# Before the Camera

*An Essay on the Works of Chuck Samuels*

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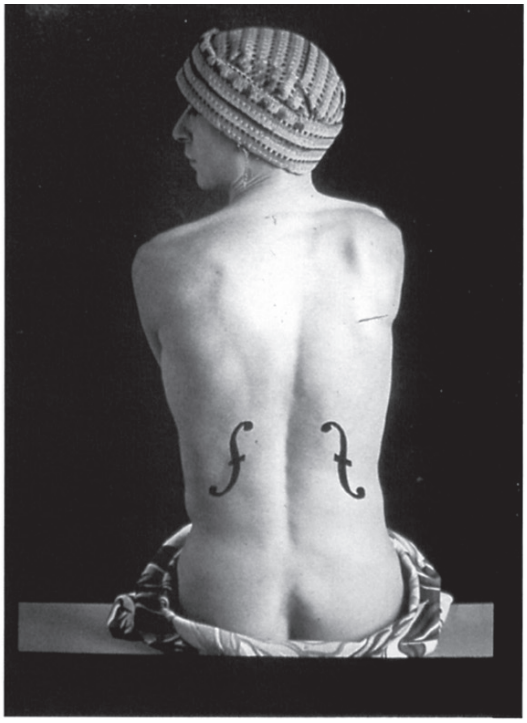

Chuck Samuels, *After Man Ray*, 1990

In Man Ray's photograph *Le Violon d'Ingres (1929)*, a young woman is seated with her bared back towards the viewer, her turbaned head turned to the left shows her face in profile. A piece of patterned fabric is gathered around her buttocks, as though she has just disrobed for the camera, revealing two black *f*-shaped sound holes seemingly pierced through her back. She is bathed in a luminous light, her white skin contrasted against a black background. This beautiful and simple photograph is emblematic for me: a reminder of some complex issues, all of which are bound up with my early photographic education and subsequent and evolving feminist consciousness.

As a photography student in the mid 1970s, I was taught to revere the "masters" of Modernist photography - Stieglitz, Strand, Weston, Kertesz, and Callahan were among my favourites. We were taught the importance of their images, for their authors - all men - were responsible for photography's ascent to the status of art. In this milieu, no one ever questioned the boundaries between art and experience. And no one ever articulated the extent to which sexism dominates photographic history.

When I began reading feminist theory in the early 80s I started to question what I'd been taught in school. Through my new-found feminist eyes, I saw that throughout Western art history the female body has been mined as an inexhaustible source for artists. Within this history, the experiences and self-expressions of women have been usurped by white male perspectives, to be exoticized, objectified and consumed. These representations succeed in evacuating the historical specificity of women's lives, for through them, women are reduced to the status of objects. I had grown so accustomed to seeing women as spectacle that I too had taken the female form for granted.

Sadly, I came to believe that my beloved Surrealists were guilty of these "crimes against women." But I also learned how photographs function ideologically, as products of a patriarchal society. Cultural theorists such as Roland Barthes and Allan Sekula have emphasised that a subject is always manipulated no matter how *real* or objective a photograph seems. Despite the recent proliferation of deconstructivist art practices, the fact that a photograph is constructed is something we tend to forget as we look to photographs to "serve as an infallible barometer of true experience."(1) And this phenomenon would seem to be at work in looking at art photographs as well.

Returning to *Le Violon d'Ingres*, it is well enough to admire Man Ray's humour and clever reference to art history, but his photograph also exemplifies 'woman as object.' And so it seemed that one of my favourite images had been irreversibly transformed into a statement about the role of women in art history. Yet it also became clear to me, by virtue of its obvious construction (both in front of the camera and in the darkroom), that this photograph also serves to contest the notion of the naturalness of the photographic act.

For these reasons, *After Man Ray (1990)* is the perfect first image in Chuck Samuels' series *Before the Camera.* Samuels has meticulously reconstructed the props, lighting, print quality and even the original framing of "classics" by Man Ray, Bellocq, Weston, Outerbridge, Bullock, Callahan, Gibson, Gowin, Krims, Newton, Mapplethorpe and Avedon. These reconstructions, however, are produced with a post-modern twist: Samuels has photographed himself in the role of the female subject/object. Standing in the place of these famous female models, his (male) body becomes a site of contention of gender conventions.

At first glance, *Before the Camera* could be seen simply as a narcissistic spoof - a kind of photo-history drag show. In a dozen constructed personae, we witness Samuels' impersonations of famous female subjects. His recurring body is chameleon-like; however, what this clever parody succeeds in doing is revealing the ease with which we accept the female body as a site for fantasy and consumption.

The success of this series depends, in part, on the selection of photographs which Samuels' re-enacts - he assumes that the viewer is familiar with at least a few

of the original photographs. Reading Samuels' body through our memory of the original sets up a layering and a flipping of gender expectation and "we see the object by means of an act of displacement, defined through a gesture of substitution." (2) So in part, the work also relies on a kind of domino effect: our reading of a gender flip in a familiar image reverberates to the other, less-familiar images.

