

# Failing the Feminine: Photographed Words in Lincoln Clarkes' *Heroines*

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## Abstract

*This article examines the function of words that appear within the borders of photographic portraits in relation to questions of gender and identity. A close reading of Lincoln Clarkes' photographs leads to the conclusion that photographed words are a particular sort of background space in so far as they are prominent in their contribution to the image's overall signification. Once coupled with a female subject who openly performs her gendered identity, the common city signs and billboards are no longer popular urban marks whose particularity – whose very message – is easily overlooked. Instead, the coupling transforms (or unveils) the commercial writing not only into a thing worth seeing and contemplating, but also into a signifier of gender and identity. The words work alongside the photographed subject to shape personal identity in contradistinction to prevailing attitudes informing the female body and the female identity. Ultimately, they help communicate a failure of the feminine.*

Cultural theorist Teresa de Lauretis persuasively argues that “gender is not a property of bodies” and urges readers to “think of gender as the product and the process of a number of social technologies, of techno-social or bio-medical apparatus”.<sup>1</sup> In her articulation of gender as both that which is created and that which creates, the “product” and the “process” of various cultural representations and practices, de Lauretis refutes traditional notions of gender that approach it as an essential, natural, real difference between male and female bodies. Yet, as she too suggests, to theorize gender as a representational construct, as the object and condition of representation, does not diminish the power of social technologies to work alongside institutionalized discourses, epistemologies and critical practices to produce a gender reality predicated on the fixed opposition between male and female bodies. The ubiquity of this opposition – described by Griselda Pollock as “one of the most significant axes for making sense of the world”<sup>2</sup> – contains gender within the rigid frame of anatomical difference. The body is typically reduced to a surface on which dichotomous gender categories are repeatedly and insistently inscribed.

The interconnectedness between physical appearance and the intelligibility of gender is especially apparent in photographic portraiture, a social technology that functions within definite cultural parameters to naturalize the corporeal intelligibility of two exclusive gender possibilities. To fulfill this ideological function, photographic portraiture adopts, proliferates and legitimizes the set of techniques developed and deployed by a given culture to regulate dichotomous definitions of gender. Photography critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau stresses this very point when she writes, “photography

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Griselda Pollock, ‘Is Feminism to Judaism as Modernity Is to Tradition? Critical Questions on Jewishness, Femininity and Art’, in *Rubies and Rebels: Jewish Female Identity in Contemporary British Art*, ed. by Monica Bohm-Duchen and Vera Grodzinski (London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1996), pp. 15-27 (p. 25).

(like any cultural practice within patriarchy) normally functions to produce and reproduce dominant ideologies of gender”.<sup>3</sup> In photographic portraits, prevalent and compelling gender myths play themselves out across the body.

Consequently, the photographed body is never a neutral body. On the contrary, it is always culturally mediated. “There are no natural bodies in representation”, feminist critic Marsha Meskimmon reminds us; instead “there are only constructions of gender and self”.<sup>4</sup> It follows that the photographed body is, among other things, a sexed body defined in semiotic terms as a visual indexical sign that refers to and justifies the existence of two genders. As Julia Cream argues, the very act of portrayal positions the body within “social and cultural settings” that “constrain the way it is conceived” according to established gender categories.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is important to note that in many photographic portraits the body does not stand in isolation. Its meaning – and this includes its gendered meaning – is oftentimes directed, supplemented, emphasized or even contested or rendered ambiguous by the context in which the body is photographed. Whether a familial space or a cityscape or a carefully arranged studio, the photographic background space partakes in the process of subject creation that is central to portraiture.

