The Female identity being performed -- Gender rebellion in Cindy Sherman's photography

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Abstract. Cindy Sherman is a post-modernist artist who uses photography to question and deconstruct traditional images of women. Sherman's Untitled Film Stills is a female self-portrait "parody", showing the performative characteristics of "female behavior" in many places. Judith Butler pointed out that the construction of female gender identity comes from "performativity", which has a connection to Sherman's work. Based on Judith Butler's gender theory, this paper analyzes Sherman's artistic techniques and the content of her works, pointing out how women's identities and bodies are subtly constructed and disciplined by behavioral language and symbolic chains in the media. In addition, this paper tries to prove that Sherman's critique of female identity is not radical but derived from a revision of the problem. Starting from the source, she distorts the details of traditional works to make the audience feel dissonance and realize the problem independently, finally achieving the purpose of deconstruction. Cindy Sherman attempts to use the method of parody and distortion (by creating dissonance) to illustrate that the discourse construction process of "gender" features is dominated by lots of symbolic features that people are used to performing, and what Sherman wants to deconstruct is not only the concept and characteristics of female identity, but also the limitations of female identity under the background of "performance", and more the process of how "performance" culture establishes this concept.

1. Introduction

Cindy Sherman (1954- ) is a famous contemporary American female photographer. She is an artist who is good at portraying typical female images in different periods of Western society through photography and was named one of the "25 Most Influential Artists of the 20th Century" by the American magazine Art News in 1999, which is on a par with long-established male giants such as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol. Sherman wears three hats--director, actor and photographer. With her post-modern artistic concept, avant-garde feminist attitude, and unique representation of self-directed and self-acting selfies, she covers all media and completely subverts the essence and function of art. Since 1975, Sherman has created a series of self-portraits, including Untitled Movie Stills, in which he has depicted various women. In these works, Sherman challenged the hegemony of the "male gaze" by means of "parody" and created "disturbing" viewing effects, thus activating the re-study of a series of modern visual art keywords with post-modern meanings, such as camouflage, performance, joking, defiance, subversion, irony, power, otherness, viewing and narrative. It also established a unique "Sherman-style" photography art landscape.

At present, there are many academic studies on Cindy Sherman's artworks, mainly from the two dimensions of "analysis and interpretation of photographic works" and "Cindy Sherman and the relationship between feminism". In addition, there are some studies from the political, fashion, mass media and other dimensions to explore Sherman's creation process and the inner meaning of his works. Among them, the famous American art critic Rosalind Krauss published her book Cindy Sherman 1975-1993 [1]. It includes Sherman's works in different periods from 1975 to 1993, reviewing Sherman's series of photographic works, and deeply explores the views of various philosophers and art historians on Sherman. In 2006, Johanna Burton published an art review magazine called October File 6: Cindy Sherman. It is a special journal on the study of Sherman's art, which has compiled many critical texts on Sherman, and has an authoritative academic status in the study of feminist ideology in Sherman's art [2].

Sherman's work is a female self-portrait "parody", showing the performative characteristics of "female behavior" in many places. Judith Butler believes that the construction of female gender identity comes from "performativity". Thus, Butler's theory coincides with Sherman's artwork. Although a few papers have done this in the past, most of them have cited Butler's theory as support rather than analyzing how it relates to Sherman's work and what parts of Sherman's work reveal the features of "performativity." Based on Judith Butler's gender theory, this paper mainly starts from analyzing Sherman's artistic techniques and the content of her works, pointing out how women's identity and
body are subtly constructed and disciplined by behavioral language in the media. Moreover, discuss two questions: whether Sherman's "parody" can really help deconstruct traditional female identity and male gaze; Why is this symbolic performance becoming more and more of a trend in the age of consumerism? Photography, not just static but now short videos and movies, has become one of the means of structuring and materializing the female body today. The interpretation of Sherman's works through Butler's theory can effectively help the public to understand and reflect on the methods of symbolizing female images and identities in the current new media art. At the same time, this paper is not only concerned with the analysis of Sherman's works of art but also directly clarifies its connection with Butler's gender theory with details, which points out the rationality of Butler's gender theory.

