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Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life Writing



Untitled © Maro Germanou 2018

*Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life Writing*

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## Emma Bee Bernstein: Fetishism of Fashion and Vintage Self-portraits

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## Emma Bee Bernstein: fetishism of fashion and vintage self-portraits

Daniele Pomilio

Such castles we'll build when we get to the shore  
You'll wear grandmother's  
hats you so adore.  
Charles Bernstein, "Elfking," after Goethe,  
in *Near/Miss*

### Abstract

This essay discusses the self-portraits of Emma Bee Bernstein as an instance of the "Crisis of the Real" that Andy Grundberg detected in contemporary photography (1999). Her creations have a transformative power very distant from the realistic vocation of the photographic medium. Emma Bernstein's work shows a great fascination with vintage décor and discarded items which she adopts as costumes in the masquerades in which she involves her girlfriends. This aesthetic recalls the one originated from decaying Roman halls in Francesca Woodman's self-portraits, in another dreamy adventure of a fugitive self. However, Emma Bernstein's recovery of these *objets trouvés* is also an exploration of the progressive legacy of her family, in a body of work that critically confronts the commodified and disaffected surfaces of fashion shows that tend to neutralise the personal and feminist motives of her art.

In his comprehensive volume on contemporary photography, David Campany discusses the eroticised but non-sexist approach of the feminist photographers in the 1970s (30). The rise of feminism in those years contributed to the development of a body art and of autobiographical performances that questioned sexual norms and repressive gender conditions. A remarkable example of this feminist body art is the vintage aesthetics developed in the rickety buildings of Rome in the rebellious 1970s by Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), who enacted lyrical, *déagagé* self-portraits

in abandoned interiors, beautifully defined in her collage artbooks of notes and clippings “Some Disordered Interior Geometries” (January 1981).<sup>1</sup> In her photos, she locates herself in front of her camera, in fugitive, blurred shots which stress the desolation of disarrayed, Roman interiors surrounded by scraped and scorched wallpaper.



Francesca Woodman. From *Space2*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. 4 11/16 x 4 5/8 in. Gelatin silver print. © Woodman Family Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Such spectral, abandoned spaces became the setting of shows which mixed her feminist aspirations with the unbridled freedom of her times and a languid, post-Surrealist absorption in the mysterious, undetected past recovered through the extravaganza of the Italian capital’s flea markets. Especially Porta Portese was very popular in those years of sexual liberation, providing to the students’ movement bizarre vintage clothing and antique books which entered their new casual fashion. This passion for found, discarded objects suggested

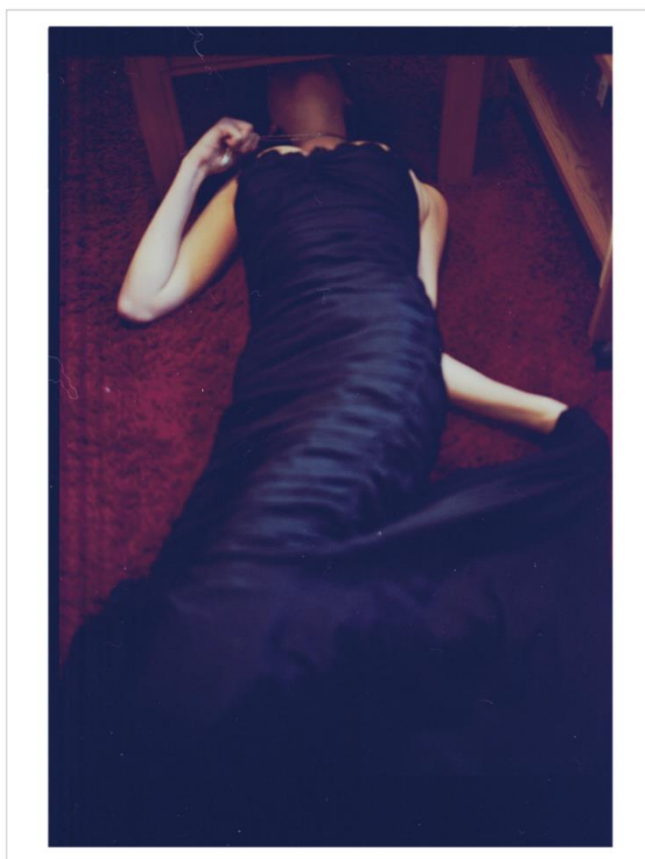
an imaginative identity to be endlessly reassembled and reinvented from lost memories independently from aesthetic conventions, in an antiquarian collagistic style which strongly inspired Woodman's diaries and postcards made of texts and images which still need to be fully recovered.<sup>2</sup> An intense return to a golden time of innocence and spontaneity is reflected in the Roman interiors damaged by time and neglect that sustained Woodman's retrospective art of reminiscence and nostalgia which made of those abandoned, empty rooms the source of the tumultuous, utopian style of chaste and casual nudes that focused on the artist's own body. Such oneiric, evocative self-portraits smoothly alluded to the taboo-breaking which dominated the coeval autobiographical performances by Vito Acconci and Ana Mendieta, also documented in photographs and home movies.