## Working Words into the Picture

Words that appear within the borders of a photograph comprise a particular category of photographic background space. When considered in relation to images, words are often characterized as that which anchors the image’s meaning and consequently restricts its semantic potential.<sup>6</sup> The mixing of media in photographic portraiture, where words and the portrait subject share the same photographic frame, is not uncommon. The famous Paul Strand photograph “Blind” jumps immediately to mind.<sup>7</sup> In Strand’s image, the word “blind” is written across a plaque that hangs from a woman’s neck. At a first glance, the word seems to be redundant in that it states that which is visually evident. However, in an important way, it is not redundant if one considers the way in which “blind” pretends to own its subject. This five-lettered word directs the meaning attributed to the photographed subject; it ensures that what is most significant about the woman is her blindness, and not her age or the social class to which she belongs.

But, what happens to the word’s role in meaning creation when verbal text appears in the background? When words are merely details that seem to have found their way into the image, as is often the case in Walker Evans’ photographs or Bernice Abbott’s photographs of New York? In these instances, words may very well seem to

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<sup>3</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists’ Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Cream, ‘Re-Solving Riddles: The Sexed Body’, in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. by David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 31-40 (p. 33).

<sup>6</sup> See Jan Baetens, ‘Texte et image dans le roman-photo’, *Word & Image*, 4 (1988), 170-176 (p. 170).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Strand, *Blind*, 1916, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

intrude and contaminate the image as E. H. Gombrich has argued,<sup>8</sup> but they are not secondary to the main subject. On the contrary, they are primary agents in the overall production of the photograph's meaning. Despite occupying a background position, they are prominent in their contribution to the image's overall signification.

Words in images present a complex problem in semiotics.<sup>9</sup> A good case can be made that there cannot *be* words (understood as linguistic signifiers) in an image; the two are irreconcilable sign systems. According to this reading, words in images *are* images themselves. Walker Evans' "Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene" illustrates this point, for the photograph presents words as pictured things to be seen, literally transforming the word "damaged" into a thing that can be carried away and transposed to a new location (Fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> In Evans' photograph, the word *is* image. Or, perhaps, viewers are faced with a verbal photograph where they are encouraged to partake in the act of reading the image, instead of viewing the picture.



**Fig.1** Walker Evans. *Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene*. 1930. The Walker Evans Estate.

Words in photographs, however, are not always readily perceived as images. They can be what I wish to call background noise – that is, words that pose as backdrops, but that take on a central role in directing the photographic subject's meaning. In the social documentary work of Lincoln Clarkes, words do not become image, as in Evans' "Mr. Evans Records a City's Scene". Instead, the street signs, billboards and other common city words found in his photographic portraits direct the photograph's meaning by way of their linguistic properties.

Lincoln Clarkes is a Canadian photographer who taught himself photography and went full-time into fashion and portraiture. In 1998, at the Helen Pitt Gallery in Vancouver, he exhibited a series of 40 photographic portraits of various heroin-using women on the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Clarkes began work on the

<sup>8</sup> E. H. Gombrich, 'Image and Word in Twentieth-Century Art', *Word and Image*, 1 (1985), 213-241 (p. 213).

<sup>9</sup> See Darrel Mansell, 'Language in an Image', *Criticism*, 41 (1999), 187-205.

<sup>10</sup> Walker Evans, *Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene*, 1930, The Walker Evans Estate.

series, poignantly called *Heroines*, in 1996 and spent over a decade photographing these women. His *Heroines Series* comprises over 400 black and white photographic portraits, the first of which was a large, plastic laminated print of a woman shooting up in a bus shelter in front of a Kate Moss “heroin chic” Calvin Klein advertisement. The piece was dated, signed and hand-titled “Leah on Heroin.”

