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Going Beyond the Photo-Archive

The Significance of Fantasy and Photo-Reflexivity in Zoe Crosher's *The Michelle duBois Project*

by

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Abstract

Zoe Crosher is a contemporary American artist who creatively bends and tests the conventions of photography. She combines fact and fiction to create ambiguous documents and semi-imaginative narratives. This thesis addresses some key concepts in contemporary feminist photography through an examination of Crosher's *The Michelle duBois Project* – an extensive photo-archival project in which Crosher appropriated, re-contextualized and intervened in the found archive of a 'mysterious' amateur photographer named Michelle duBois. Travelling and working in Asia and the Pacific Rim throughout the 1970s and 80s, duBois took on many different costumed guises, names and identities – all of which were obsessively documented and kept in an impressive archive. Crosher 're-activated' duBois' archive through numerous creative activities that further highlight the materiality of photographic reproduction and the imminent decline of analog photo technologies. In exploration of duBois' playful self-portraits, I investigate how Crosher's formal interventions in the images challenge the means by which feminine identity, fantasy narratives and archives are structured visually. Ultimately, I suggest that the project is less about exposing Michelle duBois' persona and more about the overall impression of an endless accumulation of images framed by Crosher's vigilant archival and curatorial undertakings. Therefore, the main argument of this thesis is structured around an understanding of Crosher's multilayered project as a practice of meta-reflection on the creative process itself; that is, an exciting investigation of photography's new possibilities.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

> *I don't mistrust reality, of which I know next to nothing. I mistrust the picture of reality conveyed to us by our senses, which is imperfect and circumscribed*
> – Gerhard Richter, 1972.

In early 2013, I visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was MoMA's annual New Photography exhibit where I first came across an intriguing series of photographic portraits by American artist, Zoe Crosher [1], entitled, *The Michelle duBois Project* (also known as *The Reconsidered Archive of Michelle duBois*). I remember being impressed by how consciously 'retro' and amateur the pictures were while also appreciating their formal qualities, glossiness, and rigorous stylization. Yet, perhaps, more importantly, I was puzzled by the ambivalent expressions these pictures conveyed - I kept wondering who are all those bewigged blond women dressed in cliché guises? They seemed to portray a parody of feminine tropes. I then realized that I was looking at a series of 'flirtatious' self-portraits culled from an extensive photo-archive of one woman named Michelle duBois.

According to the 'story', duBois was an all-American girl from Oklahoma, a flight attendant and an occasional escort, who traveled and worked in Asia and the Pacific Rim throughout the 1970s and 1980s. During that time, duBois took thousands of pictures of herself posing as a 'glamour' model, a tourist, or a so called 'femme fatale'. Her photographs undoubtedly depict duBois'

[1] Zoe Crosher (born 1975) is an American artist who lives and works in Los Angeles, California. Crosher received her MFA from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 2001. She served as Visiting Professor at UCLA and Art Center as well as Associate Editor at the journal, *Afterall*. Her work was included in the 2010 California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art, California, and she has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States. Her work was also included in MoMA's annual New Photography show in the fall of 2012. From 2013-2015, Crosher collaborated with the Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND) on *The Manifest Destiny Billboard Project*, a series she initiated of artist-produced billboards and activations that unfolded all along the Interstate 10 Freeway. She is currently working on a forthcoming book, *The Good & The Glamorous: a Memoir of Misremembering*, and preparing for a solo exhibition at The Aspen Museum for Winter 2017 ("Aperture - Photographs by Zoe Crosher", web).

obsession with herself as well as with a certain style of beauty and sexuality. Interestingly, Michelle duBois' constructed biography is an amalgamation of real places and candid snapshots combined with fictional names and false trajectories. duBois' actual identity remains contested. According to writer Catherine Wagley, duBois "did, in fact, exist. It's just that, at least in the account her photographs give, she never stayed one thing long enough for it to feel more than imaginary, more than just one possible idea of what she might be" (Wagley, "The Fantasy in Crisis").[2]

This multi-year and multi-layered project began in 2004 when duBois bequeathed Crosher with her extensive legacy – revealing her experiments with photography and self-expression, as well as make-up, wigs and costumes. Since then, Crosher has re-purposed and re-worked the found material to re-activate the archive and finally re-compose duBois' character. By re-photographing, scanning, manipulating and re-ordering the original images, Crosher essentially re-contextualized and re-materialized duBois' archive - turning her images into museum objects. When evaluated as a whole, duBois' photographs tackle cultural conventions of gender and identity while critically questioning the 'magic' of photography and the validity of narratives at a moment characterized by primacy of the 'fast and digital', or in other words, 'at the end of the analog paradigm'. Beyond that, Crosher demonstrated how through the recovering ('re-archiving') of old photographs and hidden albums of an unknown female practitioner, "the unfamiliar has become familiar [and] the forgotten is made visible… the discarded became regarded" (Bate 115).

Drawing upon the legacies of conceptual art and the postmodernist critique of representation, Crosher generated throughout the project a conceptual and physical inability to see duBois. Ironically, despite duBois' life-long fascination with self-documentation that resulted in an extensive series of "glamorous" self-portraits, the pictures as well as her re-organized archive refuse to neither

[2] A general comment regarding in-text citations: In cases where page numbers were not available (e.g., Internet sources, non-paginated articles), I have included the word 'web' or a short title in quotation marks in lieu of page numbers. The full bibliography entries include a URL.

convey a biographical sequence nor expose anything substantial about the 'real' Ms. duBois. Evidently, in having appropriated duBois' personal archive and by creating so-called 'pictures of pictures', Crosher not only emphasized the images materiality/physicality, but she continuously worked towards undermining our basic expectations of an 'authentic' documentation, or merely self-revelation, through portraiture photography. The viewer, therefore, is bound to oscillate between notions of certainty and uncertainty concerning the authenticity of duBois' archive and identity. Crosher indeed tested the boundaries between fiction and documentary seeing that "ambiguity of truth" and the "fiction of any sort of totality" were two motivating themes behind 'the duBois Project'. Accordingly, Soutter, characterized Crosher's work as "a slippery portrait project," and she stressed, our "sense of duBois as a person is fragmented, schizophrenic" (Soutter 14-16).

While on the surface, duBois' snapshots are convincingly amateurish and straightforward, Crosher's formal interventions in the images (e.g., re-photographing, scanning, cropping, layering, obscuring, and erasing elements) ultimately formulate a strong sense of ambiguity, as if despite the carefully constructed presentation of her portraits, Crosher deliberately prevents the viewer from establishing any context of meaning for duBois' personal narrative. To be sure, the project's inherent ambiguity, its layered meaning, and acute self-reflexiveness make it an excellent case study for issues associated with conceptual and postmodernist art, feminism, amateur photography, and archival art to name but a few. Yet, perhaps, most importantly, like many of her contemporaries, Crosher's art engages with a sort of "photo poetics", that is, according to Guggenheim curators, Jennifer Blessing and Susan Thompson, "an art that self-consciously investigates the laws of photography and the nature of photographic representation, reproduction, and the photographic object" (Blessing and Thompson, web).

Importantly, as this thesis will demonstrate, Crosher's project is not only an exploration of how culture constructs the feminine 'self' but it is equally a reflective investigation of the processes of art

making and the idiosyncrasies of the photo-archive. The mixture of fact and fiction coupling Crosher's experiments with the materiality of the photographs have led to the various iterations of the archive being presented in a series of evolving artist books and museum/gallery exhibitions curated by Crosher. In my view, the multiplicity of thematic perspectives Crosher has employed thorough the project and the formal/conceptual configurations of the archive is what makes the duBois Project so fascinating for analysis. My research focuses on contextualizing Crosher's work within the tradition and discourse of contemporary feminist art-photography, while evaluating the project in terms of the cultural critic and feminist 'fantasy' that it stages through its archival and curatorial framing. Therefore, I suggest that Crosher's art should be interpreted, first of all, in relation to postmodernist and feminist criticality (and self-reflexiveness), just as I will demonstrate in Chapter One.

In my research, I consulted a wide range of references to the *Michelle duBois Project*. These included relevant academic scholarship as well as exhibition catalogs, exhibition reviews, press releases, interviews, websites, presentations, and video segments. It should be noted that while Crosher's work is referred to quite extensively in popular media (i.e., online/print press, journals, art magazines), there is little in the way of scholarly publication dedicated to her work. The reason for this lack of academic literature might be that Crosher is still considered a mid-career artist whose work is yet to receive international acclaim. Nevertheless, Soutter's latest publication, *Why Art Photography?* (2013), should be acknowledged in this respect as it provides an important scholarly analysis of the duBois Project. Focusing on the employment of traditional genres in contemporary photography, Soutter examines Crosher's formal and conceptual re-configurations of the genre of self-portraiture, finally characterizing duBois' reworked photographs as a "hybridized" form of portraiture (Souter 28). Likewise, Crosher's four-volume artist books published between 2011-2012 by 'Aperture Ideas', were also valuable for my research. Each volume includes an introduction and

essay written by different scholars and writers who tackled the duBois Project from a number of perspectives.[3]

The majority of publications that have concentrated on the duBois Project tend to focus on the fictional aspects of duBois' multiple personas and the stylistic elements of her photographic archive. Various writers also address the idea of traveling and personal transience (seeing that duBois lived and worked in Asia and the Pacific Rim) in relation to feminist liberation or to the sociopolitical contexts of the 1970s and 80's. In consideration of these texts, I decided to further elaborate on the 'institutional' framework of this project, that is, Crosher's position as a contemporary archival artist and curator. Analyzing her working methods as an artist-archivist-curator in the context of MoMA's *New Photography* exhibition, one of the main questions I grappled with throughout this research is, what is indeed *new* or unconventional about Zoe Crosher's approach to photography? Accordingly, I utilized a wide selection of visual resources, including Crosher's exhibition and installation views, in order to present a visual analysis of the technical and curatorial strategies Crosher used when she presented the project at museums and galleries.

This thesis sets out to explore and foreground the artistic processes that make up the multiplicity of duBois' character and the fictive nature of her archive. As I demonstrate over the course of this work, Crosher's goal was to "complicate the possibility of truth through image" (Crosher qtd. in Szupinska-Myers, web). Paradoxically, Crosher challenged one's narrative comprehension through a carefully constructed photo-archive as well as a curated museum exhibition display. In this way, Crosher is a contemporary artist who invites her audience to ask questions rather than to take things for granted, particularly in the context of today's image-saturated culture. In her

[3] The Aperture artist books feature essays by photography professor, Karsten Lund, writer, Catherine Wagley, art critic and curator, Jan Tumlir, art critic and curator, Andrew Berardini, and contemporary artist, Lucas Blalock. See: Zoe Crosher, *The Reconsidered Archive of Michelle duBois, aka *Kathy** - *Volume 1* (New York: Aperture Ideas, 2011). ---, *The Unraveling of Michelle duBois aka *Alice Johnson** - *Volume 2* (New York: Aperture Ideas, 2011). ---, *The Unveiling of Michelle duBois, aka *Cricket** - *Volume 3* (New York: Aperture Ideas, 2012). ---, *The Disappearance of Michelle duBois, aka *Mitchi**- *Volume 4* (New York: Aperture Ideas, 2012).

own words, the "intention with each passing iteration is to pull the viewer away from the normal photographic viewpoint, to have her reconsider the act of looking at a singular image and start understanding that image, in all its variability" (Crosher qtd. in Blaloc, "Part 2").

Finally, I suggest that the project's multiple conceptual layers, including Crosher's high awareness of the photographic material and the apparatus of the archive, push her creativity beyond the feminist-postmodernist critique of women's constructed representation in media culture. As Crosher summarized with respect to her intentions, "the whole project is about the relationship of fiction and the archive, and the impossibility of knowing oneself even after the accumulation of thousands of images. Simultaneously, the arc is about the end—and breaking down—of analog photo technologies." (Crosher qtd. in Winant, web).

In order to examine the effects of these various 'layers' and how they merge in different ways throughout this project, my thesis has been organized into three chapters (each including several sections). The first chapter - *Feminist Art and Photography* - situates Crosher's work in relation to the legacy of feminist/postmodernist art and theory. The contextualization of her work within the contemporaneous discourses of feminism and postmodernist art-photography has been in many ways central to this thesis. As such, this chapter commences with an examination of the development of feminist art and photography (primarily in the United States) while demonstrating how a generation of influential female artists (namely in the 1970s and 1980s) affected their successors perspectives and working methods. As such, this chapter offers a review of a number of the most influential publications and museum exhibitions related to the theme of women and photography. In the second section of this chapter, I review Crosher's work in relation to the contemporary discourse of postmodernism while examining the complexities of trying to define the key characteristics of postmodernist art and photography.

The second chapter, *The Displaced Photographic Self*, examines the category of self-portraiture as a vehicle for self-expression and critique with a particular focus on the construction of a 'feminine self' through photography. Visually analyzing a selection of duBois self-portraits, I review the formal and iconographic traits of her images, and the ways in which they consciously expand the traditional conventions of self-portraiture as Crosher engages with the formal blurring and conceptual decentering of the depicted subject. In addition, this chapter features a discussion of the amateurish (at times, consciously 'cheesy') nature of duBois' snapshots and their final framing in a 'high art' context. One of the questions that governs this chapter, therefore, is whether or not these images can truly be considered 'self-portraits' in consideration of their production as well as Crosher's interventions in the images. I suggest that the classification of duBois' pictures as self or auto-portraits might be problematic seeing that they were not solely produced by her and perhaps, even more significantly, they are not in any way representative of duBois' actual self as she could be real and fictitious at the same time. Moreover, duBois' apparent chameleonic masquerading has led to an almost compulsory identification of duBois with contemporary artist, Cindy Sherman, whose iconic *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) series manifests a similar exploration of fictional female typologies. Accordingly, therein this chapter, I examine duBois and Sherman's shared commonalties as well as how their artistic work and intentions diverge.

Chapter Three, *The Unreasonable Archive*, is aimed at unpacking Crosher's multi-faceted performance as an artist-archivist-curator (also artist book editor), thus concentrating on the archival and curatorial aspects of this project. Through a revision of a number of the most recent theories concerning the social and cultural role of the archive, I investigate the building of duBois' fantasy photo-archive, also looking at Crosher's position as an archivist who deliberately expands the conventional definitions of an archive so as to facilitate an alternative 'feminist archive'. Referring to Crosher's curatorial mode of practice, I conclude this section with an analysis of Crosher's self-

curated installation in the context of the *New Photography 2012* group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As I will make clear, the way in which Crosher curates and displays her archival project is not only aimed at further complicating the viewers' understanding of duBois' self-narrative but also at foregrounding a reflective artifice, that is, an awareness of the ways in which both identities and images are constructed. In other words, through this project, Crosher invites the viewers to acknowledge the materials and creative procedures that consolidate this 'fantasy' project Left with fragments of her story, the viewer is then challenged to think of the missing details and is ultimately implicated in restructuring her/his own fantasy of Michelle duBois.

Arguably, when examining the archival and curatorial aspects of this project, as is true of Michelle duBois' photographs, it might be 'naïve' to assume that the archive or museum installation corresponds in a straightforward way to a claim of objective truth, let alone to self-identification. Crosher seems to be skeptical of any certainty whatsoever hence she introduced fictional elements into duBois' photographic documents. As art critic, Andrew Berardini, has stressed, "duBois images exist in that dangerous (and to me, titillating) zone between the documentary and imagination" (Berardini "Violating the Documentary").

Chapter 1: Feminist Art and Photography

According to artist and scholar, Carmen Winant, contemporary feminist art is primarily defined by its immediate context and authorial intent (Winant, "Our Bodies" 143). Drawing upon this assertion, Crosher undoubtedly qualifies as a contemporary feminist artist - as she testifies: "I am as feminist as I possibly can be without going out and burning bras!" (Crosher qtd. in Blanch, web). Working from a feminist vantage point, Crosher explored the politics of image-making and archives by appropriating and manipulating the photographs of another female photographer, i.e., Michelle duBois. In this regard, it is clear the Crosher is not so much a *photographer*, but rather she engages with photography – using it as an artistic means for reviewing a wide range of contemporary issues, such as female subjectivity and the paradoxical nature of the self-portrait, the proliferation of images, the fabrication of photographs, as well as the validity of authenticity and originality in the current cultural landscape. Importantly, Crosher is one of many contemporary artists that "operate within the broader framework of contemporary art while retaining specifically photographic elements" (Soutter 112).

When tracing the various ways in which contemporary female artists like Crosher have used photography in order reconfigure established ideas about gender, femininity, identity politics, beauty and the nude, along with the medium of photography itself, one must first take into account that the history and development of feminism and photography are closely intertwined; as stated by Eva Diaz, "One could even argue that they are projects birthed by modernity (Diaz 89). In evaluating the interconnected relationship between feminism, postmodernism and contemporary art-photography, the first section of this chapter considers the development of feminist art in the in conjunction with the feminist revision of the historiography of art and photography that took place in the 1970s and 1980s. The second section of this chapter seeks to define some of the prevalent strategies in

contemporary art photography and its connection to feminist and postmodernist criticality, so as to set the framework within which Crosher could be considered a contemporary artist whose conceptual work resonates with larger cultural and social meanings.

Feminist Photography - Process and Development

In her influential publication entitled, *The Woman's Eye* (1974), scholar and curator, Anne Tucker, put forth a collection of female photographers whose visibility with the art field at the time was relatively minimal seeing that their artistic work was largely unknown or merely undervalued.[4] Having been preoccupied with the problematic status and representation of women in society, Tucker's unprecedented study had the objective of re-assessing women's photographic œuvre so as to provoke an awareness of women's significant contributions to the field of photography. Interestingly, Tucker's feminist publication was in fact indicative of larger historical and political forces at work. In the 1970s, feminist historians who were highly motivated by the revolutionary achievements of the feminist movement[5] in North America supplied a great impetus to the study of women's history. This newly founded field of research in social studies shed light on the breadth of women's enormous contribution to culture, science, politics, and society at large which subsequently brought about a redefinition of women's identity and socio-political status. In addition, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist movement fostered the institutionalization of gender and women's studies within academic circles, respectively, in the US and in Europe. Women were certainly not alone in their demand for change, as the feminist movement was part of a larger transformative era – well associated with the 1960s social movements united by their collaborative activism and

[4] The publication presents images of ten female photographers: Gertrude Kasebier, Frances Benjamin Johnston, Margaret Bourke-White, Dorothea Lange, Berenice Abbott, Barbara Morgan, Diane Arbus, Alisa Wells, Judy Dater, and Bea Nettles. See: Anne Tucker, *The Woman's Eye* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

[5] According to sociologist, Manuel Castells, the feminist movement in the United States surged in the aftermath of the 1960s' social movements. It became an 'independent movement' in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when women who had been part of the civil and queer rights movements reacted against the sexism that they had had to suffer in the male-dominated movements (Castells 195). On October 29, 1966, a group of influential women, headed by writer Betty Friedan, created the National Organization of Women (NOW). Associated with liberal feminism, NOW focused on equal rights for women in all spheres of social, economic, and institutional life (Castells 235).

groundbreaking demands for social and political reforms (Manuel Castells 234). Evidently, for the previous forty years, feminist scholars, researchers, activists and artists have been working to "unearth the hidden record of women's resistance and feminist thinking" (Castells 234).

Coinciding with the revolutionary activities of the feminist movement of the 1960s, female artists and influential feminist art historians participated in events which were part of what is currently regarded as a fertile and dynamic period for feminist creativity (Broude 20). Needless to say, feminist art corresponded with the advancement of the feminist movement, hence from the 1970s onwards, feminist art became an international phenomenon; women artists in America and elsewhere were constantly looking for unconventional ways to create a possibly feminist visual language that would express their private and collective experiences as women. Moreover, feminist art achieved an increasingly significant role at the time, in the way that women artists were also being supported by feminist scholars and critics. Effectively, feminist scholarship not only sought to revise women's representation in art and culture, but also challenge the systematic marginalization of women from the main avenues of the art world. As critic Whitney Chadwick argued, feminism provided an important context for understanding and re-evaluating female artists, and has served as a powerful critical tool for change (Chadwick 499).[6]

It might be contended that the prolific relationship between the work of contemporary women artists, the larger feminist movement, and feminist theories, ultimately made feminism a transformative movement, allowing for the empowerment and greater visibility of many women in the cultural, social, and political spheres. Nevertheless, acknowledging that feminism is extraordinarily diverse in its discourse and application, feminist art should not be considered a

[6] A notable example of feminist art from that period: Judy Chicago's iconic feminist project, *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). Chicago's monumental installation, permanently showcased at The Brooklyn Museum, features a triangular- shaped table set with places arranged for thirty-nine women guests. The installation employs numerous media (e.g., ceramics, china painting, needle, fiber techniques) honoring 999 prominent women in the history of Western Civilization ("The Dinner Party", web).

cohesive movement in the traditional sense, either. Women undoubtedly came from different backgrounds to create a markedly diverse artistic practice that manifested itself in various styles and media, including painting, sculpture, installation, performance, body art, video, and photography. Additionally, it should be noted that not all women artists, past and present, necessarily conformed to a specific feminist manifest or methodology (Deepwell, "International Encyclopedia" 93). This notion, however, begs the question: how does one identify a work of art as feminist? According to feminist scholar, Katy Deepwell, the answer to "how to define an artist's work as feminist rested on how the work could be read and integrated into a new collective context for understanding social and political questions" (Deepwell, "International Encyclopedia" 94). Winant respectively addresses this question, stating that one of the defining doctrines of contemporary feminist art is its continual unwillingness to be defined. Nevertheless, the artist's authorial claim is significant in this case: "Whether you make abstract photograms or stag films, label your work feminist, and it is" (Winant, "Our Bodies" 138). In this respect, one might argue that contemporary feminist art does not necessarily produce a discernible artistic style or a single doctrine, but rather it offers endless means of re-thinking traditional modes of power along with the conventions of art.

Indeed, feminist art has addressed numerous themes and called attention to new subject matters as feminist artists have introduced women's issues, such as gender stereotypes, the female body, domestic labor, motherhood, prostitution, sexual abuse, and many more into contemporary art discourse and practice. Likewise, female photographers have attempted to regain agency of their own image and representation as well as that of other women - choosing a feminist lens through which they pictured the complexities and boundaries of feminine identities. Finally, feminist art practice has played a major part in instigating an art historical debate about the politics of women's representation within the art world. As art historian, Linda Nochlin, declared, a " feminist critique of the discipline of art history is needed which can pierce cultural-ideological limitations, to reveal biases and

inadequacies not merely in regard to the question of women artists, but in the formulation of the crucial questions of the discipline as a whole" (Nochlin, "Why Have There" 2).

Anne Tucker's study on women and photography, which uniquely demanded confrontation of the "great master" narrative of photography, is clearly linked to Nochlin's groundbreaking essay entitled, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971). In her essay, Nochlin critically examined the dissimilar positioning of men and women in art history by challenging the so-called gendered categories of "greatness" and "artist" in Western culture. According to Nochlin, women were excluded from art history not as a result of their lack of talent or the absence of women practitioners, but rather because it was "institutionally impossible for women to achieve excellence or success on the same footing as men, no matter what their talent, or genius" (Nochlin, "Why Have There" 37). In other words, talented women artists were systematically excluded from the established controlling systems of training, exhibitions, collections, and artist patronage, which ultimately precluded their ability to become 'great artists'. Similarly, this was the case of many women photographers; notwithstanding their significant role in the history and development of the medium since the middle of the 19th century, their achievements remained in the periphery of the mainstream history of photography. Frustrated with the notion of being the eternal 'other' in every aspect of society and politics, women took to the streets in the 1970s – protesting their omnipresent exclusion, they grappled with a pressing question: "If artists who were women were still being kept from public knowledge, what would happen if the institutions and their selective stories were not challenged in the name of both the erased past and the missing future?" (Pollock, "The Missing Future" 29).