2. The construction of gender identity

In her book Gender Trouble, Judith Butler directly pointed out that "gender is culturally constructed"[3]. In her view, gender is not fixed but is a product of social and cultural construction and only has fictitious stability that can be deconstructed. Identity is formed by normative discourse relying on compulsively repetitive "performativity". In Bodies that Matter, Butler bluntly says, "The 'performativ[e] dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms......constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity"[4]. Coercive discourse makes the subject identity unable to get rid of these norms while excluding those non-normalized factors, which means that the construction and identification of the subject identity are completed through the exclusion of the "Other". The field of gender identity and its constitutive characteristics is constructed through the mutual contrast of the "constitutive outside" and "abjected outside". Female identity is constructed in the process of constantly referring to and re-performing the gender norms in society. In other words, the performer, "female", is not a pre-existing concept but is formed through a routine, restricted and forced repetition of the performativity. The acquired repetition of gender behavior is not a natural revelation of sexual identity but a series of behaviors formed by "teaching how to perform", which creates the illusion of female natural characteristics. In this sense, the repetition, indoctrination, and setting of enduring female identities and traits help to reinforce the boundaries and naturalization of gender identity. Therefore, questioning and deconstructing the above characteristics of gender identity can collapse the discourse power of gender identity, provide space for identity re-expression, trigger the reconstruction of female subject identity and prove the diversity of gender identity. In a word, the effective strategy of female identity deconstruction is to seek the method of re-expression and establish a dynamic and open representation of identity and its characteristics on the basis of performance behavior.

3. Representations of female identity

Cindy Sherman created the Untitled Film Stills series of 69 black and white photographs from 1977 to 1980. The photos are in a small, 8-by-10-inch format. Unlike the larger, 72-by-49-inch format, the smaller format makes it easier for the viewer to focus on specific details, such as composition lines and specific body shapes. Through these details, the voice-over arouses the imagination of the audience, allowing the audience to have a deeper understanding of the picture and Sherman's intention. Moreover, carefully designed angles, props and costumes make it easier to highlight the "unique characteristics and behaviors" of traditional women. By "parody" these features and behaviors that are utilized as a tool, Sherman attempts to deconstruct the particularity of female images and implies how the female identity is constructed, or in Butler's term ", performed".

3.1 The uneasiness of visual angle and scene

"Unease" has always been one of the emotions in Sherman's works. In some works of Untitled Movie Stills, Sherman makes the female characters in the photos in a passive and helpless situation through careful planning of the scene and composition so as to create a sense of unease. In "Untitled #48"(Fig.1), Sherman reduces the proportion of the woman in the picture, contrasting her with the dense woods behind her, the dense clouds in the sky and the wide, unknown road in front of her. Similarly, in #51(Fig.2), the woman is placed in a triangular area made up of stairs, a roof and walls. The women are confined to two narrow geometric Spaces -- the triangular area and the rectangular area of the picture itself. Compared with other background objects, women are petite, and the audience cannot extract the state of women "at the moment" because they cannot see the expression of women. Women's anxiety in the picture is infinitely amplified through the control of these two aspects. In addition, color contrast is one of Sherman's methods of creating uneasiness.

![Fig.1: Untitled Film Still #48](https://example.com/fig1.jpg)

Cindy Sherman 1979 18.9×24cm
Although "#54"(Fig.3) amplifies the proportion of women in the composition, it still presents a tense atmosphere -- one necessary for which is provided by the unfathomable darkness behind the woman. The strong contrast between the dark and cramped space of the picture and the women suggests that the women are in an unstable, unpredictable and restricted environment. By creating such scenes, women are seen by the audience as weak and passive beings. Sherman "performs" the status of female identity in society through composition and scene shaping and implies that the source of this state is the speculation of others.