The same portrait introduces his photo-essay entitled *Heroines*, comprising over one hundred photographs and published by Anvill Press in 2002 (Fig. 2). In the accompanying text, Clarkes writes that “In any other city, this photograph might have been staged, but not here in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Crack-smoking, heroin-shooting, sleeping, eating, living, dying – it’s all done on the street”.<sup>11</sup> Although it is quite probable that the event is not staged, the similarity between Leah’s body and that of Kate Moss does not escape the viewer. Nor does the implicit reference to the commercialization of female beauty – Kate Moss, it must be remembered, is celebrated as the model that set a new standard for how lean a beautiful female body should be. In Clarkes’ portrait of Leah, it is clear that Leah’s body, although quite similar in dimensions to that of Kate Moss – it is even similar in its pose – would not be readily considered beautiful or desirable, at least, not if one accepts Rita Freedman’s definition of beauty as “an external radiance, an inner tranquility, a sexual allure, a fact of social exchange,” among other things.<sup>12</sup> Leah’s body has the “right” shape, but it is neither healthy, nor radiant, nor sexy.



**Fig. 2.** Lincoln Clarkes. October 1996 / Kate Moss/Leah, Chinatown, Pender Street.

<sup>11</sup> Lincoln Clarkes, 2002, *Heroines: Photographs*. (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2004), p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> Rita Freedman, *Beauty Bound* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1986), p. 4.

Feminine beauty and desirability and its link to the body as a commercial object runs throughout the entire *Heroines* series. Some of the women in Clarkes' photographs are positioned in front of billboards advertising female beauty products, such as hair dye, while others are at their toilette, albeit in dirty alleys or along curbsides. The idealized, sexualized female pose is also accentuated in many photographs in which a female subject presents herself as sexually available. In them, the female body is reduced to an object that offers itself up to the sexual gratification of others.

What strikes viewers is the pointed contrast between the familiar stylized image of feminine beauty and desirability and the female portrait subject. The performance of the feminine by Clarkes' heroine addicts is thwarted by what Judith Butler has described as an "abjected or delegitimated" body, that is, a body that fails to materialize the (gendered) norm.<sup>13</sup>

In Clarkes' *Heroines*, the female subject struggles to project a normative body and strike a normative pose, imitating commercialized notions of female beauty and desirability. Apart from the photograph of Leah, all of the portraits reproduced in *Heroines* are images in which the subject overtly stages the feminine. In most of the photographs, the female subject looks straight out at the photographer, oftentimes mimicking the poses of fashion models. She may jut out her hip, tilt her head, pout her lips or look out of the frame with half-closed eyes. In most instances, Clarkes' subjects openly – even exaggeratedly – adopt "*feminine*" poses. Although they often fail in their attempts to project a normative female body image (as commercialized by the fashion industry), the attempt itself makes viewers aware of the extent to which socially instated gender norms continue to regulate bodies. To be photographed is to project an image of self; to project an image of self is to necessarily negotiate existing gender norms across the body.

## **Towering Words**

In his role as photographer, Clarkes, too, partakes in the staging of the feminine. He does so in an unorthodox and much more subtle fashion: by carefully posing his subjects in front of street signs, billboards and other common city words that when read in conjunction with the photographed woman speak to her performance of a gendered identity. The women, with their Kate Moss bodies, are positioned in front of signs that, although normally an integral part of Vancouver's Eastside cityscape, gain in significance because paired with the portrait subject. The words that occupy the photograph's background space, in other words, take on a heightened role as vehicles of communication. Once coupled with a female subject who openly performs her gendered identity, the common city signs are no longer popular urban marks whose particularity – whose very message – is easily overlooked. Instead, the coupling transforms (or unveils) this commercial writing not only into a thing worth seeing and contemplating, but also into a signifier of gender.

In several of Clarkes' portraits, the female subject poses in front of grocery stores, restaurant price lists or other verbal signage related to food. In all cases, the food advertised is of a low register, usually written on the walls of a lower end grocery

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<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 15.

store, as indicated by the waste littering the store entrance or the bars covering the windows. Food, as Elspeth Probyn, following Roland Barthes, argues in another context is a “hugely powerful system of values, regulations and beliefs”.<sup>14</sup> Diet – what, how, when and where one eats – characterizes how one is viewed. It not only reflects behavioural patterns or the “way in which one manages one’s existence”,<sup>15</sup> but also plays a major role in the shaping of self.