To be sure, the influential works of feminist art historians, such as Nochlin and Tucker, were followed by a proliferation of other feminist publications, like *A History of Women Artists* (1975) by Hugo Münsterberg and *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981) by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, to name a few. Drawing upon Nochlin's essay, Parker and Pollock went further in

their critique of the dominant models of art history and museum practice. In analyzing the historical misinterpretation of art made by women, they also considered the actual impact of feminist art criticism to date. By the same token, photographic historian, Val Williams, published her influential study, W*omen Photographers: The Other Observers, 1900 to the Present* (1986). Williams' book was followed by other notable publications; *The Positive Image: Women Photographers in Turn-of-the-Century America* (1988) by Jane Gover; *Women Photographers* (1990) by Constance Sullivan and Neomi Rosenblum's *A History of Women Photographers* (1994). By gathering significant information about women's positioning in relation to photography throughout the history of the medium, these groundbreaking studies subsequently reshaped the historiography of photography. As support, these publications not only foregrounded women's talent and skill as artists and practitioners, but also introduced women's role in writing the theory and history of photography (Robert).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, an intense focus on identity politics and multiculturalism became an inseparable component of feminist discourse, when women of color, as well as lesbian feminists, began to express their concern with questions of race, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity – seeing them as also pertinent to the formation of women's identities. For these reasons, a new generation of women artists was similarly raising awareness of more specific forms of oppression and different feminist narratives (Chadwick 386). This 'new' stage of feminism, defined by certain scholars as post-feminism or Third Wave feminism,[7] was the backdrop for the

[7] Post-feminism can be considered as a critique of what is called 'second wave feminism' or the earlier 'old fashioned' feminism. It particularly challenges Second Wave's binary categorizations, such as man/woman or straight/gay, or any essential unitary identity including a monolithic conception of 'woman' (Genz qtd. in Adriaens). The 'new' phase of feminism, also known as Third Wave, also asks to address the demands of marginalized cultures by promoting a more hybrid and less homogenized ('white middle class') feminism - understanding that oppression is not true for all women in all contexts and times (Gamble 38).

publication, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (1994), by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, who stressed the importance of reinstating black women into the history of American photography.[8]

Much has been written with respect to women's effective relationship with art and photography, yet there certainly is still much to investigate. As evidence, in recent years, we are witnessing a period of increased interest in female photographs in academic as well as in museum circles. In 2010, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized *Pictures by Women: A History of Modern Photography*, an exhibition that charted the history of the photography showcasing some two hundred works by women. In a recent two-part exhibition entitled: *Who's Afraid of Women Photographers? 1839-1919 and 1918-1945*, held simultaneously at the Orsay Museum and Orangerie Museum in Paris, curators, Marie Robert, Thomas Galifot, and Ulrich Pohlmann interrogated the effect of sexual identity on photography. Interestingly, the exhibition also demonstrated the means in which photography, ever since the mid-19th century, has been used by women not only as a means to create art (or make ends meet), but also as a creative tool for "pushing the boundaries of the photographable" (Galifot "Who's Afraid").[9] Additionally, in November 2015, an international conference entitled *Fast Forward: Women in Photography* was held at the Tate Museum in London. The conference, hosted by the University of the Creative Arts and The University of Arts London, invited speakers to present their latest research in the field that was primarily concentrated on the complex and dynamic evolution of history of women in photography. The conference considered both national and international discussions, including various thought-provoking themes, such as identity politics, sexuality and gender, the history of representation, new media, the role of the archive, the status of the photograph industry, collaborative projects, etc.

[8] It should be noted that issues of race, gender, and multiculturalism have accordingly been the center of numerous feminist art exhibitions throughout the 1980s, to name but a few: *Five Black Women* (The Africa Center, London 1983), which was one of the first exhibitions dedicated to the work of Afro-Caribbean women. The exhibition *Women of Sweetgrass, Cedar and Sage* (The Gallery of the American Indian Community House, New York 1985) showcased paintings and drawings by Native American women.

[9] Galifot cited in the exhibition's brochure. For the exhibition catalog, see: Thomas Galifot, Ulrich Pohlmann, and Marie Robert. *Qui A Peur Des Femmes Photographes ? 1839 à 1945* (Paris: Hazan, 2015).

The apparent expansion of scholarly research and debate over the past three decades in the field of feminist art and photography have further demonstrated that women have indeed made an effective use of the medium of photography seeing that their work spans across diverse artistic genres; from Pictorialism to studio portraiture, commercial, documentary and photojournalism, architectural and fashion photography, as well as experimental art photography. In these terms, it seems that being a female photographer has always entailed participation and contribution to the emergence and development of various artistic styles.[10]

When referring to contemporary feminist photography, one cannot regard the success of contemporary women artists like Crosher without considering women's legacy as conceptual artists and photographers who generated experiments with new modes of artistic creativity that served as the foundation of the 1970s' Conceptualism. Kate Deepwell, for instance, stressed the marriage of feminism and conceptual art - she highlighted that feminist art can be globally found in every decade since the early 1970s in most countries where an international profile for contemporary art has been developed (Deepwell, "Paradoxa" 11). As the employment of photography became prevalent among conceptual artists, women have accordingly adopted the medium to document their ephemeral performances, installations, and happenings. Utilizing photography to document their art, and in that sense not asserting themselves as conventional photographers, conceptual artists have definitely made prominent the notion that art was not necessarily located in the photograph but rather somewhere else (Soutter 22). As an example, conceptual artist, Martha Rosler, started employing photography in the form of photo-collages and photo-texts as a new method for dissecting women's issues, including their problematic representation in the mass media - one of her most notable works dealing with these concepts is *Body Beautiful*, or *Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-72). Given these

[10] As an example, critics have come to acknowledge the active role of women photographers in the definition of the aesthetic and theoretical framework of early 20th-century avant-grade movements, such as Surrealism, New Objectivity, and New Vision, and Bauhaus to name a few (Robert, "Who's Afraid"). Artists Florence Henri, Lotte Jacobi, Berenice Abbott, Elizabeth "Lee" Miller, Dora Maar, Germaine Krull, and many more, have certainly made some unprecedented accomplishment in modernist photography.

points, contemporary feminist photography should therefore be considered one of the most important applications of conceptual art. As New York Times art critic, Holland Cotter, put forth, "feminist art which emerged in the 1960s with the women's movement is the formative art of the last four decades…without it, identity- based art, and performance art and much political art would not exist in the form it does, if it existed at all" (Cotter qtd. in Chadwick 498-9).

Without doubt, women artists have significantly contributed to the formation and advancement of conceptual art and experimental photography, discovering the possibilities of photography in an untraditional way through martial experimentations, abstraction, appropriation, and re-photography, as along with the documentation of actions and performances. In her essay, "On Defiance – Experimentation as Resistance" (2016), MoMA curator, Eva Respini, traces the history of women artists who took an unconventional approach to photography, stating that as a consequence of the historical marginalization of photography as an artistic medium, it has, in fact, always been hospitable for women and other practitioners who might have been working outside the mainstream. Hence, in a unique manner, photography's *otherness* and its "pluralistic" nature have permitted women to experiment with image-making in the most creative and radical ways, thereby setting the stage for the visceral explorations of the medium led by contemporary feminist artists like Crosher. Interestingly, for Respini, working in opposition to photographic conventions should be viewed as an act of feminist defiance. (Respini, "On Defiance" 103-6).

Obviously, contemporary feminist art has enacted a critique of contemporary culture under patriarchy in various ways seeing that it repeatedly sought to alternate the way we think about and experience the world and the society in which we live. Hence, one might reason that women artists' opposition to canonical ways of thinking and women's emphasis on critical reflections is very closely associated with the postmodern age, and apparent 'dissatisfaction' with the hegemonic ideologies of Western culture. As Jane Flax maintains, feminism can be regarded as a type of postmodern

philosophy insofar as it is "skeptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language" (Flax qtd. in Mahowald 465). By the same token, the 'alliance' between feminism and postmodernism is the focus of art critic Craig Owens' essay, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" (1983). In his analysis, Owens identified a significant convergence of "the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation" (Owens 3). Chadwick reaffirms Owens' assertion in specifically underscoring that the female artists of the 1970s and 1980s are often mentioned as indicative of a merging of postmodernism and critical feminist theory (Chadwick 385). Seeing that photography has a strong reciprocal relationship with mass media and technology, in this context, it became the 'perfect' device for formulating a postmodern-feminist critique of the power and rhetoric of women's representation in media culture.

The Production of Images in Postmodernity

The term 'postmodernism' is a collective term that describes, among many other things, the societal, cultural, and critical changes that took place in Western society from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Having its origins in the 1960s, postmodernism is connected with the era's 'modus operandi', that is, a general challenge to and criticism of the political and social order established after the Second World War. This was the era of the Women's Liberation Movement, student activism, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights Movement - also dubbed the 'counter-culture era'. Furthermore, the 'postmodern turn' maintains a strong link to the rise of mass media and consumerist popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s, and chiefly, with the demise of 'high-modernism' and its well-established narratives and systems.

Although postmodernism has its origins in the revolutionary 'counter culture' of the 1960s, it nonetheless remains an elusive philosophical term that defies any cohesive definition insomuch that it has been applied to various theoretical practices and aesthetic styles, at times encompassing contradicting attitudes. A variety of scholars have also debated whether postmodernism is still

continuing to evolve (Sheikh 1294). Although the term has taken many forms and designations, postmodernism is generally characterized by the introduction of major conceptual transitions - what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner refer to as a kind of "new sensibility" that appeared in aesthetic discourse and practice in the late 1950s. This sensibility subsequently manifested in numerous disciplines in the arts and accordingly linguistics, literature and social theory (Best, Kellner 124).

While a number of thinkers interpret postmodernism as a sharp break from modernism and its established institutions —Douglas Crimp thought postmodernism "can only be understood as a specific breach with modernism, with those institutions which are the preconditions for and which shape the discourse of modernism" (Crimp, 'The Photographic Activity' 91) — it is nevertheless important to take into account that postmodernism is simultaneously a direct continuation and a reformulation of modernism (Best, Kellner 135). For example, there are various applications of postmodern art still founded upon key modernist ideas, including experimentalism, formalism, and self-reflexivity. With this, many scholars see postmodernism as an extension of modernism in that the self-reflexive critique of society, culture, and politics had already been a part of modernism (Irvine, web).[11] Likewise, in Best and Kellner's view, the postmodern turn in the arts does not necessarily offer an entirely novel set of concepts and artistic conventions, rather mobilized strategies from modernism, like self-reflexivity, and appropriation of found objects "into a new (anti)aesthetic that rejected key tenets of modernism in order to create new types and styles of art for the contemporary era" (Best, Kellner 180).[12]

[11] In his article, "The *Postmodern, Postmodernism, Postmodernity*: Approaches to Po-Mo" (1998), scholar, Martin Irvine, highlights the wide range of terms, assumptions, and interpretations associated with the complex discourse of postmodernism. Irvine suggests that one must first differentiate the strategies and concepts of 'the postmodern' and 'postmodernism'. The former, i.e., 'the postmodern', has been articulated as a condition of a historical era, which is also an era we supposedly still live in. Alternatively, the postmodern could be regarded as a position: political, economic, or social. The latter, i.e., 'postmodernism', refers to the ways in which this philosophical paradigm shift has been visually reflected in movements in the arts and culture with varying conceptual approaches and visual styles.

Notwithstanding the fact that the term postmodernism has been analyzed from various aesthetic approaches and theoretical standpoints, art critic, Hal Foster, pointed out that all these theories are based on a common belief: "that the project of modernity is now deeply problematic" (Foster "Anti-Aesthetic", ix). To illustrate, prominent postmodern critics and philosophers like Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard, have contributed to the popularization of the idea that the beliefs of 'high modernism' - those closely associated with concepts that include master narratives, linear progress, stylistic purity, originality, and the autonomy of art - were no longer relevant in the current state of affairs of the post-revolutionary era of the 1960s and 1970s. As such, modernism was ultimately perceived as pretentious, elitist, stale, and merely unproductive, and according to many, it was time to move beyond it (Best, Kellner 124).

Indeed, when referring to postmodernity as a historical era, one of the most influential essays in this context is Jean-François Lyotard's, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). Therein, the French philosopher and sociologist articulated one of the key theoretical concepts of the 'postmodern revolution' in identifying postmodernity as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard, 72). Put another way, Lyotard contends that in the postmodern age, the grand theories and canons upon which Western society had established itself are being challenged and decentered - society is becoming gradually skeptical of the 'master narratives'. Having been disseminated by national, religious, and philosophical authoritarian systems, including Christianity, the Enlightenment, Marxism, and liberalism, those grand narratives are being undermined in the postmodern age in the search for new theories and sets of beliefs (Lyotard, "The Postmodern Explained", 17-18).

Central to these major conceptual shifts, scholar, Liz Wells, emphasizes, is the development of a new social order based on globalization, commercialism, information networks, and the mass media, which has allowed information and images to circulate freely and quickly around the globe,

thus "weakening national boundaries and profoundly changing the ways in which we experience the world" (Wells 24).[13] In considering that with postmodernity, society somehow reached the "end of history" (Lyotard 1979), the 'grand narrative' of Western art had to be questioned. Advocates of 'aesthetic postmodernism', artists and critics alike, have stood up to the postmodern trial as they denounced, first and foremost, the modernist convention of the aesthetic autonomy of art and rejected the authority of any single artistic style or concept that could retrospectively determine what art should be. Art critic, Arthur Danto, has even gone further in proclaiming this moment of transition as *The End of Art*. According to Danto, this was a period when a certain history of Western art had run its course in that the modernist notion of a linear aesthetic progress no longer informs late 20th century art.[14] Moreover, the status of the artist as a 'genius' whose personal artistic vision is original in a particular fundamental way has been accordingly subverted: "postmodern artists abandoned the belief in a self, author, and creative genius. The artist is no longer the originary… rather than expanding on the themes of selfhood, authenticity, originality, and liberation, postmodern artists parody them" (Best, Kellner 133).

This critical approach gave way to pluralism and cultural eclecticism, which Charles Jencks believes became "the most visible shift in the postmodern world" (Jenncks 50). Therefore, it is also important to realize that postmodernism has profoundly opened the art world to a multitude of art forms and areas of innovation (e.g., happenings, performance art, multimedia installations, digital art). In this light, one cannot truly discern one postmodernist visual style - postmodern artists of the 1970s and 1980s ventured in so many different directions. They admittedly favored 'hybridity', that is, a mixture of artistic styles, media, and contradicting influences employing varied strategies, such as pastiche, ambiguity, parody and irony, multiplicity and fragmentation, and self-reflexive

[13] Importantly, Wells' remarks echo Frederic Jameson's seminal publication, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1991).
[14] See Arthur Danto, "The End of Art," in *The Death of Art*. (New York: Haven Publications, 1984), 5-35.

conventions (Sheikh 1295). As Danto suitably put forth, “finally, it became apparent that there were no stylistic or philosophical constraints. There is no special way works of art have to be. And that is the present and, I should say, the final moment in the master narrative. It is the end of the story” (Danto “After the End” 47).

Though postmodern art has much stylistic diversity, Jameson stressed that the most significant feature of it is the effacement of certain key boundaries or separations between high and popular culture (Jameson “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic” 179). For example, Pop art’s visual aesthetics were born out of an amalgamation of "high" and "low" cultures and a deliberate mixture of aesthetic styles and sources from the past and present. As manifest in their works, Pop artists, like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, sought to integrate everyday life into their art and vice versa, namely by appropriating or replicating everyday/popular images, texts and objects to create complex combines and playful collages. Pop art was arguably an essential precursor to later attempts of postmodern artists to subvert the intrinsic features of modernist aesthetics and undermine the function of the ‘original author’.

Photo-Reflexivity

Finally, in the context of this thesis, postmodernism is discussed vis-à-vis contemporary art photography, namely as a way of inspecting how postmodern themes exemplify themselves, theoretically and stylistically, in Crosher’s photographic work. When referring to the relationship between postmodernism and the medium of photography, Jameson stresses that “photography is extremely important to gaining an understanding of postmodern elements, including discourses of domination, ownership, authorship, representation, and chance” (Jameson qtd. in Sheikh 1296). Along these same lines, scholar, Nabeela Sheikh commented that within the contemporary moment, “the photograph itself can be seen as a defining emblem of a postmodern aesthetic and age” (Sheikh 1295). Critically, postmodern theory introduced many alternatives for re-conceptualizing the

traditional (modernist) understanding of photography as well as the meaning of images. Questioning ideas such as 'truth' or 'authenticity' by and large, the postmodern challenge came to highlight photography's inherent reproducibility, construction, ambiguity, and fabrication.

In exploring what does postmodernism actually mean for photography, art critic, Andy Grundberg, initially turns to the meaning of its predecessor, i.e., modernism in the context of the medium. Placing emphasis upon the formalistic premise of the modernist tradition of photography, Grundberg noted that up till the 1970s, "photographers took pains to stress their interest in the formal properties of their medium, investigating "problems" of time, tone, space, and framing in the Bauhaus spirit of Moholy-Nagy" (Grundberg, "Photography View"). Alternatively, in the context of the postmodern age, photography was finally considered outside of the tenants of modernism, which meant that artists were less preoccupied with the reflexive urge to demonstrate photography's formal particularities that 'qualify' the medium as a valid art form, and rather put more emphasis into the social/cultural/political narratives photography mediates.

In the 1970s, this 'new' approach was regarded as an invitation for artists outside of the photographic field to experiment with the camera in various ways – what art historian, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, defined as "an instrumental approach to the medium" (Solomon-Godeau qtd. in Michaels 97). Going beyond the modernist preoccupation with innovation and visual aesthetics, postmodernist artists started using photography to make art (e.g., documenting performances, actions, installations, events, environments, etc.) "rather than making photographs that were themselves art" (Michaels 97). This clearly postmodernist standpoint generated new possibilities for the medium, one of which was further enabling artists to reflect back on the way art and photography is made, this time also in consideration of the means of production, dissemination, exchange, and reception of images (Cotton 191). Postmodernist photography, therefore, makes explicit that art operates in relation to the prevailing codes of culture and society. As Grundberg highlighted,

"postmodernism, in its art and its theory, is a reflection of the conditions of our times" (Grundberg, "Crisis" 13).

Further, postmodern ways of thinking of photography consequently made visible the assumption that in our digital image-flooded age, one's distinction between 'original' and 'copy' has become blurred. Therefore, many postmodernist artists have continued questioning this demarcation through means of appropriation and confiscation. As Baudrillard has declared, in a culture dominated by the mass media, our experiences are merely 'simulations' or phantom images which he referred to as 'simulacra' i.e., copies for which there are no originals, nevertheless, are copies in their own right which have no necessary referent in the world (Smith, "Baudrillard Dictionary" 197). Drawing upon Baudrillard, Grundberg went on to contend that with postmodernism, reality is accepted as an endless hall of mirrors, i.e., a representation of representations, which inevitably replace the 'real thing'. As such, cultural reality disrupts one's ability to gain any "pure, unblemished meaning or experience at all" – what Grundberg famously referred to as the postmodernist crisis that faces photography in his seminal publication, *Crisis of the Real* (1990) (Grundberg 17).

Living in a world where social reality is based on mass media-digitized representations that are loosely based on visual facts, and where images are regarded as reproducible 'simulacra' of popular culture, the status of photography as the 'authority of the fact' has undeniably been called into question. Indeed, 'postmodern photographers'' preoccupation with ontological questions regarding the nature of the medium, the reproduction of image-making, and the circulation and interpretation of visual images attest to what scholar, Miles Orvell, characterized as a 'photo-reflexive impulse' within contemporary art photography, indicative of works by artists like Barbara Kruger, John Baldessari, Robert Lango, Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, and Cindy Sherman (Orvell 193). This photo-reflexive attitude is of particular relevance to Crosher's art seeing that her highly self-conscious

working methods are informed by the tactics and achievements of this group of conceptualists/postmodernists - also dubbed the 'Pictures Generation'.

According to several writers, the peak of postmodern photographic activity is largely associated with the 'Pictures Generation' of the 1980s (Soutter 25, Bate 144, Grundberg 17). These artists are said to have used the conventions of photography against itself in that they inflicted upon their art the media saturation of film, television, advertising, newspapers, and magazines. In this way, their photographic work was admittedly postmodernist in that it offered a direct challenge to the ideal of fine art photography, with values rejecting any form of commercialism and popular culture (Bate 144). By valorizing the visual language of mass media and the objects of everyday life, postmodernist artists of the 1980s used photography to criticize the world of commodity spectacle, image saturation, advertising, and the ideology of media culture. Freely drawing from found materials and second-order images, subsequently framing them in an ironic way, had constituted television, film, video, magazines, and news photography as conceptual art's source of style and material as well as the target of its condemnation (Bate 9).

Likewise, the 'Pictures Generation' artists turned the provocative tactic of appropriation in to the 'characteristic artistic style' of the 1980s (Patrick 47). In re-presenting already existing images/objects from popular culture in a 'Duchamp-like' manner, not only did these conceptual artists further undermine the notion of artistic originality and value, but with their emphasis on photography, they responded to "the postmodern condition, in which any direct representation of reality seems suspect…" (Orvell 195). To put it differently, artists like Prince, Levine, and Sherman, sought to play off the assumption that photography had objectivity at its core so as to prompt a critical investigation of their images within the context of contemporary visual culture.

To be sure, as pointed out by Cotton, since the 1970s, postmodern photographic theory has come to acknowledge photographs as processes of signification and cultural coding (Cotton 191). By

explicitly using Hollywood cinema and popular advertising as their source material, artists like Sherman and Prince, for example, made sharp observations about how the mass media and consumerist society constructed our sense of reality (Molon 306). From a feminist point of view, Sherman's well-known series, *Untitled Film Stills*, certainly illustrated how popular visual culture has not only shaped women's sense of self, but also further advanced the audience's internalization of gender norms and codes of behavior. As Grundberg stated, the postmodern world is undeniably "a place where images constitute what we are" (Grundberg "Crisis" 18). Correspondingly, according to Best and Kellner, postmodernist critique of photographic imagery has called attention to photography's inherent cultural coding, highlighting "the power of the image and the ways that representations constitute our subjectivity and modes of seeing the world "(Best, Kellner 186). With this, postmodern photographers/artists became more concerned with the nature of images and the power of visual representations to constitute and reshape cultural knowledge and memory. Notably, being self-conscious of today's camera-based culture and its visual vocabulary is an essential feature of contemporary photographic images, that is, 'postmodernist photography' (Grundberg "Crisis" 19).

One might further claim that postmodernist photography has re-established the early avant-garde's aspirations to merge art and life through making art a political tool for advancing social change. According to several scholars (e.g., Crimp, Owens, Bate, Cotton), conceptual art is undeniably connected with an activist or political branch of postmodernism that acts, to some extent, as "postmodernism of resistance" (Best, Kellner 125). Keeping this in mind, postmodernist photography is also identified as a potential model for "political postmodernism" in that it generates a critique of photographic mimesis, and, in certain cases, exposes cultural tropes and stereotypes in popular imagery (Best, Kellner 130). Supporting this assertion, Groundberg proposed that postmodernist photography is oppositional in its essence, hence it might have great political potential in terms of agency and resistance (Groundberg 6). The tendency towards an oppositional/subversive

form of contemporary art and photography has also found support in the writings of Crimp as he characterizes the photographic activity of postmodernism:

> A group of young artists working with photography have addressed photography's claim to originality, showing those claims for the fictions they are, showing photography to be always a representation, always-already-seen. Their images are purloined, confiscated, appropriated, *stolen*. In their work, the original cannot be located, is always deferred; even the self which might have generated an original is shown to be itself a copy. (Crimp 117)

With this in mind, feminist photography is hence a wonderful example of 'political postmodernism', as stated earlier, insofar as women artists have made extensive use of photography and other media to advance forward their feminist agenda while also consciously working against the codes and conventions of photographic representation. As Respini put forth, women photographers have carved out a unique space in photography through which their photo-experimentations and deliberate disruption of photographic conventions could ultimately be construed as an act of feminist opposition (Respini 103-5). It is also necessary to realize, as Bate claimed, that the emergence of postmodernist photography in the late 1970s was symptomatic of the collapsing of an opposition that had bolstered and maintained that art was a male affair (Bate, "The Key Concepts" 144). Bate took this further in his feminist argument, professing that the significant influx of female artists/photographers in 1980s postmodernism (e.g., Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Laurie Simmons, Louise Lawler, and many more) not only had a profound impact on the very discourse on photography but also on the uses and subject matter of art photography (Bate 144). Being interested in the power of images and gender representation in media culture, Respini argued that what essentially typifies the work of these postmodernist female artists is that their work lent itself to nonconventional ways of interrogating new grounds in the photographic medium such that

"they collectively [challenged] the chief tenets of traditional photography – originality, faithful reproduction, and indexicality" (Respini 103).

An air of postmodern-feminist critique could be easily found, for example, in the works of conceptual artists using photography, like Levine and Kruger, whose art actively engaged with feminist and political theories and debates. As Owens demonstrated, Levine and Kruger have taken an active part in the fashioning of postmodern discourse in art (Owens 17). Levine's photographic appropriations iconic images and Kruger's stylized graphic montages illustrate the staging and construction of images - what Bate calls, "a strategy of explicit fakeness in photography" (Bate 51).[15] Moreover, their art assumes a feminist (political) character insofar as they manifest an opposition to the male canon of art and photography while constantly signaling at the construction and perpetuation of cultural myths through images. Considering these elements, feminist art photography is certainly an exemplary model for "political postmodernism" - it not only counters the modernist tradition of photography and thus expands the medium, but also deploys various artistic strategies to advance a critique of the male-dominant art world, gendered mass media, consumer society, and patriarchy, as examples.