Francesca Woodman. Untitled, Rome, Italy, 1977-78. 5 15/16 x 5 7/8 in. Gelatin silver print. © Woodman Family Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

More recently, traces of those vintage self-portraits of cultural resistance developed in the turbulent 1970s can be found in the performative,

autobiographical art of Emma Bee Bernstein (1985-2008), whose dreamy, retrospective art shares with Woodman's experiments the nurturing influence of her artistic family: her mother Susan Bee is a colorful, imaginative painter; her father Charles is a prominent poet and literary critic, not to mention her brother Felix who is also a gifted literary theorist and a performance artist. Woodman is never mentioned in Emma Bee's writings; yet the generative value of memory and reminiscence and the intensity of her short but significant creative experience are worth recalling as representative of the two artists' mutual desire to make art that would coexist with the libertarian values and aspirations and the formal innovations of the generations that preceded them, in a photography scene increasingly commodified by the amnesiac development of a fashion culture that remains a constant, parodic reference in their visual work.



Emma Bee Bernstein, "Andrea in black dress in floor," photograph, 2007 © 2022 by the Estate of Emma Bee Bernstein.

In Woodman and Bernstein, this parodic impulse is traceable in their dialogue with discarded objects and values which they recover in order to question the conformism of a beauty canon imposed by the fashion industry which they confronted in order to turn their artistic abilities against what Marjorie Perloff defined as the rise of the “age of media” (1991). Such a vast circulation of postmodern simulacra assaulted Emma’s generation in the early 1980s, confining the utopian values of the twentieth century embedded in the vintage style that, along with Woodman, Bernstein revives and redesigns as representative of a specific political and aesthetic heritage. In Woodman’s case, this fading legacy corresponded to her creative youth in Rome at the Maldoror Gallery while, in Bernstein’s experience, it was prompted by the activism and artistic legacy of her New York-based family. In their different modes and times, fashion and rebellious self-portraits constituted the opposite poles of the creative impulse of both Francesca and Emma, the latter alternating the excess of her youth’s nightlife at the turn of the last century with a persistent, retrospective attention to a past nostalgically reimagined through travesty and flou atmospheres. Despite the chronological gap which separates Emma Bee’s art from Woodman’s, their common ground is represented by the dreamy lyricism of a retrospective gaze which Francesca achieved in her “Angels” series created in the political unrest of the Italian 1970s, when feminist and Civil Rights movements reached their peak, while Emma drew from her search for possible, alternative selves grounded into past utopias apparently dissolved in her commodified present. Therefore, her artistic project of imaginative self-disclosure and self-exposure conveys the melancholia created by that temporal chasm, which is typical of the poetics of desuetude studied by Francesco Orlando (1993) as especially resistant to consumerism in its transient evocation of an old-fashioned past.

Woodman and Bernstein explore the ability of those relics from the twentieth century vanishing scene to resist the intrinsic skepticism of fashion with its glamorous surfaces, in art projects that rely instead on a utopian and dreamy gaze that, in many ways, looks back to estranged and intentionally backdated Surrealist tokens and constructions, depending on the mysterious power of the *trouvaille* and on its ability to revive and relaunch inherited radical values apparently lost in the funhouse of media culture. In this respect, both photographers artistically linger in that flickering, temporal gap which kept Woodman’s creativity alive before her failed access to the commodified fashion studios in a New York scene which she had eventually hoped to join in 1981, as a professional photographer on her way back from Rome. Likewise,

