrayed in fashion photography. This questions that criticism or interpretation directed towards Saville’s representation of her body. It could be argued that criticism is raised from the female viewer and/ or gaze; however, this highlights a conflict in this supposition. Saville’s target audience could in fact be women, with the intention of creating a female language and feminine space from the female gaze. However, her work may have the contrary effect and may isolate her work from this target audience, due to the monstrous, over-weight and manipulated female form she paints. The viewers may have been influenced by the powerful idealistic female forms portrayed within the media and this ideal for many women could, therefore, allow a judgment by the viewer, thus averting the female gaze.

The photographer, Jo Spence addresses and explores issues of female representation by representing illness and self-portraiture within her work. Her work is categorized as phototherapy, which enabled her to work through her every day life in a photographic diary, documenting the experiences, thoughts, difficulties and frustrations she felt in relation to her identity and experiences as a woman. Her body was not slim, contrary to the social norm, and she was diagnosed and treated for breast cancer. She documented her journey through treatment for this disease in photography. Spence developed and altered her photographic images and meanings by including text written on her body for "...their personal resonance and their wider social significance" (Meskimmon, 1996:6). Within Scott's article 'Me, Myself and I' Spence stated "...I began to conceive myself as a set of signals and signs, all of which meant something to the viewer (including myself), which I could begin to control more by emphasizing or de-emphasizing as I wished." Therefore, by using her body within visual images she could further challenge social norms, in the same way as Saville, one of her aims being to challenge the fact that "...institutions define a ridged norm and create 'monsters' from all those who do not fit the pattern" (Meskimmon, 1996:7). The photograph by Jo Spence titled 'The Narrative of Dis-ease' (1990) denotes a deep meaning about the shape of her body: the sagging left-hand breast, the deep scar where the cancer was removed and the text MONSTER written across her chest. This visual representation of her body challenges and unashamedly illustrates that despite the fact her body will not fit into the 'norm' and therefore will be labeled a monster (Meskimmon, 1996:7), there is a degree of self identity expressed. Jo Spence talked in depth about her work and motivation to

photograph her life and body in phototherapy. She felt that her work communicated meanings and thoughts to viewers, that by documenting her own life she could reach out and help others to understand her and in turn their own identities and lives. This would support the notion and proposal, made by Spence that her work fitted into the category of phototherapy. It could be argued that the nature of her work, using her own experiences and body, is her own therapy and method to cope with life and her experiences as a woman; a secondary effect is for the benefit of others. She knew that by photographing images, such as her breast after surgery, the "...human tendency is to look away when faced with photographs of sickness and death" (Scott, 2003: 31). In understanding the viewers' response to look away she was highlighting her own feelings and mirroring the feelings of the viewer; illustrating her understanding and empathy towards other feelings and signifying that she wished to look away from her own illness. This was supported by Spence's co-worker, Denette, by stating that Spence "...saw herself as a symbol, a metaphor for many others in the same position" referred to as "Cancer Sisters" (Scott, 2003: 31). This detracts from the proposal that Spence wished to make a socially significant statement in her work, that in fact her intentions ran deeper and were on a more supportive and therapeutic level.

Katie Scott proposed that visual representations, by artists and photographers like Saville and Spence, were aimed to become "...body politic..." and that this aim encompassed and "...represented the concerns and fears of thousands" (Scott, 2003: 31). It could be suggested that their aim may be

misunderstood as vanity, maybe a narcissistic drive to represent their own image, suggesting an inflated opinion of their own image. On the other hand such a motivation could be a sign of immense courage. Placing their own image within their work opened to the attack and criticism by those that view their work. This takes the discussion back to the premise that the female ideal is always an influence as to how the viewer interprets and reacts to visual images. If such a female body is presented as not fitting the norms and, as Jo Spence describes as a “monster”, then the alternative message and intentions could be masked by society’s pre-conceived ideal of a woman. Scott suggests that women and “female subjects were always fixed in the male gaze” (Scott, 2003: 31) suggesting that men dominate and develop the social norms, however such self-portraits are conducive “...to be fixed upon by both the male and female gaze, but [that it] stares back to force us to recognize the universality of being human” (Scott, 2003: 31).

-----  
 Word Count: 1,770

---

### **Bibliography:**

- Adams, Brooks et al. ed. (1997). *Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection: Sensation*. London: Royal Academy of Arts.
- Armstrong, David and Goldin, Nan. (1994). *A Double Life*. New York: Scalo Publishers.
- Barthes, Roland. (1977). *Image-Music-Text*. London: Fontana Press.
- Bordo, Susan. (1993). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, western culture and the body*. Berkley, USA: University of California Press.
- Brownell, K.D. (1991). *Dieting and the Search for the Perfect Body: Where Physiology and Culture Collide*. Behavior Therapy, Vol 22, Pp. 1-12.
- Burgin, Victor (Ed.) (1982). *Thinking Photography*. London, Macmillan.