With this, the 'duBois Project' could be regarded as a unique case study for understanding the ways photography has been used by women in the past (duBois) and in the present (Crosher). Bearing in mind the complex history and theory of feminist-postmodernist art and photography, it proves necessary to read Crosher's work in relation to these critical contexts. To be sure, when

[15] Sherrie Levine became notorious for her critique of the myth of the great Modernist masterwork and for subverting the whole idea of originality, in her famous series entitled, '*After Walker Evans*' (1981). In this series Levine re-photographed famous images from Depression-era photographs by Walker Evans – the images were identical in every way to the originals except that they had been photographed from book reproductions and signed by Levine as her own (Orvell 202). Conceptual artist and graphic designer, Barbara Kruger, is known for inserting massive bold type into her photographic works which incorporate texts and found images (usually derived from the mass media and advertising). Throughout her career, Kruger's unique application of image and texts yielded confrontational works in the form of montages, billboards, murals, and large-scale installations (Kort, Sonneborn 125).

examining Crosher's work, it is apparent that she operates in a postmodern territory as she similarly uses photography in a confrontational way. Being heavily inspired by the achievements of her postmodernist 'predecessors', Crosher plays with the ambiguity of photographic truth and the artifice of image-making. In confiscating and reusing duBois' images, Crosher similarly suggests an endless transgression of the modernist tenets of authorship, authenticity and originality, while also considering the material properties of photographic reproduction and display. Likewise, as a postmodernist-feminist artist, Crosher has reframed duBois pictures in a fashion that certainly encourages a critical evaluation of the ways images constitute the cultural representation and categorization of women. Finally, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, by introducing elements of fantasy into the duBois archive the project seems to echo a fundamental postmodern inquiry: "In a world overwhelmed by signs, what status is there for photography's celebrated ability to reproduce the real appearance of things?" (Wells 25).

Chapter 2: The Displaced Photographic Self

Contemporary (postmodernist) photography communicates meaning in a way that often demands to be viewed and interpreted with a kind of 'intellectual' self-awareness—one that constantly reminds the viewers that there is more than meets the eye when looking at photographs. Postmodern theory has indeed offered a rather conceptual way of understanding the meaning of images to the extent that it examines the medium of photography through the prism of conceptual categories, such as "the relationship between representation and reality; knowledge and belief; photography and truth; and the definition of art itself" (Johnson, web). Moreover, postmodernist approaches to photography might demand something else from the viewers, that is, to be aware of how constructed and culturally coded photographs eventually are. As stated in the previous chapter, being informed by the legacy of postmodern theory and conceptualism, many contemporary photographers are still working against the grain of the essential purpose of photography - the production of authentic documents or a photographic "truth". Soutter commented that "contemporary art discourse thrives on works which are, to some extent, illogical, uncertain, and riddled with elements of contradiction, fiction, and fantasy" (Soutter 28).

This chapter examines Zoe Crosher's "duBois Project" as a case study for the aforementioned approach to contemporary art photography—one which constantly bends and tests the distinctions between fake and original, and that deliberately problematizes the relationship between images and their meaning. Crosher's photographic project presents an extensive collection of intimate images of a woman named Michelle duBois. Paradoxically, as much as this project offers a reflection on the notion of a woman's subjectivity and the presentation of her intimacy, duBois' self-portraits, however, seem to blur her identity rather than reveal it. With this, I analyze duBois' self-portraits and the photographic representation of the female subject through the lens of postmodernism, feminism, and photography theory. These approaches aim at exemplifying how in

the context of Crosher's 'photo-reflexive' project—the reality-value of images is being deliberately challenged through different artistic strategies, including appropriation, visual and formal manipulations, masquerade, and irony.

The Ambiguous Portrayal of Michelle duBois

Art critic, Jan Tumlir, has described Crosher's archival project "as an exercise in self-portraiture, but of a pointedly fragmented, deflected sort" (Tumlir, "Femme Fatale"). In the same vein, Soutter underscored in her analysis of this photographic series that whether or not the duBois archive is genuine, it presents a very strange portrait (Soutter 16). To be sure, the long tradition of self-portraiture is at the heart of the Michelle duBois Project. Crafting her work within a contemporary art discourse which leans on the precedents of conceptual and postmodernist art, Crosher consciously goes back to the past to reuse the genres and styles of earlier periods (in this case, the practice of self-portraiture) in a contemporary context. This playful gesture of 'recycling' styles as well as objects, according to a number of writers, is one of the main features of postmodernist art (Irvine; Foster "(Post) Modern" 146).

It was in 2004 that Crosher became the recipient of a comprehensive collection of the self-portraits of an amateur photographer from Oklahoma named Michelle duBois. Over the course of more than two decades, duBois took thousands of pictures of herself in different locations, taking on many guises and photographic styles. duBois' archive consists of studio portraits, casual snapshots, tourist photographs, and so-called 'glamour' or fashion shots. As one critic reported, "she photographed everything; all of her guises are well-documented" (Wagley, "The Fantasy in Crisis"). In an attempt to legitimize duBois as a 'real' person, or on the contrary, to further confuse the critical and public reception of this photo-project, Crosher went so far as to craft duBois a complex biography. According to the story (which, unsurprisingly, has many versions), duBois was a friend of Crosher's aunt - who decided to bequeath her impressive collection of self-portraits to the then 22-

year-old Crosher. Described as an all-American girl from Oklahoma, she was married several times while working as a flight attendant and as a part-time escort. In addition, as many of her photos evidence, she traveled extensively throughout Asia and the Pacific Rim in the 1970s and 1980s. Quite extraordinarily, duBois had tirelessly documented herself and almost every aspect of her life at a time prior to the current increasing prevalence of self-documentation (e.g., selfies) – which evidently became the hallmark of the "Me-Me-Me Generation".[16] Being intrigued by this, Crosher also contextualized duBois' practice within today's social media culture, stating in one interview: "I talk about Michelle duBois as a kind of Facebook before Facebook" (Crosher qtd. in Williams, web).

Creating these pictures at a time when many female artists took control over the presentation of their bodies, it could be remarked that duBois, like her 1970s feminist contemporaries, had provocatively used her own body to proclaim her femininity as well as her most intimate and sleazy fantasies. Being in charge of the staging and execution of her own portraits, duBois is simultaneously taking on the role of the director and the subject of her pictures, and eventually the caretaker of her archive. For Crosher, duBois' sense of agency and creativity in setting the terms of her own photographic 'mission' is one of the most important features of her practice, which might also be considered a feminist act (Blanch, web).

Apparently, most of duBois' portraits are consciously titillating as she takes on many guises to portray different types of 'femme fatale', for example as an exotic belly dancer or a flirty seductress who performs her femininity in front of the camera to create what Crosher labeled "the fantasy image of herself" (Crosher qtd. in Blanch, web). In the majority of duBois' sexy snaps, she directly confronts the viewer's gaze and flirts with the camera. For example, she is smiling at the camera

[16] In a *Time Magazine* article entitled, "Millennials: The Me-Me-Me Generation" (2013), journalist, Joel Stein, investigated the effects of technology, the fast information age, and image culture on American millennials, i.e., young adults who were born between 1980 and 2000. Defining this age group as the 'Me Generation', Stein believed this social group went on to produce the 'Me-Me-Me Generation' seeing that it is characterized by a very high degree of narcissism and selfishness, all empowered by today's technology (Stein, web).

while soaking in a bubble bath, her naked body being covered by a layer of foam. She is similarly straightforward as she supposedly talks on the phone while showing off her cleavage, or as she takes the role of an exotic belly dancer (Figs. 1-3).

Her poses are not only very familiar to the viewers, but they are also of a cliché voyeuristic nature and, to some degree, seem to validate the 'male gaze' rhetoric.[17] Looked at superficially, one may claim that duBois presents herself as no more than an object of desire or a fetish, hence she seems to engage in an act of self-objectification. As Smith and Watson put forth, the act of photography inevitably freezes its subjects/objects in a scene of voyeuristic desire (Smith and Watson 71). However, it would not be surprising to realize that duBois - a so-called 'simple Oklahoma girl' - was never preoccupied with such a theoretical feminist reading of her pictures. As Crosher indicated, "duBois had all the hallmarks of *art* yet her *work* was made without any self-reflexive relationship to that" (Crosher qtd. in Lucas Blalock, "Part 1").

It may be argued, however, that once duBois' portraits were reworked and framed by a well-informed contemporary artist like Crosher, her sexually suggestive images become consciously provocative and ironically exaggerated. In a way, Crosher's added layer of reflexivity might suggest that duBois' sexy images adhere to what feminist writer Audre Lorde called, *the erotic-as-power*.[18] To be sure, by presenting images of provocative female agency, Crosher implicates the viewer in the act of (male) voyeurism, that is, looking into a woman's private life and possibly objectifying her. Moreover, by deliberately utilizing the visual codes of the male gaze - what artist and scholar Carmen Winant also defines as "using the master's tools", Crosher and duBois might eventually "dismantle the master's house *i.e.* patriarchal expectations of gender" (Winant, "Our Bodies" 143).

[17] The 'male gaze', as it was originally coined by feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), refers to the role of women as a spectacle in classical cinema, or in other words, women as a target for the sexual objectification of the male gaze.
[18] See Lorde Audre, "The uses of the erotic: The erotic as power." *The Lesbian and Gay studies Reader* (1984): 339-343.

With this contextualization, when viewers are requested to critically consider their position as voyeurs, duBois' hypersexual personas demonstrate how our notions of femininity are culturally constructed through clichéd visual conventions of feminine submissiveness and sexual seduction. As Wagley put it, "by inhabiting so many fantasies of femininity, she (duBois) pushes the fantasy - or, rather, the culturally produced idea of what a woman should be - to a point of crisis" (Wagley, "The Fantasy in Crisis").

Such a critical interrogation of the ways in which female identity has been fashioned by the male gaze has been practiced by many women artists since the 1970s, perhaps most notably by Cindy Sherman, who became known for her socially critical photography. In this light, one cannot disregard the fact that both Crosher and duBois are working in the shadow of Sherman and her legacy of stylized self-portraits and role-playing. Arguably, like Sherman, duBois uses her body as the subject of her pictures to enact a compulsive performance of cultural feminine tropes. In doing so, she similarly unmasks - what Grundberg calls – "the conventions of woman-as-depicted-object" (Grundberg 9).[19]

An Alternative Self-Portrait

> *The self-portrait, being first and foremost a portrait, indicates that it is a sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of social identity* (Tagg qtd. in Barbosa 7).

The photographic representation of the self is heavily embedded in our everyday visual culture, from passport photos to holiday pictures and wedding portraits, to the prolific use of selfies and 'profile pictures' on every social media platform, also dubbed as 'selfie culture'. Traditionally, self-portraiture is known as one of the most intimate art genres, also referred to as 'the mirror of the

[19] The sub-section entitled "A Chameleon-like Figure" is dedicated to Cindy Sherman's work - including a more detailed comparison of her work and that of Crosher or duBois.

artist' as it is an artistic process of self-inspection resulting in the 'ultimate' representation of the artist's subjectivity. As Shearer West noted in her publication, *Portraiture* (2004), from the early stages of the history of self-portraiture, artists well-realized that they could project particular ideas about their private lives and place in society through the crafting of self-portraits – what West also deems "deliberate self-fashioning" that results in a significant "manifesto of the self" perpetuating the artist's public (West 173).[20] Other than making a statement on the role of the artist in society, the self-portrait has been traditionally characterized as art of introspection - an 'arena' for tackling various issues of identity and human subjectivity through role-playing and performance. As proposed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, a visual self-image represents, through its symbolic elements, the subject's history, subjective thoughts, as well as his or her fantasies (Smith, Watson 352).

In keeping with the tradition of 'objective photography', the self-portrait photograph was accordingly based on the mimetic premise that promises to deliver a particular 'subject' to the viewer through visual representation (Lamm 1289). Drawing upon Freud's theory of the human pleasure in looking (i.e., *scopophilia*), Bate argues that there is pleasure involved merely in the very process of recognizing and identifying a human face in a photograph. The portrait, he continued, offers its viewers pleasure in the mastery over identity (Bate, "Photography" 79). Along the same lines, scholar, Ina Loewenberg, stressed that the inherent "truth value" of photography calls attention to the voyeuristic aspect in the act of viewing a portrait: "Although we know intellectually that photography is not a mirror, we feel we are *really* looking into that person's eyes; we see what that historical figure *really* looked like" (Loewenberg 400). The success of traditional photographic portraiture (along with self-portraiture), therefore rests on the ability to establish the sitter's identity

[20] For other important publications on 'self-portraiture', see: Frances Borzello, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014); F. Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998); Susan Bright, *Auto Focus: The Self-portrait in Contemporary Photography* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010); Ina Loewenberg, "Reflections on Self-Portraiture in Photography", *Feminist Studies*. 1999: 398-408. Miles Orvell, "Expanding the Self –Portrait", *American Photography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 157-162.

and to provide 'satisfaction' for its viewers as long as they recognize and potentially relate to the person depicted in the image (Bate, "Photography" 79).

This conservative approach to photographic self-portraiture was radically challenged by conceptual/postmodernist artists in the 1970s and 1980s as they admittedly acknowledged the subversive potential of the self-portrait. In questioning established cultural notions of gender, power, and identity, many embraced the opinion that while a photographic self-portrait might "secure the self, it could nevertheless, easily unsettle one's identity and defer its meaning" (Jones 69). Within this framework of transgression, contemporary artists have questioned the authenticity of self-portraiture as they re-interpret their bodies through the genre in a diversity of styles and themes. By scrutinizing the politics of racial, sexual, and class identities through self-portraiture, contemporary artists have ultimately desired to concentrate on the various social forces that affect identity construction (Lamm 1290).

Furthermore, elaborating on the problematic element of the representation of identity in postmodernity, cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, contended that the postmodern sense of self rejects the idea of a personal essence all together - one's identity is constantly shaped and re-shaped as it is decoded and informed by culture and society. As a consequence, Hall maintained, the postmodern subject is "conceptualized as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity… it is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent *self*" (Hall 598). Therefore, one should keep in mind that there is always an element of performance and role-playing in self-portraiture. This act of performance manifests itself in the balancing between the artist's recording of their physical appearance with the more playful strategies in which they can represent their inner identities (Simon Baker, web).

In terms of the postmodern notion of the 'photographic self', Sherman's photo-series, *Untitled Film Stills*, is regarded by many as an exemplar of postmodernist photography. Assessing her work

from a postmodern theoretical perspective, Grundberg believed that although one might want to refer to Sherman's photographs as self-portraits, her imaginative appropriations and performances in front of the camera refuse the concept of a portrait because "in essence, they deny the self"(Grundberg 9). In paralleling duBois and Sherman, one might argue that duBois' stylized self-portraits and colorful disguises similarly negate access to any sort of certainty of the female self, based on both artists seeming to negotiate the masquerade of femininity and challenging their own identities rather than presenting a unified and stable self. With that, Sherman and duBois admittedly present an alternative self-portrait.

Recording the Feminist Self

According to Loewenberg, "there is a special incentive for women artists to practice self-portraiture". The self-portrait, she indicated, "is a way to keep control of their own representation (Loewenberg 399). With this in mind, it should be noted that in the past forty years, thanks to female artists/photographers, like Francesca Woodman, Nan Goldin, Yayoi Kusama, Jo Spence, Hannah Wilke, and others, the self-portrait was brought to the fore, eventually establishing itself as a central concern in contemporary art (Rice and Gumper 9). One can easily observe how female photographers have been engaging in an artistic process of self-inspection as they discovered their faces and bodies in a transgressive manner – for example, revealing the socially constructed status of the terms, 'male' and 'female'. Indeed, art historian, Frances Borzello, stated that the female self-portrait could never be an 'innocent' process of self-reflection as it is part of a visual language that dramatizes "this is what I believe in" by showing "this is what I look like" (Brozello 17). The photographic feminist self-portrait has therefore become an important means to renegotiate the representation of women's lives and identities, along with establishing the codes and conventions that underlie contemporary visual culture.

In keeping with what Loewenberg defines as "the widespread exhibitionism in popular culture" (Loewenberg 400), women artists have translated their intimacy into self-portraits, and with that, they have not only engaged in an artistic process of 'self-fashioning', but on a broader scale, through their portraits, they inevitably engage with women's social trappings. From Sherman to young feminist artists like Amalia Ulman,[21] female artists have been questioning culturally coded sexual fantasies through their own photographic representation. As such, in duBois' case, her portraits further demonstrate the way in which she engages in the act of looking at the fantasy representation of herself. This idea is well exemplified in a series called *Mirrored Auto-portraits,* depicting duBois as she situates herself in front of a mirror in order to fix her makeup (Figs. 4-5). Traditionally, as writer, Jackie Higgins, maintained, "the mirror is a trope that signifies the search for self; we turn to it to see and reassure ourselves of our existence. Yet some argue that it also reveals oneself as other" (Higgins 14). Certain, duBois' mirror reflects back both the camera's gaze and duBois' on herself, yet, perhaps, more interestingly, it also literalizes duBois' masquerade, the construction of her 'otherness' - her fantasy of being someone else (a liberated woman) through photography. Importantly, as MoMA curator Susan Kismaric maintains, [it is the very artifice of photography that] "allows the self-portraitist to experiment, to assume many identities; in self-portraiture, the photographer can become the hero, the adventurer, the aesthete--or a neutral ground upon which artistic experiments are played out" (Kismaric 1).

A notable anticipation of the concerns shared by contemporary female photographers regarding gender identity, self-representation, and the performative nature of photography is well-exhibited in the works of surrealist French artist, Claude Cahun, who created intriguing androgynous self-portraits in the 1920s and 1930s. Performing in front of the camera in a series of guises, Cahun's

[21] Amalia Ulman (b.1989) is an Argentinian-born artist known for her Instagram-based work. In her famous project, *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), Ulman created a three-part performance work which explored how women present themselves online. Over the course of a few months, she uploaded over two hundred selfies to her Instagram account, presenting herself in a variety of feminine poses and roles (Artnet News, web).

famous portraits may be considered 'ahead of their time' in that they clearly demonstrate the postmodern notion of an incoherent identity. Indeed, a few years after Cahun created her self-portraits, feminist theories would advance this notion; asserting that 'femininity' is neither inherent nor essential to women to the extent as it is culturally constructed. As a result, the female self is capable of continual change, and through performance it is resistant to any fixed gender identity (Smith "Claude Cahun" 3). It might be thought that Cahun had paved the way for the women artists of the 1970s and 1980s, who had similarly drawn upon the tradition of self-portraiture in a subversive manner – using it as "a vehicle to engage arenas that exist outside of the self" (Smith "Claude Cahun", 10). For example, American artist, Lorna Simpson, positioned her portraits as a critique of the gendered and racist gaze in contemporary society. In her famous works combining image and text panels (e.g., *Five Day Forecast*, 1991), Simpson often employed the image of a black woman (sometimes herself), photographed from behind against a bright background accompanied by text. By photographing African-American women with their backs turned to the camera or their faces covered with words and phrases, Simpson undid the viewer's expectation of a self-portrait. In other words, she 'disrupted' the viewer's ability to focus on the individual's face and achieve 'mastery over identity'. Instead of revealing who these women are, Simpson's portraits reflect their relative anonymity, and to a greater degree, the (postmodern) failure of photography to record their individual lives and voices (Lamm 1290; Barson "Tate").

Finally, the feminist self-portrait could be regarded as a great example of what Foster defined as a "postmodernism of resistances," i.e., a counter practice that seeks to engage in social and political issues and to question cultural codes and stereotypes as well as conventional depictions (Foster, "The Anti-Aesthetic" xii). Additionally, by seamlessly integrating intimate issues, including the very mundane as well as the amateurish into the realms of high art, feminist artists have indeed materialized the postmodernist concept of blurring the lines between high and popular culture, the

private and the public, the professional and the amateur. Nan Goldin's autobiographical work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1985) has become a canonical example of this type of tactic.[22]

The Making of Michelle duBois

Although Crosher insists that duBois is a real person, the question whether Crosher invented duBois or was actually given her snapshots resonates throughout the project. Interestingly, Michelle duBois is just one of her many aliases - she was also referred to as "Kathy," "Alice Johnson," "Cricket," and "Mitchi"- her name changes in each one of the four artist books published by Crosher.[23] Walking the line between fantasy and documentary, most of duBois' self-portraits are deliberately obscured, either by the fact that she constantly changes her costumes and looks or simply with the physical interventions of Crosher in the archive that resulted in a variety of formal manipulations (e.g., printing, editing, crumpling, re-photographing, cropping, regrouping the images, etc.) (Figs. 6-8).[24]

Ironically, at the same time duBois reveals an almost narcissistic inclination, a kind of "pathological need to be in front of the camera" (Ross), none of her numerous self-portraits are representative of her 'true' self. Hence, duBois' self-portraits are ambiguous on two significant levels. The first is the content of the images, i.e., duBois' changing and confusing physical appearance, while the second is Crosher's formal interventions and the sequence of books and exhibitions she created from the duBois archive. Undoubtedly, the impossibility of knowing duBois through her photographic images is evermore present based on Crosher's 'control' over duBois and her archive. Giving Crosher complete freedom of action, duBois endowed her with the capacity to

[22] Nan Goldin is an American photographer known for her deeply personal portraiture. Comprising almost 700 snapshot-like portraits, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1980–1986) is a comprehensive visual autobiography documenting Goldin and her close friends, focusing on the subcultures of New York in the 1980s.

[23] 'Aperture Ideas' (New York) has released four limited edition, print-on-demand artist books by Zoe Crosher: *The Reconsidered Archive of Michelle DuBois, aka *Kathy* - Volume 1* (2011) :*The Unraveling of Michelle DuBois AKA "Alice Johnson" - Volume 2* (2011) ; *The Unveiling of Michelle duBois, aka *Cricket* - Volume 3* (2012) *; The Disappearance of Michelle duBois, aka *Mitchi* - Volume 4* (2012). .

[24] I will further examine Crosher's formal manipulations in the next chapter that focuses on the archival and curatorial aspects of this project.

manage and carefully construct every aspect of the archive – formally and conceptually. However, instead of mediating duBois' identity to the viewer, it becomes clear that Crosher makes it challenging to really see duBois and to pinpoint the narrative of her identity.

Besides performing formal manipulations in duBois' visual autobiography, Crosher went as far as creating several versions of duBois' written biography – none of which reveals her 'true' story but rather "[sends] it splintering off in different directions" (Lund, "Doubles, Echoes"). Michelle duBois, the woman, therefore, remained a mystery. When being asked in one interview, "who is Michelle duBois"? Crosher replied: "This project is more about my fantasy of duBois and not so much a biopic, so I have tended not to divulge her full backstory" (Crosher qtd. in Szupinska-Myers, web). Understandably, questions like the former will likely be left unaddressed. duBois' story, like her portraits, never seems to be complete or coherent, at times the different versions of her biography are even contradictory.[25] As described by Catherine Wagley, duBois "moonlighted as escort, sex worker, socialite, etc.; she accumulated aliases ("Michelle duBois" among them) and tried her hand at being everything other than settled and stable" (Wagley "The Fantasy in Crisis"). duBois in this sense could be anything and anywhere, at least in her extensive photo-archive.

Crosher's focus on different levels of fantasy – both "her (duBois') fantasies and the fantasy of photography itself" (Crosher qtd. in Winant, web) - effectively generates a greater sense of confusion and curiosity among the audience as the viewer is bound to oscillate between notions of fantasy and certainty, without ever truly realizing what is 'real' and what is not. Crosher - like many of her contemporaries (for example, French artist, Sophie Calle) - attests to having used this strategy of deliberate confusion and photographic manipulation in an instrumental way so as to further

[25] In one interview, Crosher claimed that duBois was married twice, while in another, she said that duBois was married six times. Based on one version of the story, duBois worked as a flight attendant during the 1970s, yet another version states she had failed in becoming one, and that ultimately, all of the stories about her being an avid traveler were merely a fantasy. Moreover, it is not clear whether duBois is still alive or not. If she is alive, then the question is, why did she ever stop taking pictures of herself?

complicate not only the content of duBois' images, but also the audience and critics' conversations about the project, namely those concerning the incompleteness of duBois' identity. Indeed, as stated by scholar Kimberly Dolan "Ambiguity is a function of generating audience interest. It invites participation… The viewer unconsciously participates in the believability of the narrative" (Dolan 86). Given these points, one might conclude that Crosher's work is ultimately marked by its sheer ambiguity, that is, the conscious blurring between fact and fiction, imagination, and reality.