Emma Bee's own difficulty in making of her memory-ridden feminist aesthetics a sufficient reservoir that would respond to the exterior surfaces of fashion photography testified, along with her suicide in her early twenties in December 2008, during an internship at the Guggenheim Museum in Venice, to the impossibility to turn the subversive, modernist past into marketable commodities. Deeply engaged, like her brother Felix, into their generational effort to preserve and come to terms with the imaginative and radical lifestyles absorbed from their parents' romantic protests in defense of equality and civil rights, Emma outgrew and, in many ways, re-launched the experimental and avant-garde art scene of the twentieth-century that she had not personally witnessed but deeply inherited. No less than Woodman, Emma Bee cherished those innovative and progressive values hardly applicable to the commodity culture which tendentially neutralised the lyricism of her retrospective gaze to the advantage of the polished but shallow voyeurism which prevailed in the early 1980s. The fashion industry and media culture which represented the main official remunerative destination for both Woodman's and Bernstein's visual talents especially engaged Emma Bee, in the critical terms addressed in her B.A. thesis on the aesthetics of fashion. In that brilliant thesis, Emma formulates a compelling reflection on photography as vehicle of non-expendable gender issues and freedom, which especially in recent years the histrionic, retro styles of the arty fashion design of Jean-Paul Gaultier, Vivienne Westwood, Dolce and Gabbana indeed recovered in order to challenge easily marketable prêt-à-porter conventions. By dwelling in the gap between real and ideal that Grundberg identifies with the *Crisis of the Real* reflected in the most creative and performative expressions of contemporary photography, Woodman and Bernstein overtly contested and opposed the realistic proclivity of their medium. Both of them attempted a deliberately theatrical and lyrical approach to the photographic reproduction of the 'real,' caught up as they were in the violent gap between their professional needs and their artistic family values, between their uncompromised search for expression and the rise of a new conservative era which tended to disperse the critical memory that brought back, as an ingrained, creative force, the radical ideologies which fed their enchanted and utopian vision.

While Woodman was privileged enough to witness as a curious and engaged spectator the rise of the students' movement in the Italian 1970s, Emma grew artistically in the nurturing shadow of her parents and grandparents: though intellectually and artistically engaged, Emma was unsupported by a comparable activism that would have helped her exorcise the pressures of the new era of trauma and the disenchantment of an

increasingly commodified art scene. Still, by nostalgically looking back at her grandmother's past, Emma never outgrew her desire to fully live up to her challenging present according to her inherited feminist and aesthetic values, in her constant effort to bridge past and present times in her photographic work, and to smooth, in her distinctive vintage taste, the polished and shallow surfaces of fashion shows which, at moments, she parodically mimicked in her regression to the comfort-zone of a lost, utopian New York nightlife. In her compelling confrontation between her skeptical present and her political and artistic legacy, she looked back at her grandmother's memories of the New York Pop underground. Thus, in her work, Emma revived Warhol's scene amusingly inhabited by her grand-mother as representative of an absolute freedom filled with acrylic colors and a glamour able to subvert the normative dressing codes of the 1950s in a queer taste for travesty and anachronistic combinations.

Emma's travesties and theatrical revivals of that discarded, late modern fashion—effectively stylised in Gus Van Sant's recent play on Warhol, *Trouble* (Teatro Argentina in Rome, October, 9, 2021),—relied on a vicarious memory and a nostalgic, lyrical gaze playfully embodied by her girlfriends' cult for vintage fashion. In their re-enactment of the utopian possibilities imbued in that apparently lost vintage spirit, those *Masquerades*, to remember the title of her first solo show organised at the Dova Temporary Gallery of the University of Chicago in 2010, became a source of absolute freedom hardly matched by the raving wildness of her youth's nightlife dominated by dependency and those extreme states of self-consumption typical of late adolescents "narcissistically addicted to excess under capitalism" (Felix Bernstein, "Forget O'Hara," 2014).





Emma Bee Bernstein, "Self-portrait with lights in mouth," photograph, c. 2006-2007  
© 2022 by the Estate of Emma Bee Bernstein.

In contrast to this hectic present, the rebellious past impersonated by Woodman's self-portraits dressed in her own old-fashioned clothes and apparels, nostalgically returns in the masquerades of Emma's girlfriends photographically reproduced through the oneiric flou which previously veiled Woodman's démodé self-portraits into a gauzy aura of longing and post-pubertal languor. In her vintage travesty, Emma's feminism warns against the reification of the commodified female body which lurks as an uncanny, disturbing threat in her old-fashioned revivalism, decidedly imbued with the utopian impulse that had previously animated Woodman's autobiographical self-portraits in the 1970s.