By personalizing the iconic, Samuels' re-enactments perform a necessary distanciation and we suddenly become aware of the artifice of the original image. For viewers familiar with any of these photographs, one becomes aware of how accepting we have become of the naturalness of the objectification and commodification of women for "art's sake." It is because of the creation of this rupture that the series succeeds in converting acceptable conventions into the ridiculous. For example, we may read *After Bullock* as a disjunctive image, but this is based upon the disruption of normative gender expectations. The equation *woman=nature* no longer makes sense, and Samuels' version folds back in on itself to reveal the constructedness of the photographic image.

As a whole, *Before the Camera* reminds us of the inherent sexism of the nude genre - that the women who figure in the original photographs are constructed as objects of no particular experience or identity. As Liz Magor writes: "[in] looking at photographs of models ... one tries to look under the skin for a name or a notion of the self ... [b]ut consistently the body remains generic in the studio; it's not a body but a figure, and no particular person resides there." (3) The photographer's treatment of a model doesn't tell the viewer anything about her as an individual, as much as it refers to aesthetic, stereotypical and mythic conventions regarding the female form.

*Before the Camera* is also a provocative series in that it asks us to consider what it means that a man poses as a woman. On one level, some of the images succeed in creating a gay or transvestite character. In *After May Ray*, *After Gibson*, *After Bellocq* and *After Avedon*, Samuels' dons signifiers of femininity - nail polish, jewellery, nylons - on a distinctly male body. This "dressing up" results in a humourous inversion of gender and sexuality. As such, these particular works may elicit speculation about Samuels' sexual orientation and, more importantly, they throw into question the existence of a normative heterosexual gaze by disrupting the pervasive assumption of heterosexuality within the viewer-model-artist triad.

On another level, this series paradoxically reveals that man cannot attempt to replace woman, without grave consequences. As such, Samuels' project importantly opens up some of the real problems that are raised by this strategy of appropriation as it necessarily involves appropriating the position of the 'other' - by literally standing in her shoes. Yet his experience "as woman" exists temporarily, for he is merely a visitor to the spaces he constructs, able to step out of the role at any time. *Before the Camera* raises important questions about what happens when a man undertakes a feminist agenda. Are the results more palatable? Are the risks the same for men as for the women who are concerned with changing the status quo? If Samuels believes that in order to change the social inequalities in our culture, men must critique the representation of women in which they (men) are deeply implicated, he knows that he can never truly "become" woman in these performances. But what he can know is what it is like to be involved in a process of objectification from both sides of the camera.

It is difficult to deny Samuels' debt to a range of feminist art practices. The first significant wave of feminist artists in the 1970s began to question representational conventions with respect to gender, paving the way for future generations of artists. In reaction to much of the "body art" produced by men, artists such as Americans Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin and Canadians Lisa Steele, Suzy Lake and Sorel Cohen began using themselves as subjects in videos, performances and photography. As critic Lucy Lippard states, "when women use their bodies in their art work, they are using their selves; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject." (4) During the 1980s, the further politicisation of the portrait genre by Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence opened up a significant space for feminist re-interpretations of the representation of women in popular culture.

The post-modern wave of the 1980s (including both theory and art practices) demonstrated that deconstruction was a successful strategy for critiquing and understanding representations. Artists such as Connie Hatch, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince employed various strategies of appropriation to deconstruct assumed notions about the veracity of the photograph. More recently, Yasumasa Morimura, Deborah Bright, Lorna Simpson and Tseng Kwong Chi (artists for whom I have a particular affinity) have radically reinterpreted the photographic self-portrait to examine issues of the representation of race, gender and sexuality.

As my own photographic practice has developed, in reaction to the constructions of both femininity and lesbian sexuality in popular culture, I came to understand why I had such a passion for Man Ray's work. "As an

avatar of deconstructivist practice and theory, [Surrealism] supplies a rationale both for photography's position within the art world and for those photographic practices that seek to disorient and disrupt conventional responses to images." (5) Yet, as Grundberg also points out, there are crucial differences:

"Today's photography is a response to living in a world in which what challenges reality is simulated reality, not surreality. Ours is quite a different situation from that of the Surrealists, who saw reality as a screen ... that masked the irrational, chaotic, childlike, and presumably genuine arena of the subconscious. Today, the subconscious is no longer perceived as innocent of culture." (6)

By sampling cultural representations of the female body, Samuels' series disrupts and critiques conventions of the female nude in photographic history. Its key effect is that it unsettles something that was fixed, by transforming the familiar into the strange. *Before the Camera* emphasises the necessity of re-interpreting history in order to speak about our complicity regarding the nature of representation. And while I laugh along with Samuels' work and marvel at his incisive revisions, the "masters" will always have a special place in my photographer's heart. But this affinity is now framed by an evolving feminist perception within which Samuels' series has left an indelible mark.

**Endnotes**

1. Andy Grundberg, "On the Dissecting Table: The Unnatural Coupling of Surrealism and Photography" in *The Critical Image*, edited by Carol Squiers, Bay Press, Seattle, 1990, p.87.
2. Rosalind Krauss, preface to *Poetic Injury*, p.4, quoted in Andy Grundberg, p.86.
3. Liz Magor, "Auto Portrait" in *Instabili: La Question du Sujet*, La Centrale/Artextes, Montreal, 1990, p.42.
4 . Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art", in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, E.P. Dutton & Co Inc, New York, 1976, p.124.
5. Grundberg, p.86.
6. Ibid, p.86.