Returning to the feminist aspect of Crosher's project, according to scholar, Amelia Jones, many feminist artists have used the photographic self-portrait as a creative strategy in order to reclaim their bodies and standing in the art world. Jones felt that the self-portrait could be regarded as a means for establishing women artists as authors rather than traditional objects of the artistic male gaze: "In picturing themselves photographically, they speak themselves as subject and thus unhinge the age-old tendency to collapse any image of a woman's body into the status of speechless and dominated object (Jones 71). Crosher has similarly considered the historical feminist context in which duBois' pictures were made. Crosher claimed: "duBois had a very feminist trajectory. She dictated her own terms at a cultural and historical moment when it wasn't easy to do from where she was from" (Crosher qtd. in Blanch, web).

Further examining the tradition of self-portraiture through the lens of feminism, Chadwick asserted that female artists have been engaging in self-representation as a way of better understanding their lived experiences (Chadwick, "How do I look?" 21). These feminist perspectives notwithstanding, when looking at duBois' extensive collection of photographic self-portraits, one is left wondering whether her images are consistent with Chadwick's view of self-portraiture as a mechanism for better understanding duBois' own identity and lived experience. As repeated by Crosher, this project is about duBois' fantasies and perhaps the very fantasy of duBois' existence. Therefore, despite the fact that at first glance, the pictures convey a sense of verisimilitude and

banality, duBois' self-portraits and the way in which they were re-contextualized by Crosher effectively portray a rather inconsistent and confusing representation of a feminist narrative.

Having obsessively documented her life over the course of two decades, duBois undoubtedly looked different from one image to the next. Yet, the changes in her look are at times so drastic, one cannot tell whether the same person is depicted in each one of the photographs (Figs. 9-11). Apparently, duBois was aware of the importance of the act of self-documentation at a young age; her archive tells her story from when duBois was a teenager until her mid-to-late thirties. In this sense, not only does this endless series of self-imaging reveal duBois' aging process and her physical transformations, but on broader scale, the pictures also manifest the inevitable imprint of time, what philosopher Roland Barthes defined as the essence (*noeme*) of photography, i.e., *that-has-been*.[26] Stated differently, in spite of their fictional nature, duBois' photographs could accordingly be positioned as irreducible records of an 'actual' subject 'that was there', and who in return promises to establish meaning by providing the interpreter with access to the author's intentions (Jones 72). Photography, thus, has a unique ability to simultaneously intensify and undermine the illusion of reality. This is where the paradoxical nature of self-portraiture is being foregrounded insomuch as Michelle duBois could be real and fictitious at the same time.

While the photographic portrait promises to produce an image that resembles the subject that stood in front of the camera at the moment of exposure, we already know that it could easily or even deliberately fail in transferring any coherent information concerning the identity of the subject. As art historian, Rice, points out, photography has the particular quality of being simultaneously objective and subjective as it demonstrates an ongoing vacillation between illusion and reality, that is, "the illusion of [the medium's] total objectivity and the reality of an inevitable subjectivity [of the photographer]" (Rice 2). Applying this paradox to the photographic portrait, artist Rebecca Horne

[26] "The name of Photography's noeme will therefore be: 'That-has-been' …: what I see has been there, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator)" (Barthes 77).

summarizes: “Intellectually, we are aware that we can’t know a person from simply looking at them, much less from a mute photograph. However, emotionally and spiritually, the temptation to try and do just that is too powerful to ignore. Technically, we know better, but we still look for "truth" in portraits” (Horne, web).

Crosher is undoubtedly interested concerned with people’s unblemished belief in photography’s inherent truth value, therefore she purposefully presented a project of seemingly traditional (also clichéd) portraits of a so-called ‘real’ woman and amateur photographer named Michelle duBois. However, as a contemporary artist, Crosher had a ‘secret motive’, that is, to constantly have maintained a degree of ambiguity in her work which undoubtedly challenges the viewer’s expectation of a photographic self-portrait. It seems as though underneath the mundane surface of duBois’ vintage portraits, there is a rigorous quest to un-define and obscure her identity. There is always present an underlying postmodern critique of the photographic representation of the self, or, as Lamm puts it, an “anxiety about the loss of a generalized frame in which the particular, self-determining individual can be recognized” (Lamm 1292). As a consequence, the significant transitions in duBois’ appearance (because of the passage of time, her playful costumes, and Crosher’s manipulation of her photos) is one of the main reasons why her portraits never seem to lead back to a stable and clear subjective identity. The outcome is quite ironic: “duBois offers herself up freely, but ultimately cannot be possessed” (Ross, web).

Such a postmodern ‘anxiety’ surrounding the impossibility of knowing someone through their visual representation is well exemplified in the *Polaroided* series[27] featuring duBois in the company of several men whom Crosher described as “husbands, johns, boyfriends, and strangers” (Crosher qtd. in Ross, web). In the Polaroids, duBois always looks stylish, wearing glossy makeup, and smiling at the camera. She seems to have enjoyed the company of her male suitors on their night out

[27] Taking the role of an editor, Crosher has divided duBois’ archive into various groups, series, and exhibition installations - naming each one according to their theme or style.

on the town. In the context of this series, duBois is never depicted alone - she is always consorting with men. As a restless traveler, she was a very sociable person who probably had a complex relationship with men.[28] Intriguingly, duBois' Polaroids convey a sense of intimacy and casualty in that they look like genuine personal snapshots taken from a 'real' woman's personal life.

Writing on the concept of the snapshot, scholar, Catherine Zuromskis, suggests that "snapshots are powerful personal mementos: nostalgic traces of people or moments past and testaments to personal intimacy or familial accord" (1612). Looking at this series, duBois' home-made Polaroids are in keeping with the Zuromskis' argument as they not only preserve duBois' past emotional and romantic life, though also supply social context to duBois' anonymity. That said, as much as the viewers would like to make sense of duBois' series of self-portraits, Crosher seemed determined to do just the opposite by making duBois' snapshots appear deliberately vague or mysterious. Again, as a way of compromising the viewer's expectation of a casual snapshot, Crosher deliberately chose images that looked quite mundane and very familiar. For example, she decided to focus on the Polaroid snaps so as to challenge the very familiarity they evoke.

Upon first glance, there is indeed a very recognizable quality about duBois' casual images - they look like 'simple' romantic snapshots of happy couples. However, this sense of familiarity is acutely disrupted once one realizes that the male figures' faces and skin have been blacked out with a marker (Figs. 12-13). As such, although these so-called 'banal' snapshots are visually straightforward, they nonetheless call into question the snapshot's ability to establish its subject as real seeing that the crudely blacked-out male figures render the snapshot surreal and ostensibly ambiguous. Despite the bright flash that illuminates the figures, one cannot tell who these men are and what they meant to duBois. Their forced anonymity suggests they could be anyone. According to various interpretations, Crosher decided to eradicate the identity of these men on the assumption that

[28] According to her 'biography', one of duBois' narratives was that she was married several times while working as an escort in the Pacific Rim during the 1970s (Ross, web).

even to duBois, they were barely known (Ross; Soutter 18). This assertion might be plausible yet Crosher has never offered any explanation for this visual manipulation or whether this gesture belonged to her or duBois.

Moreover, with this formal manipulation, one could claim that Crosher invented a 'new' artistic process, as this was Crosher's unique way of making Polaroids. For this reason, she accordingly coined a new term for this process through which images are being 'Polaroided' (and also semi-blacked out with a marker). Interestingly, in creatively using the word Polaroid (also a camera brand) both as a verb and an adjective (e.g., 'Polaroided' images), Crosher further emphasizes her interest in a reflective examination of the medium of photography and its physical properties.

The Aspiring Photographer

It is also imperative to realize that the *Polaroided* series, like most of the pictures composing duBois' archive, are of a vernacular nature, that is, casual and spontaneous photographs. Conventionally, this 'everyday type of photography' is associated with 'untrained' amateurs/hobbyists who use photography outside the institution of art (Zuromskis 1610). Of note is that Crosher has repeatedly referred to duBois as an 'amateur' in different interviews, even characterizing duBois' compulsive picture taking as "the Kodak amateur fantasy" (Crosher qtd. in Williams). In this way, Crosher has not only secured duBois' practice within the casual and quotidian framework of photography, but she has done so in order to re-contextualize the amateurish photographs as works of art. With this, if it was not for Crosher's interventions, duBois' pictures might be indistinguishable from the most mundane collection of snapshots.

The use of the vernacular in a 'high art' context, as demonstrated with this project, is perhaps a proper demonstration of the postmodernist feature of mixing high and low cultural spheres by bringing art and the mundane together. It may be contended, therefore, that Crosher, like many

contemporary artists, drew upon the conceptual gestures of Marcel Duchamp by (re)using duBois' archival materials as 'ready-mades', subsequently elevating duBois' amateur photography to the realm of art. By placing duBois' archive of 'ordinary' photographs into the museum/gallery context, Crosher consciously questions the unique value of a photograph as an artwork and the relevance of fine-art photography. As Soutter stated, thanks to Duchamp and his avant-garde successors, any type of photography – no matter how banal or unaesthetic it might be – could be considered art through its contextual framing and the artist's intentions (Soutter 18). The question then arises of whether duBois' amateur pictures could ever be regarded as art if an artist like Crosher had not given them this status by placing them in this context?

Seeing that amateur photography is comprised almost exclusively of photographs in private settings (e.g., family snaps, events, holiday pictures), according to Wells, in recent years, the distinctions between the professional and the amateur in photography has become less clear-cut: "when once snapshots and vernacular use were dismissed as largely irrelevant to photographic history, they have now become central to understanding the digital era" (Wells 179). Indeed, many well-known contemporary artists, like Nikki S. Lee, Gillian Wearing, Christian Boltanski, Erik Kessel, Zoe Leonard, Walid Raad, and Martin Parr, to name but a few, demonstrate a true fascination with the vernacular mode of photography as most of them, like Crosher, use old/new amateur-like snapshots, Polaroids, and films in their works, thus further diluting the gap between fine art and amateur photography.

Moreover, at a time when so many people submit well-composed and visually aesthetic pictures to 'Instagram' and other social media websites, one must wonder whether a clear separation between vernacular and professional photography is of any relevance. Several prominent scholars, to be sure, have opted for a more democratic approach to the definition of vernacular photography in expressing the aesthetic quality of the image is secondary to the photograph's social or emotional

impact. For example, art historian, Geoffrey Batchen, known for his extensive research on vernacular photography, concentrated on the cultural codes and symbolic significance related to the production and everyday usage of amateur photography. Interestingly, Batchen defines vernacular photography's visual aesthetic as a language of absence. Amateur photography, he insisted, is an excellent demonstration of 'anti-art' images in that it manifests a clear absence of traditional (modernist) artistic markers, such as aesthetic merit, valid authorship, intellectual subtext, clarity of meaning, and 'good taste' (Batchen 58).

Most of duBois' self-portraits seem to conform to Batchen's aesthetic theory. On the surface, one can easily tell that most of her pictures exhibit a simple – even flawed – composition underlined by a shallow depth of field. As an 'untrained' photographer, the majority of duBois' photos are either overexposed, underexposed, or superimposed (as a result of re-using the last picture in the roll without rewinding the film correctly). Some are out of focus as if taken surreptitiously, and all together, her snap shots are framed in an uninteresting or even 'bad' manner. With this in mind, one could posit that by selecting and framing duBois' so-called 'non-art' or 'anti-aesthetic' images, Crosher consciously foregrounded their 'flaws' or photographic 'mistakes' and thus aestheticized amateur photography (Figs. 14-15). To put it differently, as part of her artistic strategy, Crosher took the pictures out of their original (everyday) context to place them within the aesthetic framework of art photography and the museum institution. In addition, there exists a certain element of uniformity in the pictures, which Soutter thought of as clichéd and characteristic of amateur snapshot photography. Paradoxically, Soutter maintained, the very predictability of Michelle duBois' snapshots is another reason why they could be read as 'authentic' (Soutter 15). Crosher seems to further parody the sameness and repetition of images in a vernacular mode.

A similar critical approach present in the work of Nikki S. Lee, a contemporary Korean-American photographer, who relentlessly questioned the typical conventions of self-portraiture and

snapshot photography. In Lee's famous 'Projects' series (which also nods to Sherman), she documented herself performing various personas, each belonging to a different social group or a community in New York City (Midwesterners, Yuppies, Hispanics, senior citizens, lesbians, etc.) (Cotton 195) (Fig. 16). While the content of Lee's work explores issues of identity, race, and social behavior, it also beckons to the already conventional and very familiar aesthetic of snapshot photography. As Zuromskis maintained, the reappearance of Lee as a different character in each picture all the more called attention to the sameness of images in the vernacular mode. Despite the cultural differences of the social groups being represented, on the surface, Lee's pictures look somewhat the same (Zuromskis 1615).

Notwithstanding their clichéd appearance and the sarcastic critique of the predictability of snapshots, it is important to realize, however, that Michelle duBois' portraits convey an emotional effect in that there is something compelling about this joyful woman and her colorful vintage snapshots. Zuromskis noted, that: "Despite the uniformity and visual banality of the snapshot… the image, within a particular context of personal interaction, possesses a deep emotional significance" (Zuromskis 1612). As such, the simple or flawed aesthetic quality of duBois' portraits, the vintage flash, and the Polaroid format rendered her pictures very familiar and nostalgic. Nostalgia is definitely significant in the context of postmodernism seeing that according to Irvine, nostalgia and retro styles are characteristic of postmodernist art (Irvine, web). Explaining what attracted her to duBois in the first place, Crosher said that she was highly intrigued by "those images that have this casual 1970s snapshot aesthetic" (Crosher qtd. in Blanch). With this, it seems as if Crosher was 'romanticizing' the past, both duBois' past as well as that of photography. She harkened back to the past, not only to re-experience her own nostalgia for old photographs and vintage fashion, but also to re-examine analog photography and its unstable status today – which Crosher dramatically referred to as "the falling apart of the medium" (Crosher "In Conversation", video).

Disruption of Visibility

Crosher's handling of the large photographic archive of duBois was so methodical and well-executed, to the point that many of the images she chose to display manifest a complete denial of visibility, which Crosher generally defined as "the impossibility of knowledge, even in the midst of an endless accumulation of images" ("New Photography" MoMA, web). As a case in point, in one of the series entitled *Silhouettes*, duBois appears as a dark silhouette, standing in a doorway. Only her figure can be seen, not her features. The tonal range and sharp contrast render the meaning of these photographs quite mysterious. In another pair, called *Looking Away* (also known as *Back of Neck*), duBois is photographed from the back as she turns away from the camera, hence creating difficulty in reading her face (Figs. 17-18). Not being able to recognize duBois in the pictures evidently curtails one's desire to make sense of any simple visual representation of an individual. Additionally, this undermines the viewer's expectations, and is the reason why Soutter claimed that duBois' portraits inevitably disrupt the voyeuristic pleasure of looking at someone else's personal photographs and mastering their subjectivity (Soutter 14).

When referring to visual pleasure, it should be that in 1975, during the time duBois was traveling and documenting her life, feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, published her highly regarded essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Therein, Mulvey proposed that classical Hollywood cinema had objectified and displayed women for the visual pleasure of men. Coining the term 'the male gaze', Mulvey asserted that Western visual culture had the tendency to depict the world (and, thus, women) from a masculine perspective, therefore establishing man as subject and woman as the object of a gaze: "Men do the looking; women are there *to be looked at*" (Mulvey 46). Likewise, art critic and novelist, John Berger, evaluated gendered modes of looking and perception in visual culture, highlighting the ways in which women are inevitably the subject of a gaze. In his often-cited publication, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Berger famously wrote: "men act and women appear.

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger 38). Applying this to duBois, it could be contended that not only is she the subject of the male gaze but, also, as theorized by Berger, she is further engaged in scrutinizing her fantasy representation through her photographic documentations; a "woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself… From earliest childhood, she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually" (Berger 37).

In line with Berger's and Mulvey's theories, duBois evidently anticipated the male viewer seeing that in her photos, she showcases her sexuality and exercises flirtatious smiles, hence potentially turning herself into an object of visual pleasure. Nevertheless, concurrently, duBois 'seduces' the spectator into looking at her, simultaneously refusing the male gaze in that she occasionally turned her back to the camera, hiding her face in the shadows or giving Crosher 'permission' to manipulate her images in such a radical manner that in some portraits, her original image becomes completely obscure.

Another great example of the distortion of vision caused by Crosher's manipulations is manifest in a series entitled *The Additive Dust Series (Guam 1979)*. For these images, Crosher put together over forty photographs that exhibited duBois in various poses, dressed up in different costumes, and, as always, smiling at the camera. This time, Crosher carried out a different sort of image manipulation - she deliberately took the dust from one print and added it to the next one in the series. In doing so, Crosher had subsequently ordered the photographs 'chronologically' – not according to the time they were taken but rather based on the amount of dust that covers them. As a result of this material intervention, duBois' image became gradually obscure until she nearly disappeared in the final portrait (Figs. 19-20). Commenting on this particular series, art critic, Jonathan Thomas, made an important remark, being that "dust, one of photography's enemies, here becomes its subject—and the engine of its disappearance" (Thomas, web). This gesture of

accumulating dust on the surface of pictures, thus making the source material nearly vanish, seems to attest to Crosher's tendency to play off the desirable pleasure in looking at duBois.

Moreover, this series is also in keeping with another recurring theme in Crosher's work, that is, her focus on visual material and materiality, both the found materials that comprise duBois' original archive, and the materiality of the photographs as tangible objects. To be sure, as a contemporary artist, Crosher's art is grounded in the present, yet she is constantly looking back at the past. Her work, therefore, manifests a commentary on the current state of visual culture in which the practice of analog photography has become a tradition of the past. Being 'concerned' with the residual condition of the analog, Crosher consciously attended more to the material properties of duBois' photographs. By developing the vintage photographic films and in physically transforming the source material, Crosher also emphasized the indexical nature of duBois' photographs, thus making the viewer read them as real at the same time they were potentially fabricated.[29] As Tumlir put it, 'Crosher is treating duBois' portraits as artifacts of an analog age' (Tumlir, "Femme Fatale").

Another example for Crosher's fascination with the material aspect of photography is visualized in the *Mae Wested* series, where Crosher consciously exaggerated the physical qualities of the pictures while utilizing a variety of formal gestures and techniques. What seems to be a staged studio portrait of duBois – dressed in an elegant black fur coat, golden gloves, and a vintage veil hat - was crumpled by Crosher only to smooth it out and re-photograph the image that was finally printed on metallic paper, resulting in a wrinkled shimmering surfaces that further obscure duBois' 'real' identity (Figs. 7 and 21). Crumpling a photograph or adding dust to an image is, to some extent, an action of deliberate 'sabotage'. Yet, in the context of Crosher's work, the very act of sabotage and formal manipulations are also the subjects of her work.

[29] The term 'indexicality' refers to the way in which a photograph is understood as a chemical trace or imprint, via the passage of light, of an existing (or once existing) tangible object. Further in this context, 'taking' of a photograph can be interpreted as 'pointing' to something in the real world (Wells 362).

Bearing in mind the postmodern notion of the 'self' that theorized identity as a cultural construct denying the possibility of any real essence, Crosher's series of formal interventions further stressed the persistent failure in discovering duBois' subjectivity insofar as her images and identity were either fragmented into a series of performing personas, or just completely erased. Arguably, these ambiguous photographic self-portraits could be regarded as 'anti-portraits', or, as Soutter commented: "Crosher makes a portrait that is less a portrait of an individual…" (Soutter 17). In another multi-part work entitled, *The Other Disappeared Nurse* (*The Vanishing of Michelle duBois*) (2012), Crosher decided to focus on one image, a self-portrait of duBois performing as a flirtatious nurse in white uniform. Crosher re-printed this picture over and over again, leading to a progressive fading of duBois' features to the point she appears as a completely washed-out image. Significantly, Crosher opted to install this photo-series in a frieze of fifteen images along the gallery's walls so that the viewer was presented with a so called 'film strip' (perhaps she 'cited' Sherman again) of duBois' fading portraits. The series presented duBois in such an overexposed manner—literally and metaphorically—that in the final image of the installation, there is literally nothing left to see (Fig. 22). In an interesting manner, at the same time Crosher re-materialized duBois' archive by turning her images into objects, she eventually de-materialized duBois' representations into abstract images. However, the filmstrip wall installation is noteworthy in that the very serial quality and quantity of duBois' pictures is what makes them so powerful and meaningful despite her gradual disappearance into abstraction.

Finally, *The Other Disappeared Nurse* effectively demonstrated one of the tenets of Crosher's work, i.e., its capacity to draw the viewer's attention to the medium and to the status of photographs as objects in the digital age: "I -- as are other artists -- am working through unpacking the materiality of analog photography that has been taken for granted for so long" (Crosher qtd. in Szupinska-Myers, web). As already stated, Crosher has a nostalgic interest in analog photography, which is now

increasingly becoming obsolete as a result of the development of digital technologies. Along the same lines, Respini has made reference to this series, stating the fading portraits of the nurse "suggest the vanishing of identity but also of analog photography in the digital age" ("New Photography - Exhibition", web).

A Chameleon-like Figure

> *Actually, an amazing part of the archive is just how much she transforms her physical self, how unrecognizable she is from one set of images to the next* (Crosher qtd. in Blanch, web).

The photographic seriality of this project effectively attested to duBois' fluid status. Enjoying the act of staging and performing her many personas, it seems as though duBois is always looking for different ways of 'surpris[ing]' or entertaining herself and her viewers, as she is clearly aware of their scrutinizing gaze. In a sense, when looked at collectively, her stylized images create an interesting 'montage' or a colorful compilation of duBois' multiple transformations throughout the years. Her looks are remarkably diverse seeing that in some pictures, she is heavily made-up and costumed while in others, she maintains a 'natural' look, perhaps in an attempt to portray the "girl-next-door" archetype. Yet, for the most part, there is nothing natural about duBois' portraits. As she plays her 'fantasy dress-up' game, duBois is often depicted wearing wigs, hence she could be a blond or a brunette, with long hair or short hair, curly, or straight. In flaunting her femininity, duBois' photographs accordingly reflect the fashion trends of her era, "her makeup ranging from black cat-eye liner in the '60s to frosted blue shadow in the '80s, as well as hairstyles stretching from beehive to Dorothy Hamill's wedge cut" (Ross, web) (Figs. 23-24).

From a theoretical point of view, duBois' changing costumes, names, and personas is a great demonstration of the feminist (anti-essentialist) argument that states 'femininity' is culturally coded and constructed, and that it may simply be put on and performed, changed and mimicked (Cotton

193). From this vantage point, duBois' disguises might also be read through the lens of psychoanalysis and the notion of femininity as masquerade. The concept was introduced as early as 1929 by psychoanalyst, Joan Riviere, in her frequently cited essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade". According to Riviere's observations, intellectual and professionally successful women—a position deemed as a 'masculinity complex'—tend to put on a mask of 'exaggerated' femininity, i.e., of 'womanliness' so as to compensate for their so-called masculine position (i.e., power and success). Therefore, in order to hide any kind of rivalry with men and to be better accepted in a society codified and controlled by men, 'women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution" (Riviere qtd. in Rudnytsky and Gordon 104). In the end, Riviere claimed, there is no real difference between the 'true' identity of a woman and the masquerade of womanliness.

Building upon Riviere, Mary Ann Doane, noted film theorist, further deconstructed the essentialized notion of femininity. In her writings, Doane defined masquerade as a self-conscious performance of excessive femininity (e.g., the femme fatale) that makes visible the act of masquerade in itself. Said differently, this makes the viewer acknowledge that the image of femininity is in fact a series of masks that could be readily put on, changed, and removed (Doane 26). As such, duBois employed the camera as a recording device to document her changing fictional personas, that is, to try a new mask/look. Hence, her diverse and overly feminine self-portraits could be placed in dialogue with Doane's emphasis on the act of masquerading as an end in and of itself.

