WOMEN WITH ATTITUDE: PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

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Image 1: Group © Grace Hall

The Aim of the Project

The aim of this project, which took some time to refine and develop, was to explore the older woman, her sense of style, and zest for life as she continues to manage the

physical challenges that come with the ageing body.

Research

Research for the project covered several different theoretical strands, clothing and identity, ageism in relation to the older woman, and the use of a collaborative process between photographer and subject(s).

In relation to fashion, Malcolm Barnard states 'Fashion has a critical function in that it draws attention to the constructed nature of identity,' (Barnard, 2002, p.167). In other words our clothes are like a text, which we compose, and which is read by others. Barnard expresses this view when he states 'fashion and clothing are communication because they are ways in which meanings are exchanged,' (Barnard, 2002, p.193). Women all spend time each day deciding what to wear, what to buy when shopping for clothing, etc. Why is this? What do women look for when they shop - fashion, style? Are they choosing the materials with which to curate themselves; to dress for a 'performance'; to create the image, which they want others to see, i.e. their identity as exemplified by their clothing? Erving Goffman was of the view that each time a person goes out into the public space, 'frontstage', they attempt to control the impression others might have of them by various strategies, one of which is, though his/her appearance, i.e. how they dress.

Concerning ageism in relation to older women, my research for my graduate dissertation made me very aware of the deleterious effects on, not only the older woman, but also our culture in general, by the failure of the media to image the older woman as she is. Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004) sums up the situation in relation to this failure, and the problems thus created for society as a whole when she states,

> A culture needs to see people of all ages on the stage of the world, rather than the increasing *disappearance of older default bodies* that results from the cult of youth, marketing to youth, midlife downsizing, age segregation in housing, and so on' ... 'All these practices confirm younger people in their culturally cultivated inability to imagine older people as viable centres of self ... In midlife and old people the absence of same-age bodies in visual culture constantly reinforces

decline feelings, to the point where terrifying nonbeing is a risk, (p.178).

While carrying out research for my dissertation, I came across an a body of work entitled *The Representing Self – Representing Ageing* initiative, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (the ESRC) in the UK as part of the New Dynamics of Ageing cross-council research programme in the UK. The part of the initiative I was interested in comprised four collaborative projects, which were carried out between groups of older women and artists (painters and photographers) by means of which they explored their life narratives and ageing. The research process, which included, *inter alia*, interviews with participants both before and after each collaborative project, was documented by Susan Hogan and Lorna Warren in an article entitled *Dealing with Complexity in Research Processing and Findings: How Do Older Women Negotiate and Challenge Images of Ageing?* (2012). This research gave me the idea to make the project a collaborative one, in which the voice of the participants would play a pivotal part.

In relation to photographers which influenced me, Ari Seth Cohen, and his blog *Advanced Style*, had an influence, as did the work of two photographers who took part in the above initiative, Laura Pannack, and Monica Fernandez.

A further influence was the sixth day - the intense phototherapy workshop, run by Rosy Martin as part of the same initiative.

Development

The project was originally proposed as a kind of fashion shoot using older women as models, and in relation to this early proposal I had made contact with a hat designer, Sarah McGahon. When the project changed focus completely as outlined above, I kept in contact with Sarah who helped find some of the participants. Others were friends, and their friends. At the beginning only two of the participants were previously known to me.

Initially, I held a meeting in my house with all the volunteers at which I outlined the project and what their role would be as collaborators in the project. I decided to set a series of themes for each shoot. These themes merely formed a framework for each

shoot, within which each participant was be totally free to interpret the theme. Initially the themes comprised:

1. Clothing which the participants liked themselves, and in which they felt good.
2. A second theme was the 'special event'. All older women have attended, or will attend a family wedding or major birthday. Women want to look good, especially if she is the mother or grandmother of one of the couple getting married. Choosing an outfit for such an occasion can take up a lot of time, is stressful, and can contain much self-doubt – is it too young? Do I look ridiculous? Will others say I am mutton dressed as lamb? These are the kinds of questions that an older woman asks herself in such a situation.
3. A third theme was 'dressed up' to go out to meet a friend, go to lunch.
4. Scarves are an important means by which women individualise clothing; a further set of images would demonstrate how the participants use such scarves/shawls.

Image 2: Geraldin, aged 62 © Grace Hall

5. In the previous four shoots the work was made using the studio space where the subjects and photographer engaged in a negotiated dialogical exchange using the conventions of the formal portrait and performance. However, a fifth studio shoot took place, in which the women had a chance to make all the decisions themselves to 'perform' wearing what they liked. No tripod was used, but as the women moved around, grab shots were taken to try to capture the 'performative' element of each of the women.

Image 3: Avril & Avril © Grace Hall

Questionnaires were prepared for each shoot, exploring different aspects of the participants' relationship with their clothes, their identity and how they set about creating this identity. From these questionnaires, a profile was created for each participant, using their words. This profile was used in the book to introduce each participant. (Copies of the completed questionnaires are available on the DVDs I prepared to share with Summer School).

The final element comprised videoed interviews with each of the participants, where they had the opportunity to talk about themselves, the ageing process, the images taken of them, and what participation in the project meant to them – for instance, had it changed or made them more aware of the relationship between clothing and their identity?

The Parish Hall of my local church was used all day on a Friday for the shoots. It was an ideal space, which allowed me not only to set up a studio area, but also gave the participants a comfortable area to 'hang around' in while they waited their turn.

For shoots 1 - 3, the formal studio portrait technique was used against a black backdrop. Two lights were used a backlight and a reflector dish with reflector card on the far side. For the remaining shoots the area was flooded with light which allowed me to dispense with the tripod and shoot freely.

Image 4: Brigid, aged 62 © Grace Hall

The videos were shot in two sessions. The participants had thought a lot about what they wanted to say, one or two brought written notes. They were shot in short clips, as this made it easier for them to 'draw breath' as it were.

Outcomes

I believe the main outcome of the project is, that through my working methods, the participants became relaxed enough in the presence of the camera, each other, myself and my assistant to enable me to give them a voice. All the women loved participating in the project and for some it was a means of enablement. I think it has also shown me, that as a photographer, I must stand back sometimes and let things happen. By the last shoot I found I was photographing in much the same way as I do when photographing dance performance, grabbing the moment. I think it is very interesting how the project developed 'legs' so to speak and took off in its own direction, though still within the overall remit of the brief I set myself.

Image 5: Zan, aged 70 © Grace Hall

Negative aspects

The project might be criticised for the fact that:

- The women could be perceived to belong to a similar middle class, comfortably off group, that it did not therefore give the views of older women from mixed socio economic groups. I believe this is a valid criticism, however, the project was envisioned and carried out in a four-month time frame, and I had to rely on friends and others to put together a group of women aged 60+. On the positive side, I believe that this body of work can form the basis of a much larger research project, where groups of women from different socio/economic backgrounds can participate in a similar process, and by examining the outcomes of these further explorations for commonalities and

differences between the different groups, some interesting data on the older woman might be revealed;

- There was an overemphasis on fashion in the research. Again, I believe this is a valid criticism and should I go forward with the project, I would certainly re-examine the methodology to be used, but I would also refer back to the theories of Erving Goffman in relation to appearance.

Image 6: Georgina, aged 90 © Grace Hall

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