In Clarkes’ *Heroines*, the type of food announced by the photographed words stands in stark contrast to the subject’s open attempt at femininity; hence, further drawing notice to the subject’s abjected body. It is a non-feminine or what Carol Adams calls a masculine food that the words announce: Roast Beef, Pepperoni and Meatloaf (Fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> In her provocative study entitled *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams delineates a Western cultural link between meat eating and strength by showing a mythical association of masculinity with bellicosity and the supposed need men have to eat meat. Vegetable eating, on the other hand, is associated with femininity and weakness. The food addressed in Clarkes’ photographs is fatty food, hearty food, fast food that doesn’t conform to the feminine image embraced by Western culture or to the Kate Moss body the fashion world promotes.



**Fig. 3** Lincoln Clarkes. August 9, 1998 / Pigeon Park, West Hastings and Carrall Street.

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<sup>14</sup> Elspeth Probyn, ‘Beyond Food/Sex: Eating and an Ethics of Existence’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16 (1999), 215-228 (p. 216).

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum Press, 1990)

In addition, the photographed words indicate junk food – that is, food that contaminates the body instead of nourishing it. Like the photographed body whose extreme pose communicates a failure to conform to established norms of female beauty and desirability, the words announce a failure of the feminine. Clarkes' *heroine*, defined at the beginning of the collection as "1. a woman of heroic character; female hero. 2. The principal female character in a story, play, film, etc." is lost under the verbal urban marks that actually work to efface the feminine.<sup>17</sup> In its place, a woman who is reduced to a commodity in the "meat market" (as the words strongly suggest), her body as well as her femininity contaminated, indeed thwarted by heroin.<sup>18</sup>

And, like beauty itself, which has often been theorized as intrinsic to portraiture for it divides the worthy from the non-worthy, food as a measure of inclusion and exclusion is here transposed onto the female body. Clarkes' subjects are the excluded. They stand outside of *acceptable* patterns of feminine behaviour, their selves shaped in contradistinction to the prevailing attitudes informing both the female body and the female identity. When trying to describe the subject's corporeal management, neglect, contamination and abuse jump to mind. In Clarkes' photographs, the moral judgments of bad and good that are subtly inscribed in the types of food we eat and that are forcefully communicated across the photographed word are transposed onto the female subject. The words ensure that her body and her self are heavily marked by signs of transgression.

In Clarkes' *Heroines*, the background words are so powerful, so overwhelmingly pointed, that the subject's personal identity is violated by them. In these photographs, the background words work alongside the body to communicate a self that is void of individuality; that is, a self that is spent under the effects of heroin. This is a reversal of what theorists of portraiture have argued over the centuries. Portraiture has been - and continues to be - defined as a graphic genre that conveys truthfully the personal identity of a real, historical individual.<sup>19</sup> Although they make these women visible even to those who would rather not see them, Clarkes' photographs do not partake in the recording or celebration of personal identity, as Barbara Hodgson claims.<sup>20</sup> Not only are the women who look out from the portraits nameless; they are also strikingly alike. What the photographs mobilize is not so much individual identity, as a collective social condition. Clarkes' *Heroines* records a social type, a "cultural figure of the *heroine*" where "signs and stereotypes carry culturally 'shared' meanings".<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the photographs are not captioned and the "List of Photographs" included at the end of the collection provides only a date, a location, and a number which corresponds to the page in *Heroines* where

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<sup>17</sup> Clarkes, n.p.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that the word *heroin* contaminates the positive connotations of *heroine*. Clarkes' collection of photographs, which opens with a definition of *heroin* followed by a definition of *heroine*, incessantly brings these two words into tension.

<sup>19</sup> Contemporary theorists who propose this definition of portraiture include Richard Brilliant (p. 8-9), Marcia Pointon (p. 45) and Alison Conway (p. 28). For a survey of how this definition influenced the creation and reception of portraiture, especially from the Italian Renaissance to the Enlightenment, see Édouard Pommier's book-length study *Théories du portrait*. For a discussion of how this definition influenced photography, see John Gage's article "Photographic Likeness."