Furthermore, duBois' enactment of different poses and feminine characters could be read in relation to feminist philosopher, Judith Butler, and her influential theory on gender performativity and subject formation. In her inspiring publication, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler suggests that gender is an improvised or an unfixed act of performance that is constructed through a "stylized repetition of acts" that ultimately "founds and consolidates the subject" (Butler 140-41). With this,

duBois' staged performances in front of the camera reveal an important element of repetition. First, as duBois appears in all of her pictures, she is the main subject of this project – even her male companions were 'edited out'; second, certain pictures are identical in that duBois seems to repeat the same gestures and poses; third, duBois is mimicking, i.e., repeating well-known cultural feminine tropes and stereotypical gestures of seduction. Ultimately, duBois is caught in the act of repeatedly looking at and transforming the same woman, that is, herself. Yet, duBois' portraits remind us, nevertheless, that the 'self' remains unknowable insofar as it is constantly concealed behind an ever-changing play of feminine masks. One might believe that in doing so, duBois was (perhaps unknowingly) making a statement of power by asserting herself as provocative and as feminine as she 'chooses' to be.[30] Being both the photographer and the model, duBois had the ability to represent herself rather than be merely represented, thus she could regain agency of her fantasy image and self-representation.

Notwithstanding the ambiguous terms of duBois' performance and masquerade, it is the photographic seriality and the repetition of feminine clichés as manifest in her archive that might 'convince' the viewer that duBois' portraits are not more than mundane and familiar. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that Crosher is consciously creating a fictional narrative through the staged appearance of 'reality' – a strategy Crimp defines as the usage of "the apparent veracity of photography against itself" (Crimp, "The Photographic Activity" 99). Debatably, duBois' portraits

[30] In her recent article, "Our Bodies, Online - Feminist Images in the Age of Instagram" (Aperture 2016), artist and scholar, Carmen Winant, looks at the work of an emerging group of young female photographers whose works demonstrates 'a new brand of feminism' – one that is comprised of explicitly semi-pornographic, sensuous, titillating images of young women, many of which are taken in the form of selfies (Winant mentions artists, Amalia Ulman, Mayan Toledano, Petra Collines, and Audrey Wollen). Using social media as a significant part of their work, they further explore the "selfie aesthetic", namely how women present themselves on the internet. In attempting to answer the question, "what qualifies work as feminist art in today's cultural landscape?", Winant emphasizes that for the current feminist generation, the 'qualifications' of being a feminist artist have become less strict, thus women feel free to experiment with different degrees of conscious eroticism (*i.e.*, "eroticism as power") without being criticized for objectifying themselves or others. On the contrary, through their provocative presentation, these young feminists attempt to criticize the patriarchal expectations of gender and promote body positivity (Winant 142-3).

look utterly familiar - their meaning may derive from one's cultural knowledge of popular imagery attached to women: models in fashion spreads and commercials, Hollywood celebrities, 'calendar girls', vintage-style pin-ups, and Playboy models among others. Further, in "her images, duBois seems to bank on her Americanness; her currency is a glamour modeled after big-screen bombshells -- Doris Day, Kim Novak and maybe sometimes, at its most severe, Marlene Dietrich" (Wagley "The Fantasy in Crisis").

As evident with this project, duBois liked taking pictures and performing in front of the camera, while Crosher, meanwhile, did not use the camera to produce any original photographs as she instead appropriated found images (also 'cultural artifacts') to the point that she regarded and handled these objects as if they were her own. With this, it seems that Crosher's formal interventions in duBois' original photos allowed her to 'better' control what she has appropriated. Art critic, Nicolas Bourriaud, termed this type of appropriation art as *post-production* - a type of artwork that has not only been created on the basis of preexisting works or images but that these images have already been circulated throughout the cultural sphere, thus rendering them as "objects already informed by other objects" (Bourriaud 8). Crosher was certainly not alone in her appropriation of culturally coded images. Levine's famous series, *After Walker Evans* (1981), which I referred to in Chapter One, is a proper demonstration of Bourriaud's theory. Certainly, Levine generated her feminist-cultural critique not only by means of re-photographing found objects but by the very direct appropriation of widely circulated images (e.g., Evans' *Portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs,* 1936) which have been raised to iconic status within (male-dominated) visual culture. Along similar lines, Crosher's appropriation of familiar snapshots calls attention to the ways in which cultural codes are embedded in images, and how eventually, the meaning of duBois' snaps are informed by one's cultural knowledge of clichéd representations of women. duBois' chameleonic performances potentially implicate the viewers in the process of cultural coding, thus making them ever more

aware not only of the social consolidation of the term 'femininity', but also of the constructed nature of pictures and the, perhaps, artificiality in the creation and reading of images of women.

Ultimately, in the context of our image-saturated era, duBois' massive photo collection of so-called 'familiar feminine roles' demonstrates (perhaps more so than ever) how our understanding of images is powerfully influenced by their reference to other images as well as to hegemonic social conventions. As put forth by Grundberg, in postmodernity, "the photograph suggests that our image of reality is made up of images. It makes explicit the dominion of mediation" (Grundberg 17).

Cindy Sherman Vs. Michelle duBois and Zoe Crosher

It would be unreasonable to discuss the construction of personal identity through staged performance and portrait photography without once again turning to Sherman and her iconic *Untitled Film Stills* series. Since the 1970s, Sherman has daringly explored the nature of representation and female identity formation through role-playing and masquerade. Documenting herself in various costumes, makeup, wigs, and settings – inspired by classical Hollywood cinema, fashion, as well as the canon of art history, Sherman has created an extensive series of seemingly recognizable yet effectively ironic and unsettling self-portraits that call into question the fashioning of 'female typologies' and criticize the influence of mass media (including photography) on the construction of identity as a whole.

It seems that appearance and disguise were similarly crucial for duBois, hence many critics have compared Crosher's project to Sherman's work. Being highly aware of the precedents of Sherman, Crosher addressed this comparison several times, also stating that her practice has been significantly informed by Pictures Generation artists, like Sherman, as well as Richard Prince (Szupinska-Myers, web). Of interest is that, ironically, positioning duBois as a *Cindy Sherman avant la lettre* (Tumlir, "Femme Fatale"), Crosher mounted an installation of twelve images entitled, *The Cindy-Shermanesque, But She's the Real Thing*, in 2005 (Fig. 25). However, once realizing that,

unlike Crosher, Sherman acts on both sides of the camera, it might be more appropriate to juxtapose Sherman and duBois based on their equal engagement with the fantasy of photography and self-documentation at around the same time, thus making their pictures share particular noticeable visual features.

Identifying the resemblance between Sherman's and duBois' practices is necessary. While the two women are clearly different in their artistic intentions and critical recognition, [31] both nevertheless effectively used themselves as a leitmotif in their photography in order to produce a different type of self-portraiture, or in other words, an alternative female desire. Importantly, Sherman and duBois deliberately exercised control over the execution of their photos and set the 'strict' terms of their own representation (and objectification). Crosher emphasized the importance of duBois' authorial actions: "I like how she dictated the terms of her own world… What is important is that she dictated the planning, execution and critically, the keeping of these images of herself, what I call 'Auto-Portraits" (Crosher qtd. in Blanch, web).

To be sure, a number of duBois' photos are quite reminiscent of Sherman's famous grotesqueries and ambiguous mise-en-scenes from the 1970s and 1980s. In a way, duBois' portraits seem to anticipate Sherman's. As a case in point, in one of the images presented in the context of the *Shermanesque* installation, duBois is depicted as one of her humorous characters; wearing a shaggy brunette wig and funny-looking red eyeglasses (Fig. 26). At first sight, duBois, like her contemporary, Sherman, is knowingly theatrical and amused. Yet, on a deeper level, she (perhaps semi-consciously) engaged in a transgressive fragmentation of her own identity into a series of colorful characters. As such, duBois and Sherman's grotesque costumes and masks not only further

[31] As a professional artist, Sherman's intentions behind her series are most likely more deliberate and conscious than those of duBois - the anonymous amateur photographer. In terms of reception, being an amateur, duBois probably never intended to create her photographs for the public eye, whereas Sherman's works gained immediate institutional recognition. Unlike Sherman, the viewer duBois anticipated was most likely only herself and her companions at the time (Lund,"Doubles, Echoes").

sabotage the mimetic premise of the traditional portrait, but, also, as Crimp mentioned in referencing Sherman's work, these documented disguises make visible the postmodern concept of the self as an imaginary construct: "There is no real Cindy Sherman in these photographs", says Crimp, "there are only the guises she assumes" (Crimp, "The Photographic Activity" 99). With this, there might not be a real Michelle duBois - only the fictionalized construction of the of this woman through images.

Finally, when considering the current re-contextualization of the images, duBois' practice should be further placed in conversation with Sherman's inasmuch as both women offer a cultural critique of the current trends of exhibitionism and the strategies of image circulation that perpetuate gendered narratives of identity. As Lund proposed, the common thread that runs through duBois' and Sherman's practices is that the "sense of identity-as-performance entangles with an insinuating awareness that culture constructs the self" (Lund,"Doubles, Echoes"). By creating their documented chameleon-like transformations, Sherman and duBois might have equally subverted the male gaze by never conveying their fixed identity but rather an identity in process. At the same time, it is important to note that from Crosher's perspective, although she acknowledges Sherman's impact on her artistic process, she insists on differentiating her intentions from Sherman's by emphasizing her unique photographic manipulations and archival actions: "As I have moved through the project, my investigations have resulted in increasingly pronounced interventions and multiple iterations, leading to the near-disappearance and even total obfuscation of the original source material… An obfuscation of the overall narrative … And I think this concerted obfuscation goes beyond the groundwork that the Pictures Generation artists laid before me (Crosher qtd. in Szupinska-Myers, web).

A Feminist Co-authorship

Although art critics, curators and Crosher herself have synonymously referred to duBois' images as self or auto-portraits, it could be interesting, however, to question whether the category of self-portraiture is the suitable definition for duBois' unique body of work. As one might speculate, if duBois is by and large the subject of her images, then who actually operated the camera and clicked the shutter? Having been asked this particular question in more than one interview, Crosher unsurprisingly replied that "it doesn't really matter who the photographer of these pictures is" (Crosher qtd. in Williams, web). Interestingly, by calling these images 'self-portraits', the viewer inevitably perceives duBois as the sole author of her photographic archive. However, based on the fact that Crosher was certainly not interested in delivering any certainty, she subsequently disclaimed duBois' authorship by simply offering the possibility that there might be more than one photographer involved in the project. After all, it is realistic that many of duBois pictures could have been taken by unknown photographers, such as duBois' friends, husbands, clients, and even passers-by.

The uncertainty surrounding the identity of the photographer that took the pictures while duBois was performing for the camera is yet another strategic confusion executed by Crosher. Consequently, in the context of postmodernist art, this ambiguity further tests the modernist acknowledgment of an identifiable, singular author/creator, also known as the "myth of the author" (Grundberg 9). It could therefore be said that Crosher's contemporary approach to authorship echoes Roland Barthes' critical theory of literary and artistic authorship, known from *The Death of the Author* (1967). In his famous essay, Barthes argued for the liberation of the reader from the 'tyranny of the author', that is, the traditional disposition by which the meaning of an artwork might be solely formulated by the author according to his/her determined intentions. Alternatively, Barthes presents the reader/viewer with the power of interpretation, stating that the "birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes 148). In the case of the duBois Project, by suggesting that

there could be several photographers who had taken duBois' self-portraits, Crosher seemed to further reinforce Barthes' "death of the author" understanding of photography in that she encouraged viewers' participation in decoding and interpreting her ambiguous and multi-layered project.

When evaluating the work as a whole, it becomes evident that through the appropriation of duBois' archive, along with the subsequent varied manipulations and arrangements of her pictures, Crosher earned the 'authority' to re-contextualize and present the archive based on her own logic. By the same token, Crosher was in charge of dictating the levels of confusion around duBois' identity and the meaning of this project all together.[32] Indeed, Crosher involved herself with different thematic perspectives in each of the duBois exhibitions as well as in her books.[33] Under these circumstances, duBois and Crosher are, in fact, artistic collaborators or co-authors. To a greater extent, the two women are dependent on each other: while duBois is the one who dictated the conventions of her own fantasies by assuming so many clichéd female roles and posing herself in front of the camera, Crosher, in return, utilized duBois' 'photographic inheritance' as raw material for her archival and curatorial experiments. This is a conceptually daunting undertaking seeing that the project essentially involves one woman (Crosher) who is "presenting someone else (duBois) documenting herself performing herself" (Wagley, "The Fantasy in Crisis").

If it was not for the two women's collaborative efforts, duBois' archive would have remained as it was; tucked in boxes under her bed. Arguably, without bequeathing her archive to Crosher, duBois' collection of photographs would have remained 'silent' and duBois' character would have continued to be unknown. As stated in one of Crosher's exhibition essays: "But an archive by itself, like an artwork by itself, is a static notion, a thing activated only when it is being handled, witnessed,

[32] Notwithstanding the artistic overshadowing of Crosher, she is certainly aware, nevertheless, of the ethical issues of appropriation and ownership. Perhaps as a way of further confusing the narrative, Crosher insisted on the actuality of duBois' existence by declaring in one interview that after negotiation with duBois, she decided to pay her a portion of what she earned from any work that sells, thus reinforcing their co-authorship.
[33] Crosher's role as the curator of her shows will be discussed in the next chapter.

experienced" ("DCKT Contemporary", web). Accordingly, thanks to Crosher's physical and conceptual interventions, duBois' so- called 'static archive' was activated and exposed to the public. To this end, Crosher's appropriations and the collaborative authorship thereafter of the two women rendered this project all the more self-reflexive as it provided a re-examination of the traditional conventions of ownership, originality and of photography all together. Finally, it is therefore the very concept of a co-authorship that further undermines the characterization of duBois' photographs as ordinary self (auto)-portraits. By introducing more than one author responsible for the making of these images, Crosher in fact, as mentioned before, 'dilutes' the mimetic premise of photography that strengthens the relationship between the self-portrait and the 'truth of a subject'.

To add to this idea of co-authorship, and moreover, to the overall sense of confusion, it seems as if Crosher has deliberately chosen to present the archive of a woman who, quite strangely, looks almost like her. As many have suggested, there is in fact a remarkable resemblance between the two women (Figs. 27-28). Pointing at this uncanny resemblance, Tumlir thought that duBois could potentially be "Crosher's 'spiritual' mother" (Tumlir), or, as Schoen put it: "Zoe Crosher is Michelle DuBois. Or Michelle DuBois is Zoe Crosher. Or neither is neither or both are both" (Schoen, web). Crosher, on the other hand, has never denied these claims of resemblance. On the contrary, she supported them in stating: "they were photographs of someone that kind of looked like me, when I was younger, and at certain moments I really looked like her!" (Crosher qtd. in Blanch, web). Unsurprisingly, this peculiar resemblance has elicited many curious questions regarding the 'true' nature of Crosher and duBois' relationship. However, as has already been established, Crosher is clearly not interested in giving any definitive answers. Instead, she reveled and continues to revel in this extensive sense of confusion and incoherence as she commented: "Often, people think that I am Michelle duBois and that she is me. I like that our identities appear to have merged; that people think

we are one and the same. This is part of the work: the blurring of the boundaries of identity and understanding" (Crosher qtd. in Ross, web).

Conclusion

Staging so many photographic self-records over a 20-year span, assuming different names, looks, and identities and, finally, collecting and maintaining the resulting thousands of images is most certainly a challenging experiment in photography and performance. Yet, even after reviewing duBois' excessive collection of self-portraits, the 'mystery' remains somewhat unsolved. Who is this woman? Is she even real? And what was her incentive in compulsively making and accumulating so many pictures of herself? duBois' seems to avoid self-disclosure. Attempting to answer a portion of these questions, Schoen gives a rather emotional or existential reasoning for duBois' actions, suggesting that duBois' compulsive self-documentation simultaneously derives from the very human and inevitable anxiety of death: "The possibility of a world without me (the possibility of my *not-Being-in-the-world*). In the face of this threat, one serves a compulsion to repeatedly project images of oneself onto the screen of the world" (Schoen, web). In the same vein, Bate stressed how photography is paradoxically driven by the possibility of forgetting: "The retention and registration of impressions within photographs has come to be associated with the idea of remembering… the anxiety of remembering is thus that which we will forget" (Bate 119). It might be reasoned, therefore, that duBois' own 'anxiety of remembering' (her colorful appearances and fantasies) not only prompted her so-called 'photo-mania', but the very fear of being forgotten (and remaining an anonymous housewife from Oklahoma) might have been the reason for finally bequeathing her massive photo-collection to Crosher.

Opting for an open-ended type of interpretation, I tend to agree more with Tumlir who concluded that the answer to duBois' mystery "is beside the point; it is only the question of that counts here…:" (Tumlir). Among many other things, and in the context of a post (post)-modern era,

the duBois Project is arguably about the constant search for an answer without ever really getting to the root of who this woman really is. It could be said, therefore, that the uncompromising ambiguity manifest in duBois' pictures is a significant part of the 'goal' of the whole project. The final framing of the images ultimately suggest that duBois' identity is constantly on the a point of divergence, hence her photographs deviate from the conventional definition of portraiture based on the autobiography of an essential persona. Moreover, by reconstructing duBois' portraits, Crosher deliberately complicates the efficacy of culturally dominant, monolithic images of women. As such, duBois' portraits might further make viewers aware of their own complicity in decoding her images and in investing them with meaning: 'It is because we don't—and can't—know her that she is so fascinating. She is a blank screen for projection of our own imaginations' (Ross, web).

Furthermore, it is interesting to see how Crosher's focus on the act of compiling and accumulating so many photographs mirrors the current status of images in the fast information age, and, more particularly, in the image-centric web platforms where people obsessively share and broadcast their private lives and intimate moments. As a contemporary artist who undoubtedly utilizes social media to promote herself, Crosher considered (and accordingly asks the viewers to reflect on) the implications of the massive saturation of digital images and the current cultural form of the self-portrait, i.e., the 'selfie'. As art critic, Maxwell Williams, maintained, not only did Crosher metaphorically act as duBois' social media platform (being the one to 'post' duBois' archive online), her project also exposes the inevitable failure of trying to piece information together from sets of so many photographs (Williams, web). To be sure, it is somewhat difficult to patch together someone's life or 'true' appearance via their social media timeline.

Interestingly, Soutter referred to duBois' pictures as 'hybridized versions of portraiture', that is, a photograph that has a realistic surface yet is underpinned by layers of conceptual subtext and references to a variety of art genres and gestures (Soutter 28). In light of Souter's contention, by

creating as so called ‘hybrid’ art project, Crosher might have adopted an unconventional approach to photography that consequently took on a more complex perspective of representation of identity and subjectivity in contemporary society. Yet, as it turns out, this project is not necessarily about the portrait of an individual woman, but rather an ‘experiment’ in establishing a new vocabulary to portray the infinite fantasy images of the female self. As Lund believed, “rather than manifesting who she really is, her photographs seem designed to see who she could be. There’s something not only experimental but also aspirational in duBois’ efforts” (Lund, “Doubles, Echoes”).

It might be that duBois never really left her small town in Oklahoma, yet significantly, photography facilitated her dreaming and fantasizing about being someone else (a free-spirited woman) and traveling to exotic places. As Crosher said: “All she wanted to do was see the world” – hence, for Crosher, this feminist project was also an opportunity to make the fantasies of an unknown female photographer from the past come true in the present: “[it’s about] how far can I push her fantasy and realize it for her, both her amateur Kodak fantasy and the feminist fantasy of liberation, which is rooted in a very specific historical moment” (Crosher qtd. in Szupinska-Myers, web).

Chapter 3: The Unreasonable Archive

> *The Michelle duBois Project is about the relationship of fiction and the archive*
>
> (Crosher qtd. in Winant, web).

In this chapter, I analyze Crosher's project as a prime example of contemporary archival art. Crosher chose to employ the model of the archive in order to investigate the inherited personal photo collection of duBois and accordingly stage and perpetuate her story(s). Through a discussion of various central contemporary theories concerning the current social and cultural role of the archive, I examine Crosher's archival strategies as they facilitate the various iterations (i.e., museum/gallery presentations) of duBois' fantasy archive.

In keeping with Crosher's meta-reflection of photography and the making of images, she similarly used the principles of the archive so as to revise the status, meaning and limitations of an extensive photo-archive within contemporary culture. Therefore, Crosher's archival project should not be taken at face value, but rather as a means to draw attention to the formal and conceptual 'mechanisms' of the archive and to the work of the artist who acts as an archivist and subsequently as a curator. Accordingly, the second section of this chapter is dedicated to an examination of Crosher's combined role as an artist who curates her own shows and installations. I conclude this section with an analysis of Crosher's self-curated exhibition in the context of the *New Photography* 2012 group show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Taken together, one could claim that Crosher's archival and curatorial practices push her innovation further, beyond the postmodernist critique of the cultural representations of women and the construction of subjectivity via images.

The Artist as Archivist

Interestingly, the archival framework of the project further harnessed the distinct 'roles' which duBois and Crosher had taken on in the context of their collaborative artistic effort. While duBois is the subject, producer, and compiler of her self-portraits, Crosher is the archivist, editor, and curator of the photo-archive bequeathed to her. These different roles advanced the notion of a multilayered archive that incorporates several narratives and time frames while also blurring the boundaries between past and present, original and copy, the real and the unreal. Accordingly, artist, Lucas Blalock, emphasized, in regards to the project, that there seems to be a double notion of the duBois' archive in that it is both an 'archive of her' as well as 'her archive', that is, duBois' collection of self-portraits could be "considered as both images of someone's life, but also as objects or keepsakes from that life" (Blalock, "Part 1 - Lucas Blalock Vs. Zoe Crosher").

Importantly, Crosher's reflection on the idea of the archive and her employment of archival strategies placed her artistic practice in conversation with the well-established socio-cultural phenomena known as 'the archival drive' or 'archival impulse'. In his introduction to the publication, *Lieux de mémoire* (Realms of the Past), Pierre Nora wrote that "l'obsession de l'archive … marque le contemporain" - 'the contemporary is marked by… obsession with the archive' (Nora 30). Correspondingly, an obsession with an endless accumulation and preservation of images and objects were one of the main the driving forces behind Crosher's project. Furthermore, Crosher's (and many like-minded artists') [34] archival obsession is undoubtedly the result of what Nora called the "imperative of our epoch" – that is, "not only to keep everything, to preserve every indicator of memory – even when we are not sure which memory is being indicated – but also to produce archives" (Nora, "Between Memory and History" 14).

[34] In his essay, "Archival Impulse" (2004), Foster examines the works of 'archival artists' Thomas Hirschorn, Sam Durant, and Tacita Dean. For other prominent examples of contemporary archival art, see: Douglas Gordon, *Pretty Much Every Film and Video Work from about 1992 Until Now* (2002-2014), Christian Boltanski, *The Store House* (1988), Thomas Demand, *Archive* (1995), Gerhard Richter, *Atlas* (1962-present), and Sophie Calle, *Prenez Soin de Vous* (2007).

When concerning the incorporation of archival forms and artifacts into art, Foster identified a recent international phenomenon where contemporary art has become heavily infused by the presence of the archive. In his essay, "Archival Impulse" (2004), Foster reviewed the work of several contemporary artists that manifest an 'archival drive' as they re-interpret documents, read historical texts, edit images, and incorporate found objects into their work so as to produce existing juxtapositions and new meanings (Foster 3).

Archiving and collecting is, according to Bate, an activity of memory, hence the process of conservation might be motivated by the need to know and remember - or paradoxically - by the possibility of forgetting (Bate 119). Pierre Nora added: 'Modern memory is, above all, archival [. . .] (Nora, "Between Memory and History"13). Therefore the archive's strong link with memory, history, nostalgia, and the representation of the past certainly makes the case for today's apparent popularity of the archive as a subject of reflection among artists (and society, in general). As curator, Dieter Roelstraete, stated in his article, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art" (2009):

> "More and more frequently, art finds itself looking back, both at its own past (a very popular approach right now, as well as big business), and at "the" past in general… The retrospective, historiographic mode - a methodological complex that includes the historical account, the archive, the document, the act of excavating and unearthing, the memorial, the art of reconstruction and reenactment, the testimony - has become both the mandate ('content') and the tone ('form') favored by a growing number of artists (as well as critics and curators) of varying ages and background" (Roelstraete 1).

Notwithstanding the belief that the questioning of the conventions of the archive within the context of modern art is not necessarily a new trend,[35] Foster claimed that it is a prevalent contemporary tendency in its own right (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 4). Supporting this claim, several other scholars have indicated that over the past two decades there has been lively debate surrounding and a growing interest in the concept and status of the archive amidst postmodernism outside its formal institutions (Manhoff 9; van Alphen 8; Enwezor 13; Edwards 2). Indeed, as put forth by Bate, an awareness of the historical and current accumulation and dissemination of images and documents has expanded exponentially since the invention of the internet: "As the internet has begun to show, 'archive fever' is a prevalent aspect of human behavior, with everyone collecting something or other, either as objects or via photographs". Importantly, Bate continues, the internet itself is regarded as a new meta-archive that constantly generates new networks and archival linkages while yielding greater access to existing archives photographer was curious ves (Bate, "Art Photography" 105; 113).