Compared to her gifted predecessor, in more recent times, Emma Bee absorbs Woodman's retro style to vocally counter the backlash of the feminist protest, in reportages which also led her from coast to coast in search of the residual feminist venues reached by car in her exemplary on-the-road journey across America. In order to pursue this retrospective tour into the political past of her mother and grand-mother, Emma's photography took the activist form of a feminist trip organised with her friend and cultural journalist Nona Aronowitz, the daughter of the green political scientist Stanley Aronowitz and of the equally missed *Village Voice* cultural critic and feminist writer Ellen Willis. Explicitly planned as a return on the trail of their mothers' feminist legacy across America, their journey generated the extraordinary documentation of feminist alternative styles and fashion of *Girl Drive: Criss-*

*Crossing America, Redefining Feminism* (2009). In this visual/verbal travelogue illustrated by Emma's photos (who also contributed to the volume with a number of intense narrative sketches), the two young New Yorkers searched for a possible expansion in their present of a feminist stance apparently doomed to vanish, managing to bridge geographical and ideological distances across feminist generations. As a result, their memorable collection of photos and travelogue identifies spatial and temporal continuities and discontinuities, being convinced, in an anticipation of the MeToo social movement against sexual abuse, of the importance of not retreating from women's issues. Long anticipating Mary Dore's and Nancy Kennedy's documentary on second-wave feminism *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* (International Film Circuit, 2014), —in which Nona's untamed cultural activism is also accounted, *Girl Drive* significantly discloses, in the form of a photographic reportage, a social terrain that at the time found little public coverage. Nona's and Emma Bee's exploration of their feminist legacy actually hinted to the construction of a second-wave feminist scene which, as they felt, persisted in vintage forms, though dramatically transformed by the visual seduction and triumphant amnesia brought about by media culture and Facebook's obsessive selfie-representations. Like Woodman's vintage self-portraits in black and white, Emma's visual/verbal creations in *Girl Drive* inhabit the neglected but dialectic space opened in the new millennium between their family legacy of convinced New York freedom fighters and the need to survive the pressure of the information flow and the noisy alarms which, with September 11<sup>th</sup>, inaugurated in 2001 the current era of trauma and of the enforced surveillance which instantly silenced their parents' collective aspiration to democracy and social progress.

Bernstein's photographic gaze interestingly turned away from the saturated public chronicles of the national disaster which indeed finds no trace in her photos. Instead, her art, like Woodman's, grew inward as if to delve into a better past and indulge in the imaginative possibilities opened by a decontextualised *démodé* environment reconstructed through her mother's and grandmother's past. Her languid, teenagers' portraits of old-fashioned post-pubertal models therefore appear mostly representative of her desire to inhabit another time, less projected into a future of disasters which could hardly progress after September 11<sup>th</sup>. On the contrary, Emma Bee was more interested in the evocative power of props and apparels that revived the vanishing, progressive scene of the New York underground and of the feminist movement which had colorfully animated those downtown streets in the previous millennium. In this keen spirit of revival, her moving and poignant

series *Masquerade: A Retrospective*, based on the eponymous exhibition documented in the related catalogue, adumbrates the initial patterns of the creation of a surrogate and not-yet-digital community of girlfriends, where she willingly included herself.

Thus, her masquerades are domestic tableaux often set in the unaltered, wallpapered interiors of her grandmother's home which offered her an eternal refuge into a blurred progressive memory to be preserved through an allegorical vision not only embedded in discarded objects but also photographically portrayed in temporarily abandoned affective and familiar spaces.



Emma Bee Bernstein, "Andrea in black dress in floor," photograph, 2007 © 2022 by the Estate of Emma Bee Bernstein.

Like the unrenovated Roman palaces which were occupied by the students' movement in the 1970s, the discarded clothes and objects pictured by both Francesca Woodman and Emma Bee Bernstein maintain an evocative power that mysteriously revives the magic aura of the discarded objects and places