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Hodgson, 'Foreword,' in *Heroines: Photographs*, by Lincoln Clarkes (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2002), xi-xiv (p. xiii).

<sup>21</sup> Margot Leigh Butler, 'The Hero of *Heroines*', *Mosaic*, 37 (2004), 275-297 (p. 278, 282).

the image appears. The photographed words, like the “List of Photographs”, foreground the subject’s anonymity, and not its specificity. It follows that Clarkes’ portraits are portrayals of public norms and the addict’s social condition, and not private identities.<sup>22</sup>

The words help do away with private identity by towering over the subject, creating an intense (and, perhaps, violent) background noise that taps into the viewer’s preconceived notions of the feminine. Sidonie Smith argues that the portrait image holds “the subject in specific bodily postures” that communicate its identity as it intersects with a network of social practices.<sup>23</sup> In *Heroines*, the network of social practices is so forcefully addressed by the photographed words that the subject is, at best, a type. As a type, the specificity of the photographed woman is shadowed beyond recognition. Clarkes’ heroines lack a personal identity: they remain without a name, existing as a collective of strangers whose faces and bodies meld one into the other. Underneath the weight of these words, the subject fades from visibility. Ironically, this fading takes place within a practice that pretends to assert identity through the act of making visible.

## Conclusion

The words thus aid to further marginalize these women and entrap them within the strictures of gender that regulate behaviour, beauty and desirability. This is particularly evident in a photograph of a heavily tattooed woman wearing a T-shirt with a prominent picture of Eve posing underneath a bathroom sign on which “women” is written beside a popular icon for women (Fig. 4). In the portrait, there is a surplus of signs – verbal and visual – that refer to the category of woman. Faced with such an abundance of “female” indicators, the viewer is forced to ask if the category itself has become over-determined, over-coded, contaminated by so many different signifiers that no binding characteristic remains. And, in a surprising way, perhaps, the viewer might ask if the category has become destabilised because of the “type” of woman the photographs associate with it.

With a sense of shame, perhaps, viewers may associate this woman, whose body is so positively emancipated and whose beauty is far removed from the Kate Moss ideal, with the first woman printed on her T-shirt. Like Eve, the choices this woman makes to contaminate her body and use it to seduce others and secure that which she desires carry grave consequences for her self and for her surroundings, as well as for others. Viewers may ask if this sort of woman bears the blame for all sorts of evils that plague the world. In addition, they may reason that the heroine’s fall from grace is so grave that it renders the feminine unstable. By urging viewers to address these sorts of embarrassing (and politically incorrect) questions, Clarkes’ photograph offers a pointed critique of gender expectations, and by extension, of certain understandings of what properly constitutes a female identity.

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<sup>22</sup> C.f. Johnson who, in line with Hodgson, argues that ‘viewers must look beyond the obvious shared circumstances of these women and recognize each woman as unique’. (p. 78).

<sup>23</sup> Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 177.



Clarkes' photographs openly address established attitudes guiding the feminine, thus forcing upon viewers an examination of the criteria of gender normalcy that are operative in our society. They seem to force the questions: How is the feminine defined? How do social manifestations of gender regulate personal attitudes and comportments?

Counter-intuitively, they do so by presenting a female subject that has not only failed at its gender display, but also draws attention to this failure. Unable to accommodate the body within traditional representations of gender, as inscribed and policed by the fashion industry, eating patterns and popular myths, the subject's gendered identity is put into question. Whereas the body – that principal indicator of gender – fails to perform a femininity it so openly invokes, the words overdetermine the female subject to the extent that unique personal identities are written out of the image.



**Fig. 4** Lincoln Clarkes. July 25, 2000 / Victory Square, Cambie and West Hastings Street.

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