Archival Theory

According to its traditional definition, "an archive is a place where people can go to gather firsthand facts, data, and evidence from letters, reports, notes, memos, photographs, and other primary sources" ("National Archives", web). Accordingly, archives are often interpreted as repositories of cultural memory, in other words, "a means to conserve the past, that is, to present the past in the present" (Groys, "Art Workers" web). In political/national terms, with the institutionalization of archives in the mid-nineteenth century, the archive further came to serve the crucial function of bringing together the imagery of the nation/state and in reinforcing the collective

[35] Artists and scholars have been investigating the concept of the archive since the early twentieth century. See: Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-1941), in which Duchamp created a portable miniature monograph including 69 reproductions of his own work. Another example: German art historian, Aby Warburg's incomplete archival project known as *Mnemosyne Atlas*. The 'Warburgian Atlas' is a massive collection of images composed between 1924 and 1929. The archive consisted of 40 wooden panels covered with black cloth, upon which Warburg thematically arranged and pinned approximately 1,000 drawings and pictures from books and magazines, newspapers, and other daily life sources.

national memory (Caraffa, Serena 17). For the sake of the control of history and of national identity, as Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook argued, until recently, archivists and scholars have had a true interest in both perceiving and promoting the archive as a neutral historical repository of facts and objective information (Schwartz & Cook 6). Therefore, archives have long been envisioned as a chronologically organized storage filled with boxes, drawers, and files that maintain valuable documents and images, or as scholar, Ernst van Alphen, deemed it, "static physical objects or passive products of human or administrative activity" (van Alphen 109).

When reviewing the duBois Project, it might seem as though Crosher's work is somewhat in keeping with the principles of a conventional archive insofar as Crosher has indeed employed typical archival devices, such as research, collecting, organizing, and categorizing. However, as one might theorize the way Crosher eventually shaped and displayed duBois' archive in a series of books and exhibitions does not manifest a 'stable repository of facts and clear information', but rather the duBois archive could be interpreted as an 'alternative archive'. An archive as well as an artistic tactic that further blurs Michelle duBois' – already ambiguous - self-narrative. "I really wanted it to be about an accessibility" Crosher said, "about not being able to get to the root of who she is" (Crosher "In conversation" video). Consciously questioning the rational conceptualization of the archives and archivists as the 'keepers of truth', Crosher's work finally showcases a "transgressive performance of archival principles" in that her articulation of the archive does not follow or obey the conventional principles upon which official archives are built (van Alphen 10). For instance, in Crosher's presentation of the duBois archive, the images usually lack descriptive captions or indexes, there are no indications of dates or time lines, nor is there a clear provenance of the archival objects.

This act of 'undoing' one's expectation of the archive is arguably symptomatic of the paradigm shift to postmodern thinking that has similarly taken place in archival theory. As van Alphen noted, in the postmodern era, the institution of the archive and its power to shape history and

memory has been challenged, reimagined, and subsequently repositioned - from a so-called 'neutral' guardian of the past to an active agent in the present (Van Alphen 109). The last two decades has seen archival theory and archival art similarly embrace a postmodern self-reflexive approach, as scholars, archivists, and artists have interrogated the structural and functional principles of the archive.

The most notable writers in this context are philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, whose seminal publications on the cultural function of archives in contemporary society have, it may be said, compelled the 'postmodern turn' in archival science and theory (van Alphen 10). Importantly, in their writings, both Foucault and Derrida dissociated the archive from its physical space so as to analyze it as a metaphorical construct. In reading the conventional definition of the archive against the grain, Derrida and Foucault conceptualized the archive either as a feature of human behavior, i.e., the desire to archive everything, according to Derrida, or as Foucault framed it, the archive is a system of social, discursive power that governs the production of knowledge and culture – "the first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events".[36] Finally according to both, the archive is not a passive receptacle but an active agent that "produces as much as it records the event" (Derrida, 17). The 'postmodern archive' is a social construct that has a significant potential to shape and control the way history is mediated, which in turn modulates our cultural and social memory as well as political reality. As Derrida stressed at the beginning of *Archive Fever*: "There is no political power without control of the archive, or without memory" (Derrida 4).

In light of Foucault and Derrida's influential theoretical formulations, the ways in which archives are currently used and viewed have been re-shaped. In a contemporary art context, as Bate suggested, when artists and photographers mobilize archival practices into their artworks, they

[36] See: Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge; And, the Discourse on Language*. (New York: Pantheon, 1972 p.129); Jacques Derrida. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1996).

subsequently bring new types of imagery to the archives of museums and gallery walls, thus contributing various types of images, narratives, and aspects of culture and knowledge (some of which might have previously been ignored) to these institutions. Hence, through the lens of postmodernism, these 'new' archives are in fact dynamic artistic constructs (tangible as well virtual) oriented towards the present and the future (Bate, "Art Photography" 113). In this respect, an archive (like photography) could never be an objective or neutral entity as it is always constructed and mobilized according to 'someone's' (institution or individual) interests or intentions.

Re-archiving the Archive

In the work considered here, Crosher re-activated duBois' 'passive' archive and with that, she emphasized the archive's transformative nature. Seeing that Crosher had an impressive amount of materials to work with, each exhibition and publication offered a different perspective on the personality of duBois and proposed a new visual display of the archive. In a way, Crosher created a morphing archive that echoes duBois' changing costumes and personas. By positioning duBois' photographs within a reorganized archive and subsequently displaying her self-portraits in artist books and gallery installations, Crosher might not only have implicated the viewer in the re-construction of the archive but, she consequently made an anonymous photographer and her displaced story, namely Michelle duBois, 'physically present'. As Crosher highlighted, "[through the archive], she's on this perpetual level of re-living" (Crosher qtd. in Schoen).

Of note is that a significant part of Crosher's archival work was the removal of duBois' images from their initial reference or original purpose so as to give them a 'new' significance. She did so by selecting and categorizing duBois' original images in a manner that draws one's attention to an array of themes, forms, patterns, costumes, references, and styles that constitute the fantasy life and inconsistent image of Michelle duBois. Working through the archive, Crosher characterized the images according to their content and narrative as well as their formal or material features. For

example, the sub-series entitled, *grrrr*, showcases duBois' obsession with tiger prints. For this somewhat humoristic purpose, Crosher put together all the images from the archive in which duBois wears a tiger print outfit and poses in a 'tiger-like' manner (Figs. 29-30). In *Posed Postcards*, Crosher formed a series that underscores a clichéd feminine pose - that repeats itself - in which duBois shows off her cleavage while smiling at the camera. For the *Cindy-Shermanesque* series, Crosher claims to have approached the archival work from an art historical perspective, subsequently sorting out and selecting those images which are most reminiscent of Sherman's iconic *Untitled Film Stills*. Alternately, Crosher also approached the archive from a 'film historical' point of view insofar as many of duBois photos manifest her passion for role-playing and cinema. *21 Ways to Mae Wested* is a series of posed self-portraits in which duBois portrayed the American actress, Mae West (Figs. 7 and 21). Other, more 'material-focused' groupings manifest the physicality of the images and that of the archive. For example, in the *Blackened Last Four Days and Nights of Tokyo*, Crosher assembled several dark prints made from badly damaged negatives that depict duBois backlit and underexposed - her features completely obscured – revealing only a silhouette of an undetectable woman and the apparent disintegration of the film (Figs. 31-32).

One should keep in mind that in the context of the 'duBois Project', there are seemingly two main archives; the first is duBois' so-called 'original' or personal archive of vintage images which she had gifted to Crosher, and the second is the 'new' archive Crosher formed by appropriating and re-photographing duBois' source materials. It appears that duBois' original archive was quite disorganized. Hence, this 'messy' state of affairs could be one of the reasons behind duBois' decision to bequeath her collection to an artist like Crosher: "Her original archive was a complete disaster zone, not really an archive at all, more an accumulation of negatives, Polaroids, contact prints, slides, photo albums, immaterialness that had no rhyme or reason…" (Crosher qtd. in Blanch, web). Therefore, on Crosher's end, this was probably an exciting opportunity to re-materialize the

immaterialness of photography - so-called 'end of the analog'. As demonstrated, Crosher expressed her concern with the materiality of the image and with the changing experience of creating photographs in the age of rapid digitization which turned photographs into non-prints (i.e., JPEGs, TIFFs). This concern, said Wells, is definitely shared by contemporary photographers who creatively respond to the apparent 'dematerializing' tendencies of digital culture (Wells 224). Evidently, thanks to Crosher's material experimentations, duBois' images have been handled again like tangible objects and subsequently rendered as museum 'artifacts'.

As established in the previous chapter, duBois' identity remains elusive despite the thousands of pictures she had taken of herself. Notwithstanding van Alphen's argument stating that archives have an enormous power over the construction of one's identity (van Alphen 109), the newly articulated duBois archive constantly seems to fail at clarifying the ambiguity surrounding the identity of the archive's subject. At the same time, as duBois' images were processed, classified, edited, and preserved by Crosher in an apparently well-organized archive, they nonetheless disappoint the viewer as the images demonstrate the archive's inability to bring us closer to the 'truth' or to maintain a cohesive (or realistic) narrative. Therefore, the unavoidable uncertainty about the authenticity of the project as a whole not only involves the nature of duBois' personal identity but also the credibility of her archive. As Andrew Berardini mentioned in interpreting the duBois Project, "Crosher captures the hazy space between documentary and the imagination" (Berardini, "Violating the Documentary"). With this, the viewer's sense of confusion becomes ever more profound as Crosher reveals the uncertain or fictional aspect of the archive as an institution.

All this begs the question of what does duBois' archive really tell us about her identity? To be sure, Crosher's artistic imperative of "confusing the audience about who is who and what is what" (Crosher qtd. in Blanch) has run through this project since its inception, hence it is unquestionably a significant part of the project's main goal and perhaps of its meaning. Similarly, one should bear in

mind that duBois' archive and its evolving exhibitions were never designed to reveal any objective facts about duBois' story and identity. As pointed out by Ross, "Crosher's handling of the archive is neither documentary nor investigative; she never intended to use the photos to give an accounting of her subject's life" (Ross, web). Rather, for Crosher, the archive becomes another subversive means to exemplify the very impossibility of making sense of an individual's identity through an accumulation of self-portraits, that is, according to Crosher, the very fictional aspect of the documentary photography. "Accumulation", she stresses, "does not equal clarity - but in fact it compromises fiction" (Crosher qtd. in Blalock, "Part 1"). In this respect, one may realize how Crosher's formulation of duBois' archive is not only in keeping with the postmodern concepts of the constructed-unstable self, but also with what Marlene Manoff called "the postmodern suspicion of the historical record" (Manoff 14).

As with the uncertainty about the authenticity of duBois' self-portraits, Crosher is similarly skeptical of the truth value of the archive. As stated by Wallen: "The archive is also a lure: it promises contact with 'original documents' and with what has been touched by the agents of history - what was registered and recorded at the time…" (Wallen 261). As a corollary, photography is still often premised on the hope of representing the 'truth'. Yet, as has already been established, Crosher is interested in the ambiguity of any totality and in complicating the possibility of any type of certainty (e.g., photography, archives, and meta-narratives). Therefore, she used an array of formal interventions and conceptual interpretations to introduce fiction and fantasy into duBois' photographs. Puzzlingly, despite the existence of so many self-portraits of duBois and the framing of her images within an archival presentation, it seems like one could never 'get a hold of' Michelle duBois, the person.

The Incomplete Project

According to Foster, "archival art-works do not only draw on informal archives but produce them as well (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 5). Along these lines, van Alphen indicated that contemporary artists' interrogation of archival conventions may result in the creation of another archival structure (van Alphen 112). By way of re-activating the duBois' original archive, Crosher consequently created new visual relationships as well as a unique archival and curatorial structure. According to Crosher, when she inherited duBois' collection, she discovered that the original archive was in fact placed in a couple of boxes, hidden under duBois' bed and behind cupboards (Crosher qtd. in Blanch, web). Therefore, unlike the previously 'silent' archive, the newly articulated or 're-evaluated' archive, manifested itself as a very dynamic site as Crosher intervened in the photos, re-shuffling and re-arranging the images. To be sure, "Archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 4). As such, by unearthing and exposing duBois' images, Crosher also transformed the private archive into a public one, adding to the conscious blurring of the boundaries between intimate and public, original and fake, fantasy and reality.

Upon receiving duBois' archive, Crosher operated like a 'photo-archeologist' as she delved into duBois' collection in order to recover and reconstruct her fantasy narrative. For almost a decade, Crosher edited and categorized thousands of images culled from a private photographic archive of an unknown photographer. One might easily assume that the 'enigma' of duBois' colorful identity as well as the vague provenance of her images were the reasons behind Crosher's fascination with duBois' story in the first place. Foster recognized this type of 'enigma' as a recurring feature of contemporary archival art insofar as archival artists tend to be "concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces… they are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects…" (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 5). In the work in question here, Crosher has not only investigated an

obscure narrative but she chose to work with an 'incomplete project' to begin with. Ironically, although duBois documented almost every aspect of her life, the photographs that she kept and eventually gave to Crosher document merely two decades of it. This begs another question - where are the rest of her photos? Or what made duBois stop taking and keeping pictures all of a sudden? Perhaps digital photography did not 'live up' to her fantasies any longer.

In keeping with the sense of so-called 'incompleteness' manifested in archival art, it seems as though Crosher similarly insisted upon incompletion as her archival presentations (books and installations) consciously offer endless configurations and multiple interpretations of duBois' story and identity. Writing on the work of contemporary archival artist, Tacita Dean, Foster argued: "In a sense, her archival work is an allegory of archival work—as sometimes melancholic, often vertiginous, always incomplete (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 12). Interestingly, Foster's argument could be applied to Crosher's project - Crosher's work as an archivist is essentially about her self-reflexive relationship with the very act of archiving. Indeed, it seems that Crosher's meticulous actions as an archivist demonstrate a serious pursuit of a complete and total record of duBois' life. One may accept, however, that this archival work might never be 'finalized' as there are endless ways to re-contextualize duBois' story as well as numerous alternatives to displaying her images. It could be said, therefore, that Crosher's employment of archival principles is nevertheless an important means to interrogate - not only duBois' story - but also the very nature of photographic archives.

According to Jeffery Wallen, as a result of the conceptual postmodern shift in archival theory, "the scholarly desire today is often less to unearth this or that particular content in an archive than to engage with the archive itself, both as an institution and as a constitutive and transformative force" (Wallen, "The Lure of the Archive" 277). It could be contended, hence, that Crosher is less interested in 'the content', that is, revealing duBois' story through the archive, and more fascinated

with material processes and the activity of archiving. By engaging with the archive, Crosher might reflect on the issues associated with the 'making of' archives in the fast information (digital) age: "The archive then becomes the container of its own dynamically shifting history" (Crosher qtd. in Blalock, "Part 2"). Ultimately, through the various accumulations and iterations of the archive, Crosher further stressed the foreseeable incompletion of the project as well as the fate of her own on-going work as a contemporary photo-archivist, that is, the coming to terms with the notion that archival work is tedious, obsessive, and potentially endless. As Crosher repeatedly said, "this project is about the amassing of many (many) photographs and the impossibility of coming to any sort of conclusion or completion"(Crosher "In Conversation", video).

Photography and the Archive

Bate stated that photography is an archival practice in and of itself as "it enables anyone to collect anything" – from found objects to people, places, events, and processes (Bate 113). Furthermore, van Alphen suggested that there is indeed a significant mutual relation between the archival medium and the medium of photography seeing that historically, photography is said to have promoted the nineteenth century archival impulse, and still today, archival artists have a preference for using and displaying photographic archives (van Alphen 24). The duBois project is a clear manifestation of duBois' and Crosher's obsession with photography and self-representation. As Schoen insisted, "both [women] assert their own roles as producers and disseminators of representations (Schoen, web). While duBois used the camera as a recording device to secure her self-representations and by extension - her costumes, poses, and vivid fantasies, Crosher not only collected duBois' photographic materials, but in a way, she collected and reconstructed Michelle duBois – the person, along with her fantasies and memories. In a sense, duBois and Crosher could be titled *iconophiles* - yet from two opposite ends of the photographic spectrum: the former being the 'photographer' while the latter is admittedly an artist who 'works with photography'.

Although duBois' amateur snaps were probably never intended to be displayed as art, the positioning of her photographs within the context of an archive, certainly endows her amateurish self-portraits with a significant art-historical value. One might argue, therefore, that Crosher adopted an instrumental approach to photography and the archive seeing that she employed both mediums in order to make art. As Arthur Danto noted in his important analysis of Cindy Sherman's work: "Photography is not her medium. It is rather a means to her artistic ends. Her medium is herself" (Danto, "Encounters & Reflections"120). Drawing upon Danto's statement, it might be believed that photography is similarly not Crosher's medium (as her medium is duBois) but rather an important artistic tool – whether it is used for the making of the fantasies of another woman come true or for simply creating contemporary art. The resultant 'aesthetization' of duBois' amateur photography and the rendering of her casual snaps as contemporary archival art undoubtedly informs her images with a new value and meaning. As Bate pointed out, "a photographic archive enables the construction of a bridge between art and non-art" (Bate 123).

Furthermore, Bourriaud's formulation of *postproduction* art is fitting in the context of Crosher's archival work seeing that it underscores the constitutive formal manipulations that followed the appropriation of duBois' images. By appropriating the familiar, Bourriaud said, "notions of originality (being at the origin of) and even of creation (making something from nothing) are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape" (Bourriaud 8). Such an ambiguity between an original and copy exists in the duBois Project in that it is accordingly difficult to identify when does Crosher deliberately present an original photograph (i.e., a vintage print) from duBois' 'original archive', and in which other cases does she create and display a manipulated copy of the source material, that is, a scanned or re-photographed image. Like many of her contemporaries, Crosher turned to Duchamp's legacy of the readymade in order to further transgress the conventions of ownership and originality. When considered in relation to the archive, Crosher's postproduction

project emphasizes "the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private" (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 5).

Crosher testified to having been very strict and rigorous about what to include in the 're-articulated' archive and, accordingly, how to display it. With this in mind, it is of particular interest to see how through the conscious inclusion of 'sleazy' snapshots, intimate Polaroids, and banal travel pics into an archive, Crosher cleverly questioned what may constitute an 'archivable' document, image, or event. Traditionally, the archive is known as a repository of important documents that hold significant (also 'rational') information about events of historical or national importance (Edwards 6). However, Crosher consciously places a collection of amateur (i.e., unofficial) photographs of an unknown female photographer from the 1970s at the center of this archival project and with that, she further highlighted her reflection on the power and the meaning of a photo-archive. It was Foucault who emphasized that the archive has the power to regulate and dictate what can be said and by whom, therefore, he theorized the archive as a traditional instrument of power and authority, "the law of what can be said" (Foucault 129). With this in mind, I stipulate that Crosher's project directly engages the traditional (also patriarchal) archive and questions the validity of that authorial voice, i.e., *the law of what can be said*, or said differently, that which is historically significant or aesthetically proper in order to be archived and eventually rendered as art. It could be argued, hence, that Crosher's project calls attention to the subversive, potentially transgressive act of archiving amateur photography (and amateur pornography) and subsequently assigning it art/archival value.

It is necessary to remember, therefore, that Crosher approached the archive with a contemporary feminist awareness of "how women have been photographed, objectified, posed, etc." (Crosher qtd. in Blalock, "Part 1"), hence her archival artwork could ultimately be viewed as a form of cultural critique. By reconfiguring duBois' photo-collection of semi-provocative fantasies, Crosher proposed an alternative 'feminist archive' through which she consciously (and quite

paradoxically) reveled in the very stereotypical feminine representations she sought to critique. Importantly, by taking an 'archival' approach to feminism and photography, Crosher not only posed a succession of challenges to how contemporary culture conceives women's representations (as in the case of Sherman and other feminist artists), but taking it a step further, she revised the conventions and agency of archival collections and how these conventions might affect the inscription of female subjectivity. As Berardini put it: "This strange archive, re-presented in its bracing totality of a life constantly performed, shows the effects of media cultures on an individual" (Berardini, "Violating the Documentary").

Archival Operations and Manipulations

It is simply an archive. But nothing is ever simple ("DCKT Contemporary", web)

Although Crosher clearly does not appear in any of the photos in this project, the archive she re-constructed anew for each of her books and museum installations reflected her power and authority over duBois. She even noted how "this narrative actually unfolds is what [she manipulates and shapes]" (Crosher qtd. in Blalock, "Part 2"). Over many years of working with the archive, Crosher experimented with a variety of photographic procedures, such as: re-photographing, re-framing, scanning, enlarging, altering, fading, crumpling, over-exposing, blurring or breaking up images, and re-editing of the source material. Insomuch as there is a parallel between photography and the archive, Crosher's series of actions was not only a means to highlight the materiality of photography and the properties of the analog, but a significant part of the entire staging of the newly articulated duBois' archive, hence it should be regarded as 'archival praxis'. As stated by Chantal Wong and Janet Chan: "Before the archive is factually present in reality, there is archiving as praxis, which is a series of actions – acquiring, collating, cataloging, digitizing, annotating, classifying…" (Wong and Chan, web).

In agreement with Crosher's self-reflexive exploration of the 'making of archives', one might interpret her formal interventions in the photos as not only altering and obscuring their subject, but they nonetheless dramatize the creative process behind the making of the archive, that is, the archival praxis. As van Alphen stressed, the current discourse in archival theory and archival art is symptomatic of a shift that "emphasizes process instead of product, function instead of structure, archiving instead of archives, recording context instead of record, actively specificityted "archivalization"…" (Van Alphen 111). This weight on strategies and processes instead of product is also evidenced in the duBois Project. Crosher indeed indicated in one interview that revealing the processes that make her artworks is, in fact, central to her performance as an artist (Szupinska-Myers, web). Interestingly, it could be contended that the duBois project fails to supply a consolidation of archival records that mediate clear and solid meaning, while definitely succeeding in foregrounding the act of *archivalization*, e.g., collecting, scanning, re-photographing, and categorizing as an effective artistic gesture. As Crosher stated, "[the project] also becomes an archive of my ever-shifting relationship to the work" (Crosher qtd. in Szupinska-Myers).

Taking the role of an archivist, Crosher conducted what she calls "increasingly pronounced interventions and multiple iterations", which, in certain cases, "lead to the near-disappearance and even total obfuscation of the original source material" (Crosher qtd. in Szupinska-Myers, web). Crosher's deliberate fading and abstracting of some of the images gain more resonance when viewed in light of Derrida's analysis of archival desire. Indeed, it could be said that Crosher's so-called 'destructive' interventions in the images - such as crumpling the prints, adding dust to the surface of the photos, or dissolving and fading the images until they are completely washed out, uncover yet another paradox in this project as they echo Derrida's formulation of the 'archival death drive'. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), Derrida viewed the archive as a mediation of two conflicting forces i.e., behavioral compulsions. Drawing upon Freudian psychoanalytic tropes known

as the *death drive* and *the pleasure principle*, Derrida proposed that while one force, i.e., the death drive (a primal urge of destruction), leads us to wish to destroy the archive, the opposite force, i.e., the archive drive (linked to the pleasure principle), is a desire for conservation. This contradictory mixture of preservation and destruction is the *mal d'archive* according to Derrida: The death drive incites us to destroy memories while simultaneously providing the impetus to archive. Significantly, as Derrida suggested, this oscillation between preservation and destruction is pertinent to the existence of any archive as without the aggressive nature of the death drive (also the anarchivic), there is no archive fever (Derrida 12).

The duBois project could be construed to reflect a similar paradox in that it exhibits Crosher's own contradictory desires between preserving and re-constructing duBois' images and memories while physically destroying the source material. Crosher's 'death drive' resulted in "the physical disintegration of the archive" (Crosher qtd. in Winant) or a type of 'anti-archive' which echoes Derrida assertion that the archive "always works, and a priori, against itself" (Derrida 14). Moreover, a number of the titles of Crosher's books and exhibitions imply destruction and dissolution: *The **Unraveling** of Michelle duBois aka "Alice Johnson"* (Artist Book - 2011), *The **Disbanding** of Michelle DuBois* (Exhibition 2013–14), *The **Disappearing** of Michelle duBois* (Artist Book and exhibition, 2012). An excellent example is the Aperture edition project, *The **Vanishing** of Michelle DuBois* (Edition project for Aperture, 2010). For this project, Crosher mapped out the stages of material disappearance by creating another series of duBois as the 'naughty nurse' (perhaps her favorite costume) - this time striking a different pose (Fig. 33). The fourteen images composing the series progressively faded out, eventually turning into white images that resemble abstract paintings.