3.2 The gaze of the body

Laura Mulvey once commented on Sherman's photography, "Sherman made her mark on the stage of history by establishing a culture of specific looks, especially women's looks" [6]. Modeled after pornographic magazines, Sherman used body postures, clothing and fabrics worn, and special camera angles to highlight "specific" features of women: breasts, hips and soft skin. Mulvey believes that Sherman's photography creates not only a sense of flatness but also destroys the composition space of traditional art through close-ups of cropped bodies, thus emphasizing the objectification of women's bodies. For example, in Untitled #2, #3, #6, and #15 (Fig.4.5.6.7), Sherman, or rather she imitated traditional magazines, used tight clothes, corsets, and V-neck to draw the viewer's attention to the women's raised breasts, as well as to the bare arms and thighs. In this way, Sherman accurately restored the standard female figure in popular culture by reproducing the female body as the character of the male gaze. These images not only satisfy certain male standards of female body beauty, but also the perspective of the photograph focuses the viewer's eyes on these features, forcing them to become "witnesses" to the features of a woman's image, and they have long been confined to a certain perspective, associating words such as "tall breasts" and "soft skin" with "beautiful women". Unconsciously, the beauty of women's physical features is solidified in these symbols, and female identity is associated with these features and embedded in the public consciousness through these widely circulated photographs, and gradually leads the audience, and even the women themselves, to constrain female features with conventional standards of beauty.
Sherman "re-imitates" the female body and dress in traditional magazines and movies, "perform" those attenuating postures, and "parodies" these symbols but satirizes the audience's gaze on the female body and solidifies female aesthetic standards. Unlike the "seductive" eyes of women in traditional films, the wandering eyes of the women in Sherman's photographs are in stark contrast to the viewer's gaze on the photographs. It also undermines the certainties (such as fixed poses) of the picture -- the "supposed" look of women as constructed by the magazine. In doing so, Sherman questions the viewer's gaze on the female body and popular standards of femininity. In addition, she liberated the audience from stereotypes by "acting out" traditional magazine femininity and combining it with a wandering eye. Sherman used eyes to deconstruct the audience's gaze on the female body, and she made the women in her works be restored into a mentally paranoid and possessed individual, as well as human beings with personal feelings and thoughts.

3.3 Articles bound by identity

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard pointed out that post-modern "reality" is no longer a production space but a reading chain, the symbolized chain [7]. By creating a variety of symbol chains, the mass media binds people's cognition of "reality" to the "meaning" of symbols so as to make symbols more "realistic halo" [8]. Sherman "parodies" the general means of operation of mass media, revealing how they use the performance of female models to bind specific "symbols" to the public's understanding of female identity and characteristics. In "#3" (Fig.5) and "#35" (Fig.8), Sherman performed the typical housewife image at different times. In both works, Schoeman used the same prop - an apron. In "#35" (Fig.8), the apron with strong color contrast to highlight its presence; In the third episode, Sherman uses kitchenware, a woman's waist bow and other elements to remind the audience of the aprons. The link between the three symbolic concepts of the apron, women and housework is constructed through the public's perception of the meaning of the apron, which is related to housework activities. The object, the apron, and its chain of symbols (such as being good at cleaning) were transferred into femininity and became one of the criteria by which it was constructed. However, according to the "performance" method of mass media, the relationship between the woman in the image and the apron must be harmonious, but Sherman destroys this sense of "harmony". For example, in #3, messy kitchen utensils, women's expression that they are not focused on housework and the function of the apron (including "women are good at housework") create a sense of contradiction.
In addition to aprons, cosmetics, headscarves and high heels also frequently appear in Sherman's photos, which have been constructed by mass media as objects related to "women" in real society. These props repeatedly appear in Sherman's works as representations of female identity corresponding to the traditional symbol chain. However, Sherman deconstructs the relationship between the symbol chain of these objects and women. By performing other objects, body language and facial expressions of characters in an uncertain or even contrary way, she breaks the relationship between objects and female behaviors. As a result, the feminine identity is no longer confined by object symbols within the symbol chain group. In the article Cindy Sherman: Untitled, Krauss uses Roland Barth's "Myth theory" to uncover the metaphorical interpretation of all of Sherman's photos and regards it as the revelation of "Myth" [9]. According to Balter's interpretation of "Myth", in order to cut off the symbolic chain and femininity, Sherman first show the manipulative method of signifier and signified in female mythology, that is, make these manipulative traces completely visible through "parody" and make the meeting point between the chains ineffective. Finally, Sherman challenges the boundaries among body, self and identity by deconstructing the relationship between the symbolic chain and female definition.