- Butler, Judith. (1990). *Gender Trouble- Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Dysktra, Jean. (1995). *Putting Herself in the Picture: Autobiographical Images of Illness and the Body*. *Afterimage*, Vol 23, Pp.16-20.
- Evans, Jessica et al. ed. (2000). *Identity; a reader*. London: Sage Publications.
- Feliciano, Kristina. (1997). Self- Portraits in the Third Person. *American Artist*, Vol 61, Pp 66-72.
- Foucault, Michel. (1980). *Power/ Knowledge*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Gett, Trevor. (2003). *Shock of the Nude*. *British Journal of Photography*. No 7369, March 13, pp. 16-17.
- Goldin, Nan and Kawachi, Taka. ed. (1998). *Nan Goldin: Couples and Loneliness*. Japan: Korinsha Press & Co Ltd.
- Goldman, Shifra. (1999). *Mirror Mirror on the Wall...* *Art Nexus*, No 32, Pp.72-76.
- Grant, Catherine. ( 2002). London. *Art Papers*, 26 (#4), pp.55-56.
- Gray, Louise. (2004). Nan Goldin. *Art Review*, 2 (#6), p.103.
- Halberstam, Judith. (2000). *The Body in Question: Transgender Images in Contemporary Visual Art*. *Make*, the magazine of women's art. No 88, Aug, pp. 37-38.
- Holmes Pernilla. (2003). *The Body Unbeautiful*. *Art News*, Vol 102, No10. Pp.144-147.
- Hopkinson, Amanda. (1987). *Jo Spence: Puts Herself in the Picture*. *Creative Camera*, No.2, Pp. 24-27.
- Kuhn, Annette. (1982). *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. London: Verso.
- Kuhn, Annette. (1985). *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*.
- Kuspit, Donald. *Jenny Saville's Tragic Women*. *Art*, Vol 24, No 5, August/ September 2003. Pp.13.
- Liu, Jui-Ch'i. *Francesca Woodman's Self Images: Transforming Bodies in the Space of Femininity*. *Women's Art Journal*, Vol 25, No 1, Spring/ Summer 2004. Pp.26-31.

McNay, Lois. (1992). *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*. Cornwall: Polity Press.

Meskimmon, Marsha. (2000). *Das: Atelier: Spatiality and Self-Portraiture in the Work of Grethe Jürgens*. *Women's Art Journal*, Vol 21, No 1. Pp. 22-26.

Mileaf, Janine. *Between You and Me: Man Ray's Object to be destroyed*. *Art Journal*, Vol 63, No1, Spring 2004. Pp.4-23.

Miller, Alicia. (2003). *Terms of Engagement*. *Art Monthly*, No 271, Pp.31-32.

Nead, Lynda. (1994). *Caught in the Act of Staring*. *Women's Art Magazine*. May/ June, Vol 58, pp. 18-19.

Pultz, John. (1995). *Photography and the Body*. London: Calmann and King Ltd.

Richardson, Diane. (1993). *Introducing Women's Studies*. Basingstoke, Macmillan.

Rideal, Liz. (2001). *Mirror Mirror: Self-Portraits by Women Artists*. London, National Portrait Gallery.

Salmon, Robin. (2000). *Through the Looking Glass: Feminine Self-image in Art*. *Sculpture Review*, Vol 49, No 3. Pp. 20-23.

Scott, Katie. (2003). *Me, Myself and I*. *British Journal of Photography*. March, Vol 150, pp 30-31.

Scott, Katie. (2003). *Me, Myself and I*. *British Journal of Photography*. Vol 150, March, pp. 30-31.

Spence, Jo. (1988). *Putting Myself in the Picture- A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography*. Seattle: The Real Comet Press.

Sumner, Dawn. (2003). *The Female Ideal*. *British Journal of Photography*. No. 7369, March 13, Pp. 22-23.

Thompson-Reid, Phyllis. (2004). *Nan Goldin- Dark Diary*. *Aperture*, No 176, Fall, Pp. 62-75.

Wark, Jayne. *Conceptual Art and Feminism*. *Women's Art Journal*, Vol 22, No1, Spring/ Summer 2001. Pp. 44-50.

Wolmark, J. (ed). (1999). *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

Woodward, Kathryn. ed. (1997). *Identity and Difference*. London: Sage Publications.

Jenny Saville 'Propped' (1992)



Propped | 1992 | oil on canvas, 213.5 x 183 cm

The Narrative of Dis-ease by Jo Spence