This process of deliberate erosion of the images underscores again Crosher's rigorous formalist approach to photography. Likewise, these manipulations highlight the simultaneous

dissolvent of the subject and, by extension, of the photo-archive as a whole. Although there is a sense of an archive being compiled and edited, eventually, as Crosher indicated, 'everything is gradually collapsing together', that is, the traditional archival structure, the materiality of the images in the digital age, and subsequently, the story of duBois, fall apart.

The Artist as Curator

In this section I analyze Crosher's combined role as an artist-curator by exploring the ways in which she visually phrased the duBois archive within various museum and gallery spaces. The 'artist as curator' is considered an 'established' figure in today's art world, as it reflects the relatively recent expansion and democratization of the institutional role of the curator and equally, the extremely diverse role of the artist (Celina Jeffery, web). One might further state that this 'curatorial independence' is also indicative of the rise of the "curator as creator" (also 'curator as artist'), that is, according to curator and art critic, Hans Ulrich Obrist, the labeling of modern curators as creative professionals (also *auteurs*) whose personal vision as exhibition organizers and mediators is a fundamental part of the art presented in their shows (Obrist 6-7). This statement should be considered together with the fact that in recent years, in the context of contemporary art, the line between creating and curating one's art installation became blurred: "the museum and gallery have increasingly become self-reflexive spaces, in which the relationship between art, its display, its creators, and its audience" is constantly being re-considered, negotiated, and possibly subverted (Jeffery, web). Furthermore, in the wake of this 'institutional critique', many artists have opted to reflect their critique by employing similar tools to that of the museum curator. Certain artists, for example, have preferred to focus on the process of selecting and editing the objects to be displayed and the exhibition narrative - they seek to challenge the boundaries of both the art object and its institutional display (Adamopoulou and Solomon, 36).

Insofar as self-reflexivity is a tenet of Crosher's work, one could argue that Crosher incorporates archival principles into her art not only as a framing device for reflecting the idea and principles of the archive itself, but also as a means to interrogate the very concept of exhibition making and the role of the 'artist as curator'.[37] As curators Joseph Doubtfire and Giulia Ranchetti indicated in their essay, "Curator as Artist as Curator" (2015): "In a move away from traditional display, *the artist as curator* is preoccupied with the exhibition as a medium for artistic expression in and of itself" (Doubtfire and Ranchetti, web). Indeed, Crosher's perspective and practice are in accordance with this statement: "the duBois project is all about curation - that shifts intentionally from show to show" (Winant, web).

Assuming the role of a curator, that is, fully defining the terms of display, directing and participating in the installation and mediation of her artworks is arguably integral to Crosher's art practice and creative process. Moreover, her curatorial work is in fact the culmination of Crosher's practice as 'artist as archivist'. It might be said that the translation of the duBois archive from Crosher's studio to museum/gallery exhibitions and the published artist books is essentially the final stage in the process of re-materialization of duBois' archival images. As previously stated, through meticulous re-photographing and printing images, employing film roles and Polaroids, and creating wall-installations and artist books, the project as a whole demonstrates Crosher's desire to re-materialize photography and to re-use the photographic image in its material form.

Evidently, Crosher's books and gallery installations also serve as an editing device as she sequences the numerous archival materials. In this sense, Crosher's employment in the role of the curator and mediator of her shows is necessary - she is the collector, editor, and the ultimate

[37] The combined role of artist-curator is clearly not a new phenomenon. In her article, *When Exhibitions Become Form: On the History of the Artist as Curator*, Elena Filipovic stated that since the 1960s, a significant number of artists "not only quietly made discrete objects in their studios but took into their own hands the very apparatus of presentation and dissemination of the work they had produced—and often that of other artists as well" (Filipovic 157).

manipulator of duBois' photo-collection. In other words, Crosher is the 'expert' *par excellence* on Michelle duBois. Hence, at the same time as she physically mined duBois' photo-collection like an archivist, Crosher also adopted a curatorial strategy so as to display her final 'findings' inside the museum. As Foster pointed out: "Certainly the figure of the artist-as-archivist follows that of the artist-as-curator" (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 5).

Furthermore, by curating the archive, Crosher might turn the audience's attention to the idea that her exhibitions (as well as the series of artist books) are an inseparable part of her creation as an artist - if not the artwork itself. Said differently, the same way Crosher presented a photographic archive (and archival processes) as art, she respectively brought forward the idea of exhibition-making as art. As Doubtfire and Ranchetti maintain, the "artist-curator curates, in a sense, like the artist makes work"… therefore, the exhibition itself is used as a medium with its own agency by the artist-curator, which further allows new approaches to reading curatorial practice (Doubtfire and Ranchetti, web). In this sense, Crosher used the exhibition as yet another medium or artistic tool for her creative expression. Moreover, the visual translation of duBois' archive into an exhibition might offer an interesting physical space for re-thinking the limits between artistic and curatorial modes of practice. As such, in the context of postmodernism, these limits are consciously questioned and open to discussion as "curators and artists populate the same modern, liquid topos" (Adamopoulou and Solomon, 39), or, as Dorothee Richter suggested, "the curator and the artist now closely imitate each other's position" (Richter qtd. in Doubtfire and Ranchetti, web).

The Curatorial Rationale

Since 2008, Crosher has exhibited the duBois Project at several museums and art institutions in the U.S. and abroad, most notably at MoMA, New York (2012), The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) (2011), and at The Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria (2014). As mentioned earlier, at each of her shows, Crosher has revealed a new configuration of the duBois' archive and a different perspective on duBois' self-narrative and multiple identities. When considering the process of formulating her exhibitions, Crosher has said, "the largest problem was how do you show this work and how do you present it" (Crosher, "In Conversation", video).

Attesting to staying away from what Crosher defines as 'the single image presentation', her curatorial approach is based on forming 'strategic clusters' or photo-series that alter from show to show according to the overarching thematic perspective. This strategy means Crosher's work is completely site-specific and ephemeral – an accurate demonstration of Schwartz and Cook's assertion that archives "are neither universal across space nor stable across time" (Schwartz & Cook 5). For example, at LACMA, Crosher created a grouping of nine Michelle duBois images entitled, *Tilt of Her Head, Over Analog Time* (*from the Disbanding of Michelle duBois*). This cluster showcased various images of duBois from different locations and time periods which nevertheless shared one important feature - an identical pose that repeated itself in the photos, that is, duBois' characteristic tilt of the head (LACMA, web). Intriguingly, the concept of serial or formal repetition is evidently a defining feature in Crosher's work both visually and conceptually. First, repetition exists at the heart of this archive as it consists of hundreds pictures of the same woman whom the viewer encounters again and again. Second, repetition is clearly manifested via Crosher's repetitive

archival actions and the formal iterations. Third, many of duBois' photos are identical either in the way duBois looks or her pose and gesture.[38]

In terms of exhibition design, Crosher's curatorial strategy features well-staged yet seemingly 'eclectic' spatial installations. Taking the images out of their original context, Crosher creates diverse non-linear groupings of duBois' archival materials. The eclectic characteristic of Crosher's installations is not only visualized through the diverse content of the images - presenting a wide range of duBois' playful guises and personas from different years - but also via the formal properties and framing of the pictures. Similarly, Crosher's artist books follow the same - seemingly associative - logic of her installations. For example, pagination area does not remain consistent throughout the books and there are no descriptive captions, thus the images themselves consciously fail to offer a clear context or a sense of chronology (Fig. 34). It seems as though Crosher follows the contemporary principles of exhibition design, especially the tendency to prefer the aesthetic of density, multiplicity, and unusual juxtapositions (Adamopoulou and Solomon 40). As with duBois' changing looks, the curatorial outline of her archive continuously alters, thereby producing new contextual meanings and visual dialogues. In this view, Crosher's installations further seem to echo Obrist's 'curatorial statement': "To curate, in this sense, is to refuse static arrangements and permanent alignments and instead to enable conversations and relations" (Obrist, "To Curate" 119).

In the process of such staging of the archive, Crosher has freely employed and combined together a variety of photographic formats, materials, and techniques, including slides, Plexiglas and C-prints, framed images and loose prints, vintage Polaroids, and disc negatives - all of which are displayed in a wide range of sizes. Finally, the images are arranged and hung in clusters, or elaborate grids with no particular order or sense of hierarchy. The result is a hybrid installation (a type of montage) that harkens back to the powerful effect of accumulating images as well as the multiplicity

[38] For example, Crosher formed a series called *Almost the Same* that featured nearly indistinguishable images of duBois that were probably taken during the same shot (Figs. 10 and 14).

of duBois' representations (Figs. 35-36). Crosher refers to her installations as 'an all-over-the-map' photographic display that accordingly demonstrates her acute awareness of the physicality or 'objectness' of the photographs and the archive. Moreover, it might be that the reason for this curatorial strategy is Crosher's personal wish to realize (also materialize) her own fantasy - creating an impressive and nostalgic tribute to analog photography.

Yet, from a more critical perspective, it seems that Crosher raises an obvious challenge to the traditional conventions of display in that her archival installations consciously fail to remain consistent in their presentation and meaning. Crosher's play with photographic materials and curatorial principles demonstrate the excessiveness and overabundance of archival images, which inevitability disrupt the narrative continuity. Instead of offering a bearing of clarification to duBois' identity, Crosher's hybrid installations complement duBois' multi-faceted self(s), and moreover, they call attention to the potential opacity of the contemporary photo-archive. In the words of Crosher: "… it's this idea of completely breaking whatever roles there are about ways that things should look or should be framed or should be presented. And I wanted to give a sense of collapsing of all the different kinds of medium with all the different kinds of photographs…" (Crosher "In Conversation", video). With this statement, Crosher curatorial approach validates Doubtfire and Ranchetti's assertion regarding the practice of the artist-curator: "the artist-curated exhibition seems to dissect and destabilize what we might refer to as established curatorial tradition… The artist-curator consequently questions the very act of curating and exhibition-making" (Doubtfire and Ranchetti, web). Indeed, as far as curatorial options go, it could be that artists' choices are more 'free' than that of the professional curator who has to work within the boundaries of the institution and its dictated guidelines on display.

Interestingly, Crosher's hybrid installations include many of duBois' handwritten notes and texts, most of which appear on the backs of the photographic prints or in the form of little scraps of

paper clipped to the front of duBois' snapshots (Figs. 37-38). The inclusion of these personal notes at the exhibitions is significant because it equally calls attention to the archival act of handling these images as objects as well as to the 'real' Michelle duBois that has physically engaged with her own archive by creating a type of 'note to self' - or even more ironically - 'a note to Crosher'. These images also appear in one of Crosher's artist books under the appropriate title "Self-Reflexive".[39] At the LACMA exhibition, Crosher juxtaposed textual and visual artifacts and organized a portion of duBois' personal documents, including handwritten lists of images, albums, and vintage prints, in stylish white table cabinets (Fig. 39). This display format further 'harnessed' duBois' amateur photos within an archival logic and aesthetic - what Foster called "quasi-archival architecture, a complex of texts and objects (platforms, stations, kiosks…)" (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 5).

Referring to this self-conscious act of writing and adding information to her own images, Ross asserted: "these modest messages expose a peek into duBois' own experience of looking at the archive along with us [the viewers]" (Ross, web)[40]. For example, some annotations indicate places and dates while others act as 'humoristic' denotative remarks about her outfits or her state of mind while covering duBois' face, e.g., *The Island nights were hot and muggy; Going to Mardi Gras party - the theme was 1001 Knights* (Figs. 40-41). Additionally, in several installations, Crosher turned duBois' notes/comments into photographic artifacts as she scanned, enlarged, and finally displayed the back of these prints, including an old envelope in which the developed prints were delivered to duBois. The envelope similarly featured duBois' handwriting as she added the somewhat redundant (or narcissistic) proclamation - "Me" (Fig. 42). By displaying this enlarged ('Super Foto Me') envelope - which was re-purposed into a type of 'readymade' in and of itself, Crosher might further

[39] Crosher's series of artist books accordingly display the material which is presented in the form of an installation in her exhibitions. For instance, the images featuring duBois' notes and personal comments appear in the second book of the series, *The Unraveling of Michelle duBois (aka Alice Johnson)* (2011).

[40] The conscious experience of looking is indeed a recurring theme throughout the project. For example, with some installations, Crosher displayed a large cropped image of duBois' eye, thus explicitly calling attention to a reflexive look or an act of introspection, that is, the way in which duBois looks at her own representations and, together with the viewers, the way she also looks at the project/exhibition itself.

have heightened duBois' obsession with the perception of herself, while correlating it with Crosher's own recurring fascination with the technologies of analog photography and its related objects and paraphernalia. Therefore, she insisted on this type of non-linear mix-media installations.

As far as interpretation is concerned, according to Foster, when presenting their work, archival artists favor the installation format as they use the installation's non-hierarchical spatiality to their advantage (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 4). In Crosher's case, her advantage when forming a seemingly associative order of images is that her installations do not necessarily confine duBois' story into one framework, but instead supply a space for open-ended interpretations of her identity and fantasy. By juxtaposing different themes and photographic formats/styles, Crosher presents audiences with various facets of duBois' story, thereby potentially stimulating different trains of thought and endless proposals for meaning. Rather than imposing her own interpretation, Crosher insists upon unconventional connections and a non-hierarchical rhetoric that invites the audience to 'engage in conversation' with the exhibition by freely charting their own route through it.

Ultimately, duBois' gesture of writing "Me" on her photo-envelope seems to be quite ironic as we are repeatedly reminded through duBois' numerous self-portraits and the final visualization of her archive that this project never reveals anything concrete about duBois' 'real' self. When reviewing Crosher's exhibitions, at the same time as her installations seem well choreographed, the curatorial strategies she employs underscore the blurring of duBois' individual narrative and further contribute to the construction of fiction through the photographic archive as well as through exhibition-making. As Wagley playfully framed it: "In shaping and presenting photographs of Michelle duBois, Crosher has inhabited the fantasy archive of a fantasy woman (Wagley "The Fantasy in Crisis").

The Institutional Wall at MoMA

In 2012, Crosher was invited to participate in the 27th annual *New Photography* Exhibition at MoMA in New York.[41] The (almost) all-female group exhibition showcased six photographers (four women and two men) whose concerns centered on the current status of picture-making, the fate of analog photography, and the compulsive dissemination of images and information in a media-saturated world ("New Photography 2012 - Exhibition", web).[42]

For the MoMA show, Crosher was interested in further investigating the paradoxical denial of visibility through photography, hence she presented what she calls the final steps of *The Disappearance of Michelle duBois*.[43] The artist book accompanying the museum installation equally demonstrated a variety of formal interventions (mostly obfuscations) which make visible the further abstracting of the images - and accordingly – the dissolution of the narrative ("New Photography - Exhibition", web). Although her installations appeared to have been well-choreographed, Crosher has had a more intuitive approach to the curatorial process. According to Crosher, her working method is based on experimenting with several versions of a display, after which she forms a 'tailor made' installation for the institution in question. Crosher has said: "Conceptually, my overarching structure is consistent, but how it manifests is completely relative. It's almost site-specific in that sense. I'm not married to a specific vision" (Crosher qtd in Winant, web).

The *New Photography* exhibition was overseen by MoMA associate curator Eva Respini. Being part of a group show, Crosher clearly had to work in dialogue with Respini (and possibly the other participating artists) in order to fit her installation within the overarching concept of the 'New

[41] The first *New Photography* exhibition opened at MoMA in 1985. The exhibition was organized and curated by the former chief curator of MoMA's photography department, John Szarkowski. With this exhibition, Szarkowski's ambition was to place contemporary creation at the center of the department's programming. Eventually, the show turned into an important annual event. Since its inception, the New Photography series has presented more than a hundred artists (American and Non-American) while covering a broad photographic range and variety of pictorial modes ("New Photography - Exhibition History", web).

[42] The New Photography 2012 exhibition featured artists Michele Abeles, the duo, Birdhead, Anne Collier, Shirana Shahbazi, and Zoe Crosher.

[43] This is also the title of the fourth and last artist book in the Aperture series of the duBois publications.

Photography' exhibition – its premise being an enquiry into what does it mean to create a photograph in the twenty-first century ("New Photography - Exhibition", web). While Respini undoubtedly selected the artists, set the official terms of the exhibition, and heightened the thematic/conceptual linkages between the different artists and the works on display, Crosher curated her own site-specific wall which she very appropriately referred to as an 'institutional wall': "The wall was really specific to the space, and the decisions made about the way that the work was hung happened during the installation, through conversations with the curators" (Crosher qtd. in Winant, web).

In keeping with Crosher's intentions to undermine one's ability to 'master' duBois self-portraits, at the MoMA show, she selected images that demonstrate a nuanced denial of visibility. The installation, *Stares and Silhouettes for MoMA* (*From the Disbanding of Michelle duBois*), 2012, was composed of different manipulated images taken from several series she previously worked on: *The Other Disappeared Nurse* (2012), *Silhouetted* (2010), *Mae Wested* (2012), and *Back of Neck* (2008). The installation wall combined crumpled glossy images of Mae West, obscured photos of duBois in the shadows, as well as a multiplication of the same 'famous' image of duBois - the sexy nurse - as she is fading out over multiple steps (Fig. 43). Paradoxically, Crosher chose images that evidence different forms of disappearance, though she was nevertheless fascinated by duBois' gaze, i.e., her changing 'feminine perspectives' on herself as well as on her archive. According to Crosher, she sequenced the works according to the direction of duBois' gaze. Again, in a very self-reflexive manner, it appeared as if duBois was looking at herself or, more accurately, at her own fantasy of herself (for example, the *Mae Wested* portraits on the two ends of the installation wall seem to mirror each other). The result is a type of visual syntax that underscores a wide spectrum of feminine gazes: "duBois alternately gazing at herself, turning away from the camera, and seeming to gaze at this exhibition, drawing attention to the acts of photographing and looking" ("New Photography 2012 - Zoe Crosher").

One should keep in mind, however, that while Crosher's overarching curatorial concept seems to be consistent (as per the MoMA exhibit), when examining the photographs composing the wall-installation, it seems as though the images were abstracted from any logical sequence and, as such, they do not tell the viewer anything substantial about duBois' biographical narrative. Similarly, the links that Crosher generated between the different images and clusters remain deliberately 'diffusive' and ambiguous. In the end, all the viewer is left with are fragmentary glimpses into duBois' life. As Crosher explained: "This cumulative layering of material and history, playing out through the "Kodak Promise" of every single film type, size and print, added to the impossibility of seeing the archive as a totality of her … (Crosher qtd. in Szupinska-Myers).

With the continual formal investigations and the iterations of this project, Crosher admittedly emphasizes the transitory qualities of the duBois archive. Rather than being fixed in one place or within a restricted institutional framework, the duBois archive is dynamic and transportable as it moves and morphs from one gallery/museum space to the next as well as through the evolving artist-book series. The continual (almost ritualized) intervention and transformations in and of the archive – both materially and conceptually – call attention to the fact that the archive might never be a *fait accompli* insomuch as the urge for taking pictures, accumulating and preserving images (i.e., 'archive fever') is an inevitable continuous or endless process. Indeed, there might always be some feature that could be further added to the archive.

Commenting on her first encounter with duBois' massive photo-collection, Respini recalls asking herself, "Who was she? Where was she? Were these fake pictures?" (Respini "Inside/Out", web). The curator's questions are in fact a great illustration of how the duBois archive undoubtedly elicits a 'narrative drive' in the viewer, that is, 'the desire to know'. Yet, as demonstrated, this 'need' to know more about duBois is never satisfied, even despite the fact that her self-portraits were well-arranged and presented in the form of a site-specific installation at MoMA. With this, Crosher

demonstrates once again the transgressive edge of her work. This criticality is mediated by Crosher's questioning of any structure of power, logic, or order, i.e., 'authority of truth' ('totality' according to Crosher), and this includes the photographic self-portrait, the archive, and, finally, the museum entity. Throughout, Crosher's strict selection of images and the final presentation of her installations and publications are deliberately targeted at dismantling the viewer's expectations of discovering a biographical narrative or, as Crosher simply put it, the aim was "to interrupt our expectations of looking" (Crosher Winant, web).

To summarize, if the traditional concept of the archive (and exhibition display) is based on a solid system of evidences and signs that orders rational interpretation and identity (Edwards 5), then Crosher has undoubtedly broken free from this convention by constructing a so called 'anti-archive' that undoes the 'truth' or 'meaning' value both archives and photography traditionally claim. "The metaphor", Crosher has said, "stands as an escape from a singular, conclusive, totalizing effort" (Crosher qtd. in Winant). Therefore, in my view, instead of exhibiting a so-called 'conventional' photo-archive, Crosher has presented audiences with an alternative-feminist archive that displays multiple (accumulating) perspectives on the making of a woman (or women), as well as on the making of art/archives/exhibitions, through amateur photography and within a contemporary framing. By building archival installations, Crosher invites all to freely piece duBois' fantasy narrative together and fill in the gaps with their own imagination as they move through the exhibition.

Being a contemporary artist versed in academic discourse, Crosher is clearly conscious of the cultural shaping power of museums, hence through her site-specific installations she might be pointing at the institutional 'politics' of photography display. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that Crosher's work does not necessarily occupy a position of opposition towards the museum institution, but rather it consciously questions the underlying logic of an institutional display of photographic

archives, as well as how art – and now amateur photography – is given new significance by a powerful entity, such as MoMA. Finally, from a feminist point of view, it could be thought that the presentation of the duBois archive inside MoMA's exhibition space is in fact an act of individual (feminist) curation within a site - exemplary of a long legacy of institutional curatorship (led by men) which established MoMA's photography department as the "Judgment Seat of Photography".[44] Arguably, MoMA's institutional framing is crucial for Crosher as it positions her art in tandem with other prominent artists whose work is at the forefront of contemporary art photography.

[44] See Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography" (1982). In his essay Philips examines MoMA's role as a cultural trend-setter and aesthetic taste-maker through the history and evolution of MoMA's photographic department and its chief curators (e.g., Beaumont Newhall, Edward Steichen, John Szarkowski). Emphasizing the curators' influential role in the art world, Phillips demonstrated how through the re-writing of the history and theory of the medium, the MoMA curators not only firmly placed photography in the museum but within the canon of modern art.

Conclusion

In the *Michelle duBois Project*, artist Zoe Crosher has tapped the visual culture of still pictures and accumulated archival materials. She played with constructing women's fantasies, popular imagery and fictionalized biographical accounts. Crosher's multilayered project reflects her profound engagement with a broad range of concepts, theories and genres, ranging from self-portraiture, performance and amateur photography to feminism, the history of photography, archival and conceptual art. Using all of these 'tools', Crosher posed a series of challenges to how we conceive of images and how these conceptions produce clichéd representations of women. Appropriating and repurposing the found archive of another woman, Crosher framed duBois' excessive collection in a way that deliberately lifts the images out of their original contexts and obscures photography's promise of 'truth', consequently creating "a documentary that underscores the failure of documentary" (Berardini, "Violating the Documentary"). As exemplified in this research, even when carefully looking at so many self-portraits of Michelle duBois, there is no 'genuine' Ms. duBois to be found. Refusing to follow the tradition of photographic portraiture, duBois' imaginative act of self-expression ultimately calls the genre itself as well as the notion of a fixed feminine identity into question.

This thesis has attempted to contextualize Crosher's work within the practice and discourse of contemporary feminist photography. The positioning of Crosher's art within this theoretical framework has been a significant part of this research as it affirms Crosher's project as an exemplar of social-critical photography. That is the kind of photography that relates to our lived experiences and thus invites us to be critically conscious of the politics of images in the present moment. Ultimately, as she drew upon the oppositional stance of postmodernist and feminist art, one can argue that in all of Crosher's creative performances, from appropriating duBois' private photo-collection and presenting her snapshots in a series of books and museum exhibitions, to the various

manipulations of the images and the deliberate exaggeration of their physical qualities, there is always present an underlying cultural critique that invites further transgression of the conventions of women's self-representation, and potentially that of the archive and contemporary photography.