4. Discussion
As Butler's concept of "performativity" points out, female identity is gradually constructed through the chain of repeated spoken symbols in social culture and people's performance of these symbol chains. In order to reinforce the meaning of female identity, popular culture continuously produces cultural products (e.g. pornographic magazines) and plays out these "specific" symbolic chains. Cindy Sherman recognizes this and says she wants her work to imitate something outside the culture and make fun of it in that way [10]. "Untitled Movie Stills" is good proof of this point. Sherman uses these photos to "act out" the design intentions and methods of classic works in the social and cultural field but actually deconstructs them. Sherman said the reason she did not show her actual nude body was essential that she did not think it was a credible form because it automatically suggested, "Please look at this carefully" It is too suggestive of female sexuality. Especially since people are so obsessed with what women really look like, it has the opposite effect.

However, Sherman's tongue-in-cheek "parody" has been questioned. While "re-performing" these classic female images, Sherman also makes her intention to deconstruct traditional female identity and characteristics blurred. In particular, when Sherman reverted to 1950s clothes and makeup, her methods were fiercely criticized by Mulvey, who said she was engaged in a "fetishism" [11]. In other words, her appearance was still the same as Butler's criticism, performing the characteristics of female "beauty," as if she herself were trapped by this social norm. Is she really resisting the male gaze?

Unlike many feminist artists in the 1970s, such as singer Madonna, who also imitated many female images and was more reckless about showing her body, Sherman's Untitled series has always been regarded as passive, as if she never got rid of the shackles of the problem itself in the process of revealing that female identity is constructed. However, from another level, what Sherman wants to deconstruct is not only the concept and characteristics of female identity but also the limitations of female identity under the background of "performance" and the process of how "performance" culture establishes this concept. As Roland Barthes pointed out, the best way to fight myth is in the return of myth [12]. Thus, Sherman's critique of female identity is not radical but derived from a revision of the problem. Starting from the source, she distorts the details of traditional works to make the audience feel dissonance and realize the problem independently, finally achieving the purpose of deconstruction.

5. Conclusion
In the stage of the post-modern art revolution, Cindy Sherman appeared. Through the analysis of Cindy Sherman's photographic works, it can be found, with the iconic techniques of selfies and parody, she did not blindly follow the mainstream aesthetic and values of society at that time. With more than 600 mysterious self-portrait characters, she reproduced female images of different ages and identities in Western society, challenged the stereotypes of women in society, explored the way of innovation of photographic concepts, and became one of the most influential female artists in the field of post-modern art. Untitled Film Stills series is Cindy Sherman's first influential work. Sherman uses her own body as a medium to express the shaping process of female identity in the whole society. The individual in her works is not only an independent image in a work of
art but more a representation of female collective identity. Sherman's art attempts to correct the fragmented individualism of today's world by relocating the individual within the whole picture of the human environment; she assumes different female identities without pointing to any particular person. It is this uncertain female individual that deconstructs the symbolic myth associated with women and reveals the process of female identity being shaped. Sherman recognizes those fixed identity concepts surrounding women, and she parodies the construction process and form of these symbolic myths, suggesting the possibility of women's self-authorization in reality.

It can be said that this exactly shows the difference between Sherman and early feminist artists because, as Derrida said, it is impossible to overturn the binary opposition of Western metaphysical tradition, so it is difficult to change the concept of female identity by deconstructing the ideology based on female identity. The problem lies in how to present the shaping process. It is Sherman's intention to erode his construction in a subtle way. That is what Butler's theory says. Today, it is through the repeated performativity act of these characteristics that the definition of women is constructed, which leads to the past women being covered in these symbolic definitions, and finally being materialized into those single images in social life. Cindy Sherman attempts to use the method of parody and distortion (by creating dissonance) to illustrate that the discourse construction process of "gender" features is dominated by lots of symbolic features that people are used to perform, while the real definition of "female" is more than these symbolic chains, or not so.

It should be noted that although this study directly analyzes Sherman's photographic works, proves in detail the intersection between some of the details and Judith Butler's theory, and points out that Sherman's contribution to gender rebellion is internal and formal, it also has some defects. On the one hand, this study selected a small number of Sherman's works, did not carry out a more perfect analysis; On the other hand, this study does not specify in detail the practical value of Sherman's works to Butler's theory. These problems are waiting for the complement and improvement of later, and also look forward to further refutation and deepening on this basis.

References