Interestingly, Crosher used elements of fiction and fantasy to construct a potentially plausible archive of a so-called 'real' woman and her interchangeable guises, yet as demonstrated throughout this thesis, ambiguity and deliberate confusion are essential to Crosher's artistic process and storytelling technique. Although the uncertainty of the archive's authenticity and enigma of duBois' identity similarly remain open-ended, upon closer examination of this project, I realized that what the curious viewer could potentially reveal about duBois' anonymity might be less 'interesting' than the very artistic methods and self-reflexive strategies Crosher has employed throughout her project. In other words, Crosher's awareness of (and obsession with) the photographic material properties (namely with analog photo technologies) coupled with her carefully staged archival actions and exhibition installations, seem to displace the viewers' interest in decoding duBois' personal narrative, to interest in the formal processes that constitute this artwork and the activity of archival/curatorial praxis as such.

As Crosher stresses in one interview, "In contrast to being about the story that surrounds the work (she was a friend of my aunt, she was a prostitute, anything else), the duBois project is about all of the elements that make up the gestalt" (Crosher qtd. in Winant, web). Accordingly, this thesis attempted to demonstrate how Crosher's practice not only confronts issues of gender and identity representation but also invites us to reflect on the principles of making and disseminating new images and alternative meanings within a photo-centric (digital) culture.

Encountering the duBois project for the first time at MoMA's *New Photography* exhibition, one of the main questions that governed my research was, therefore: What is in fact *new* about Zoe Crosher's work? In other words, what differentiates her work from that of other well-known

contemporary female artists whose art similarly question ideas of self-representation as well as the visual stereotypization of women in media culture? After having analyzed her work, I propose that what pushes Crosher's creativity beyond that of her predecessors is her combined role as artist-archivist-curator. Moreover, the positioning of duBois' images within an archival framework adds another contextual element to her work as the (re)constructed fantasy archive offers a dynamic space for meta-reflection and self-transformation. I also put forth the concept of a 'feminist archive' insofar as it is also an archive that celebrates the collaborative authorship of two women photographers. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, Crosher uses the archive as a 'lab' within which she conducts her experiments with the formal properties of photography while testing the mechanism of the archive and the limits of archival collections. Ultimately, duBois' fantasy archive and its related series of artist books and site-specific installations seem to be 'on a quest' to further un-define or deconstruct Michelle duBois' identity so as to direct the viewer towards narrating her or his own fantasy notion of duBois. This is a key part of the whole project.

Through the research presented in this thesis, I finally suggest that what essentially renders the Michelle duBois project as unconventional (or *new*) is its various conceptual underpinnings and thematic perspectives as they are mediated by the project's archival, curatorial, and editorial iterations. Correspondingly, the institutional framing of Crosher's work within MoMA's *New Photography* exhibition, places Crosher among a significant group of contemporary artists who "collectively examine and expand the conventional definitions of photography ("New Photography 2012 – Exhibition", web). Insofar as the Michelle duBois project accounts for multiple imaginative narratives, identities, and endless formal configurations of the source material, I maintain that this project manifests an expanded approach to photography. As Bate stresses, "photo-experimentation is linked with new models of vision" (Bate, "Art Photography" 142). The apparent expansion of photography's parameters by contemporary artists like Crosher has far-reaching implications on the

future of the medium. Importantly, the introduction of 'new models of vision' into photography and their eventual official sanctioning by museums, and more broadly speaking, the very vision of photography's future, raise several interesting lines of research which I intend to pursue in my future work.

When concerning the future of the medium, as previously mentioned, Crosher is not a photographer 'per se' but rather she engages with a variety of creative activities and processes such as collecting, editing, curating, and storytelling while explicitly maintaining a self-reflexive relationship to the medium of photography. With this, Crosher's hybrid working method seems to apply to art historian George Baker's definition of the current expanded practice of photography. In his article "Photography's Expanded Field" (2005), Baker points at some of the most fascinating intersections between photography and other mediums (film, video, painting, installation, architecture, etc.), satiating that today's artists are in fact broadening the conventions of photography by combining the medium with other art fields and creative activities (Baker 122-3).[45] In light of contemporary artists' interdisciplinary tactics and the subsequent erosion of traditional art forms, Baker and like-minded critics argue that we are currently witnessing a so-called 'post-medium' condition of art - "the medium as a trajectory is coming to an end" (Berardini "Violating the Documentary").[46] Within this 'radical' context, the nature of photography as a distinct discipline is being questioned as the lines between the medium and other artistic disciplines are deliberately blurred. Hence, the very idea of a medium-specific approach might no longer be relevant within the broader framework of a contemporary pluralist art practice. As Souter maintains, "In this

[45] Along the same lines of Baker's argument, in her article "On Defiance – Experimentation as Resistance" (2016), Respini argues that artists' investigation of photography's relationship to other mediums, and the resulted challenging of the medium as a fixed discipline is central to the current tactics and conversations around contemporary art-photography (Respini 104-5). Moreover, Bate suggests that the once separate fields of conceptual art, modernism and documentary photography, are currently more or less combined in what he defines as 'post-conceptual' (pluralist) art photography (Bate, "Art Photography" 101) .

environment, terms such as painting, sculpture, or photography are only invoked with due sensitivity to the fact that they have been expanded, unraveled and redefined" (Soutter 116).

In regard to the future of the Michelle duBois project, it seems as though the consecutive art books and museum presentations of the fantasy archive suggest ongoing accumulation, manipulation and dissemination of duBois' extensive photographic output - which in return, invite further research and new avenues for analysis. Crosher has certainly stated in the past that she is planning to create an epilogue to the project in the form of a fifth volume entitled *The Disbanding of Michelle duBois, aka Michelle duBois*; however, the book is yet to be published.[47]

Writing on the concept of contemporary archives, art critic Boris Groys maintains: "In a certain sense, the archive gives to the subject the hope of surviving one's own contemporaneity and revealing one's true self in the future because the archive promises to sustain and make accessible this subject's texts or artworks after his or her death" (Groys "Art Workers", web). This future promise of remembrance might apply just as well to Michelle duBois. As a woman who married young and got divorced while living in a small town in Oklahoma during the 1970s and 1980s, materializing her fantasies of traveling and becoming a photographer ("the amateur Kodak fantasy" according to Crosher) were undoubtedly confronted by a problematic reality and a vague destiny. However, by performing her fantasies in front of the camera and subsequently bequeathing her massive photo-collection to Crosher - who kept her archive and aspirations 'alive'- duBois might have been able to 'escape' her everyday reality thus 'survive her own contemporaneity'. With this, Crosher and duBois' unconventional co-authorship could eventually be interpreted as a joint liberating effort and a feminist act in the service of self-expression. Yet quite ironically, the possibility of breaking free from one's social/cultural constraints and gender limitations was

[47] *The Disbanding of Michelle duBois* is also the title of a series of exhibitions focusing on the final material and conceptual disintegration of duBois' archive. The last exhibition took place at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna in 2014.

ultimately achievable within the confines of the archive. Nevertheless, thanks to the re-constructed fantasy archive, duBois (whether she exists or not) is able to reveal the multiplicity of her colorful persona in the present as well as in the future to come.

For Crosher, liberation and freedom bear a significant meaning as they not only apply to Michelle duBois' escape from her predetermined destiny but also to the photographic medium. When concerning art's 'post-medium' condition, Crosher seems to be similarly interested in the liberation of photography from its own exacting principles, as she crafts her 'hybrid' projects in between documentary and fiction and in between art forms and categories.[48] In an antithetical way, Crosher's 'medium-based' approach, that is, her intense explorations of photographic materials, objects and techniques, eventually open up her work to diverse interpretations within the expanded (i.e. 'post-medium') field of contemporary art and photography. Referring to her most radical manipulations of duBois' portraits which resulted in overexposed semi-abstract photographs, Crosher says: "It is this sort of liberation—from the medium, from the historical read, from identity politics, from one's own history, from photography, from the static image—that drives this final iteration" (Crosher qtd. in Blalock, "Part 2").[49]

[48] Crosher's photographic works often overlap with sculpture, painting and installation. For example, in her most recent series *LA-LIKE: Prospecting Palm Fronds* (2015-2016), Crosher examined the conceptual mapping of Los Angeles by bringing sculpture and photography together in her installations. The project consists of 150 natural bronze palm frond sculptures, named according to where Crosher found them in LA (*ZoeCrosher*, web).
[49] To add to this notion of 'liberation through formalism', some of duBois' Disappearing Nurse portraits were appropriately titled, *The Overexposing, Fading, Blurring, Crumpling Up, **Liberated** Original Nurse*.

Figures

Figure 1: Zoe Crosher, *Like Miko Smiling for Christopher Williams*, 2008, Fiber print.

Figure 2: Zoe Crosher, *The Additive Dust Series no. 30*, 2012, Archival pigment print.

Figure 3: Zoe Crosher, *The Gypsy Cluster (with the Tow Wigs)*, 2005, 13 Inkjet prints.

Figure 4: Zoe Crosher, *Mirrored Autoportrait #1*, 2009, Digital C-print.

Figure 5: Zoe Crosher, *Mirrored Autoportrait #2*, 2009, Digital C-print.

Figure 6: Zoe Crosher, *The Additive Dust Series no. 40*, 2012, Archival pigment print.

Figure 7: Zoe Crosher, *Mae Wested no. 14 (Crumpled)*, 2012, Digital C-print.

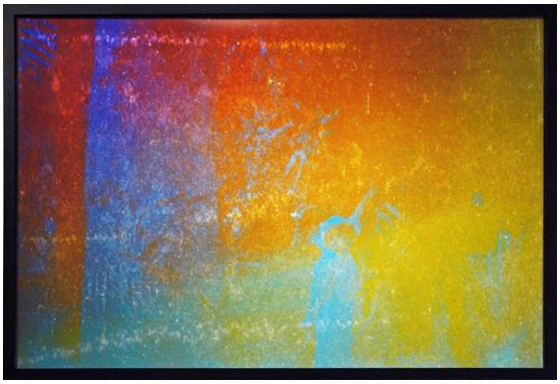

Figure 8: Zoe Crosher, *Obfuscated no. 3, 2009*, Archival inkjet print.

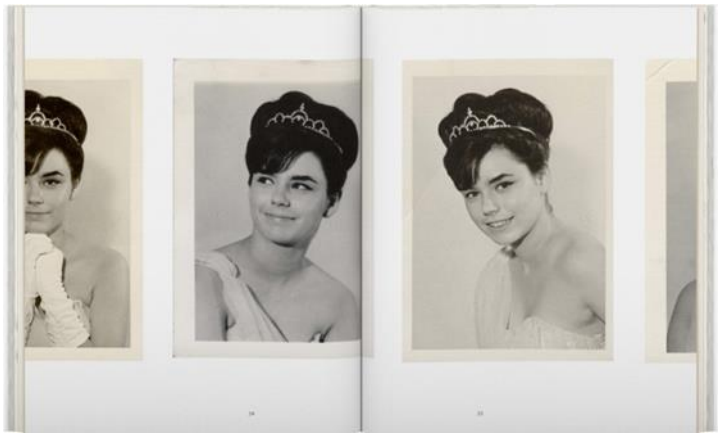

Figure 9: Zoe Crosher, *Interior Portrait - The Disappearance of Michelle duBois Vol. 4*, 2012.

Figure 10: Zoe Crosher, *Almost the Same (8-17-86)*, 2011, Digital C-prints.

Figure 11: Zoe Crosher, *The Additive Dust Series no. 5*, 2012, Archival pigment print.

Figure 12: Zoe Crosher, *Polaroided - Eight Dollar Meal*, 2008, Polaroid and ink.

Figure 13: Zoe Crosher, *Polaroided 5*, 2008, Polaroid and ink.

Figure 14: Zoe Crosher, *Almost the Same (Veil)*, 2010, Digital C-prints.

Figure 15: Zoe Crosher, *Obfuscated*, 2009, Original C-print.

Figure 16: Nikki S. Lee, *The Hiphop Project (1)*, 2001, Fujiflex print.

Figure 17: Zoe Crosher, *Silhouetted no. 6*, 2010, Digital C-print.

Figure 18: Zoe Crosher, *Color Back of Neck*, 2008, Digital C-print.

Figure 19: Zoe Crosher, *The Additive Dust Series no.34*, 2012, Archival pigment print.

Figure 20: Zoe Crosher, *The Additive Dust Series no.43*, 2012, Archival pigment print.

Figure 21: Zoe Crosher, *Mae Wested no.8 (Crumpled)*, 2012, Digital C-print.

Figure 22: Zoe Crosher, *The Other Disappeared Nurse*, 2012, (Installation view) Perry Rubenstein Gallery.

Figure 23: Zoe Crosher, *The Reconsidered Archive of Michelle duBois Vol. 1*, 2011.

Figure 24: Zoe Crosher, *Posed Postcard*, 2004.

Figure 25: Zoe Crosher, *The Cindy Shermanesque (But She's the Real Thing)*, 2005, Twelve lightjet prints.

Figure 26: Zoe Crosher, *Almost the Same (Really Disguised)*, 2010, Digital C-Prints.

Figure 27: [Michelle duBois] *The Other Disappeared Nurse no.1*, 2012.

Figure 28: Artist Zoe Crosher (2012), *Hancockparktoday*, web. April 2017.

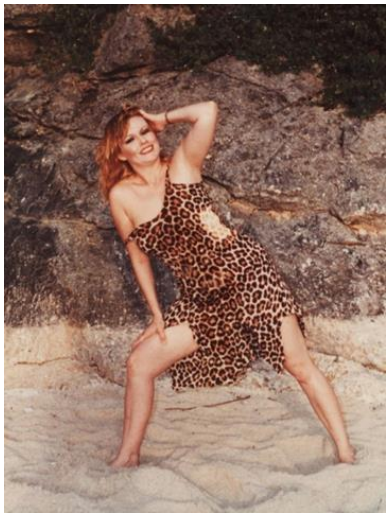

Figure 29: Zoe Crosher, *Posing Like a Tiger*, 2009, inkjet print.

Figure 30: Zoe Crosher, *Wearing the Tiger*, 2009, inkjet print.

Figure 31: Zoe Crosher, *Blackened Last Four Days & Nights of Tokyo no.5 (8.21.86)*, 2012, Digital C-print.

Figure 32: Zoe Crosher, *Blackened Last Four Days and Nights of Tokyo (8.21.86)*, 2012, (Installation view) Perry Rubenstein Gallery.

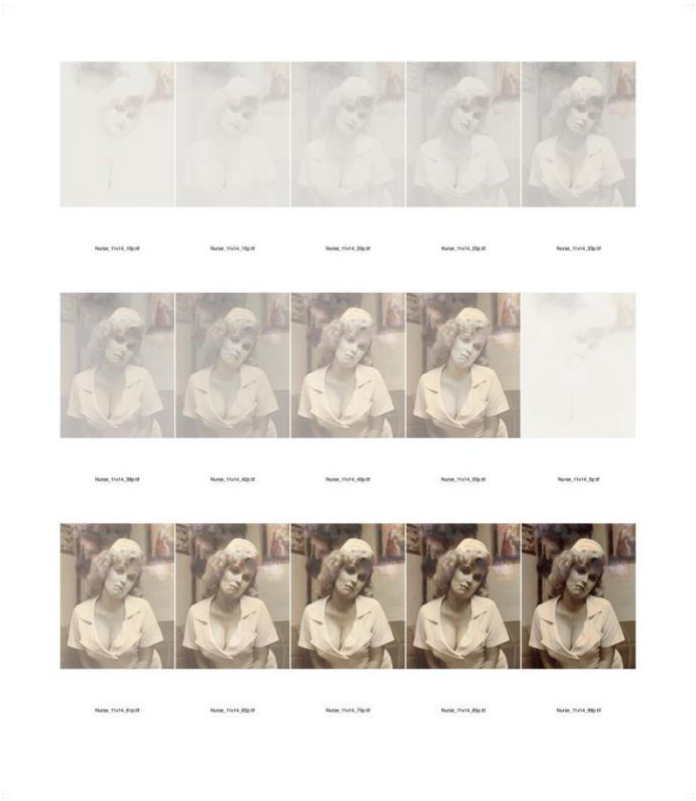

Figure 33: Zoe Crosher, *The Vanishing of Michelle duBois, 2010*, Pigmented ink.

Figure 34: *Zoe Crosher, The Reconsidered Archive of Michelle duBois, aka *Kathy* - Vol. 1*. New York: Aperture Ideas, 2011.

Figure 35: Zoe Crosher, *The Unveiling of Michelle duBois*, (Installation view) The California Biennial, 2010.

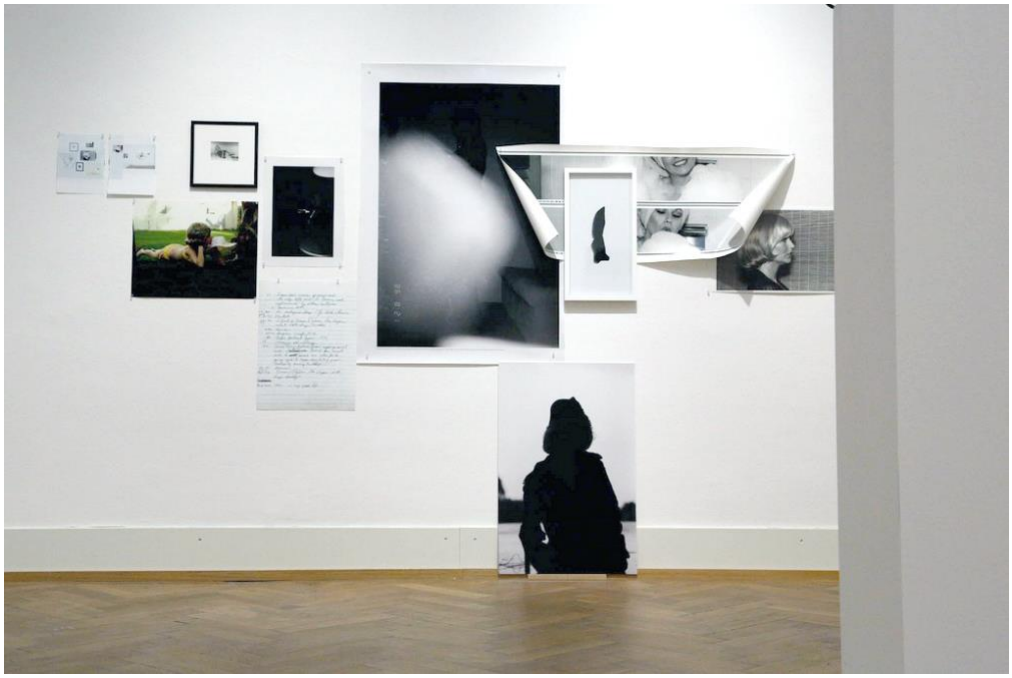

Figure 36: Zoe Crosher, *The Disbanding of Michelle duBois*, (Installation view) Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, 2014.

Figure 37: Zoe Crosher, *The Unraveling of Michelle duBois*, (Installation view) DCKT Contemporary, New York, 2010.

Figure 38: Zoe Crosher, *The Unvieling of Michelle duBois*, (Installation view) Emma Gray Headquarters, Los Angeles, 2010.

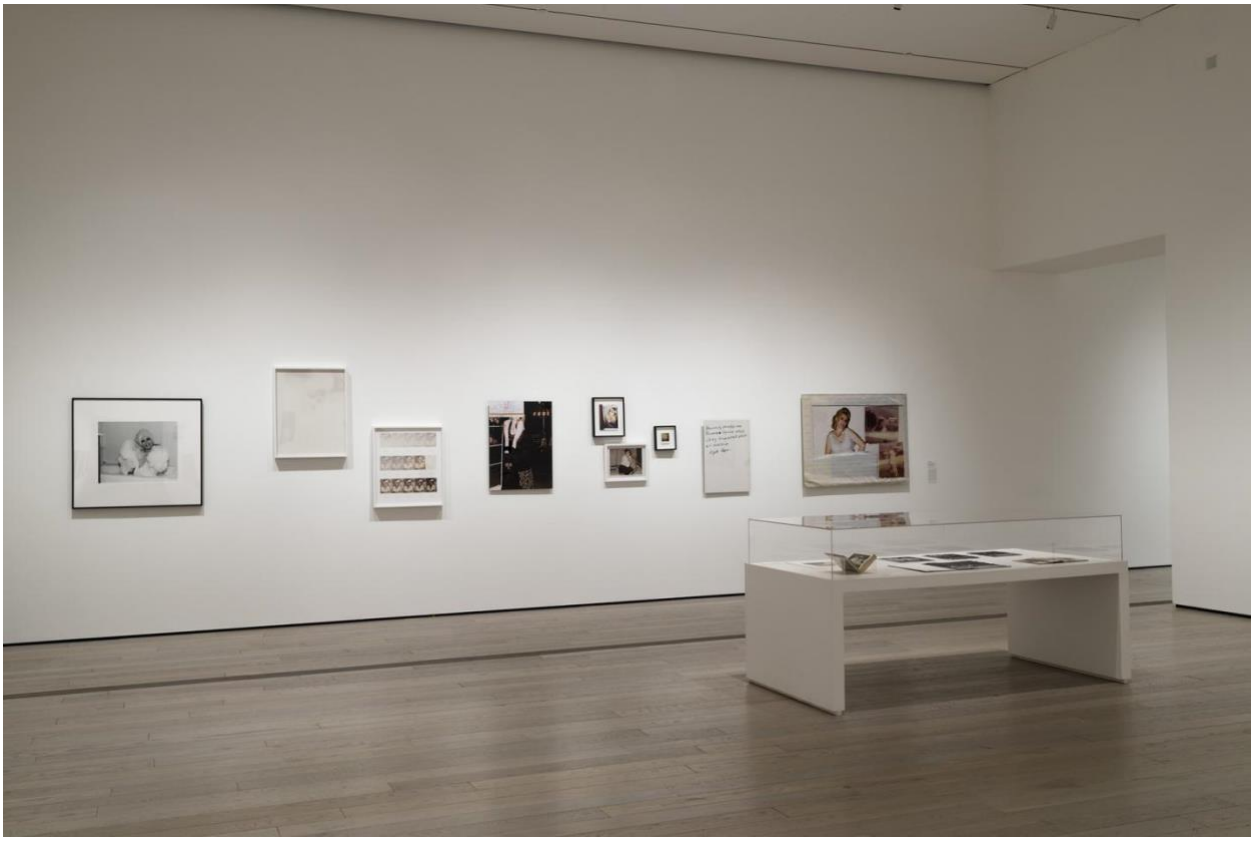

Figure 39: Zoe Crosher, *Tilt of the Head of Analog Tim*e, Nine photographs and mixed media installation at LACMA, 2012.

Figure 40: Zoe Crosher, *Obfuscated Island Nights (Hot & Muggy)*, 2009, Digital C-print.

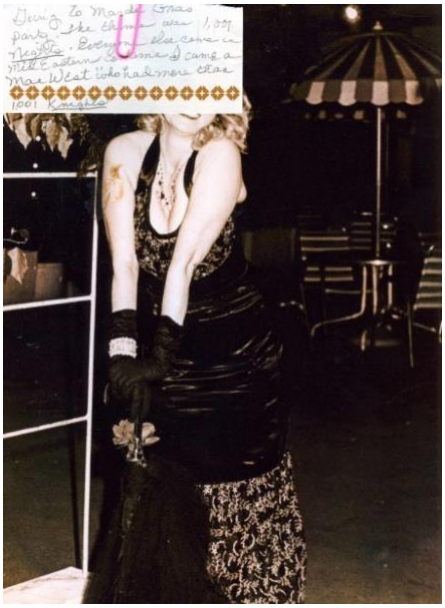

Figure 41: Zoe Crosher, *Obfuscated Mae West (and the 1001 Knights)*, 2009, Digital C-print.

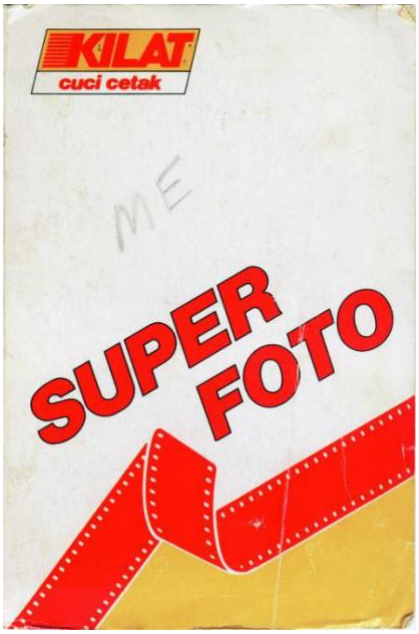

Figure 42: Zoe Crosher, *Super Foto (Me)*, 2009, LightJet print with glossy lamination mounted on aluminum.

Figure 43: Zoe Crosher, *Stares and Silhouettes for MoMA*, 2012, (Installation view) The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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