investigated by Francesco Orlando. Similarly, the vintage clothes of Emma's grandmother, as relics from a rebellious past, resonate with an energy and an excitement unknown to Emma's post-traumatic generation, and magically become lyrical carriers of a radical imagination to be re-enacted and reconsidered. Eleanor Antin's performative masquerades and photographic tableaux led the way towards an allusive and evocative photography able to revive lost values through historical impersonations (Bettie-Sue Hertz, 2008). Likewise, Emma's "Masquerades" offer a compelling, conceptualist reflection on the social failure of the baby-boomers' ideology of youth's growth, pointing to the psychological complexity of present emergencies which, by repressing dissent, hardly preserve a sense of individual progress in a digital age in which age groups strangely coalesce as spatial and temporal notions come to overlap each other. From his own more theoretical perspective on time and memory, in his *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, Emma's brother, Felix Bernstein, reflects on the insistent autobiographical stance which dominated the first two decades of the new millennium, in the name of a "New Sincerity" and of a "Post-conceptual" integrity (2015) which can also speak for his sister's affective conflation of the different chronologies of her family history, in a visual adventure across time that constantly keeps at bay and exorcises the disenchanting, profit-making frame in which she operated as an artist. What is indeed at stake in Emma's parodic dialogue with a fashion world which remains an immediate yet remote background is the possibility to restage with her girlfriends her grandmother's Warholian, eccentric style, as a heart-felt homage to the excitement and transgressions of the New York nightlife which Sherrie Bernstein joyfully joined in the psychedelic scene of the Pop underground.

That nightlife bounces back twenty years later, compared to the joyless, destructive and toxic hangovers of a wild rave scene represented in an ironic counterpoint by Emma in the hectic, post-punk form of her montage of photo-slides in *Exquisite Fucking Boredom*, a posthumous exhibit curated by Phong Bui in 2012 at the Microscope Gallery. The excitement of the 1950s is brought back by the bizarre hats and glamorous vintage clothes hanging in the wardrobe of Emma's grandmother; recovered by her granddaughter to recurrect Warhol's lighthearted, fanciful celebration of the rising Pop underground, these props returned in the exquisitely démodé and languid interiors of the grandmother's house, clothed by pastel wall-paper, and safely sheltered from the terror which instantly silenced the loud, festive downtown scene of the New York underground.

With her camera, Emma reestablishes a number of lost connections inhabiting deserted rooms in which, like Woodman in her own scorched Roman interiors, she enigmatically and fugitively resituates and recognises herself in her antiquarian, misty fascination with vintage items which, like all the discarded objects hold, according to Orlando, the intense, imaginative power of reminiscence which adumbrates the lost lives of those who did not survive those evocative places.

This exhausted but unconsumed space of memory inspires Emma's dreamy autobiographical poses and those of her girlfriends, set in familiar interiors clothed in the same old-fashioned décor which also framed Woodman's nostalgic sensibility. Like Woodman's, her masquerades provide the ideal setting of a warm and soulful romanticism at odds with the meaningless horror vacui of commodity culture. The affective significance of the ready-made props and the vintage clothes selected from her grandma's wardrobe make of Emma's photography a retrospective scenario that her sisterly community of friends re-enact in an atemporal, feminist companionship in order to counter the dark nihilism of the alcoholic nightlife and techno clubs which also finds room in Bernstein's bleaker Generation X self-portraits. These unfettered self-representations from an amnesiac youth scene foregrounded by bold soundtracks display a girl's body framed in the conformism of a self-consuming, post-apocalyptic setting. The duplicity of Emma's vision, suspended between what she names a present "exquisite fucking boredom" and the lost adventurous past experienced by her parents, makes her inhabit at once, like Walter Benjamin's angel, two simultaneous worlds in which the autobiographical photographer, on the one hand, looks back to the vintage memory of an ingrained feminist legacy festively inspiring oppositional communities and, on the other, insistently claims a "post-conceptual," "new sincerity" and "confessional/affective/lyrical" needs suffocated by the diffused, blinding obsession with fashion typical of the current culture of selfies and vain self-exposure (Felix Bernstein, 2014). Such an oscillation between the shallow excess of the contemporary youth culture and the evocation of a family background providing solace and social meanings makes of Emma Bee's art a significant, intergenerational variation on the past and present New York underground which proverbially never die. Emma's art challenges fashion standards incompatible with her artistic free-style which anticipates the Me-Too and the body positive movements to come.



Emma Bee Bernstein, “Jill lying down at water’s edge,” photograph, 2005 © 2022 by the Estate of Emma Bee Bernstein

What lies in the gap between her deep vintage memories and the artificial fetishisation of fashion is the photographer’s attempt to merge distant temporal levels, in a recurrent self-stylisation enacted earlier by Woodman in the torpor of another countercultural artistic initiation before her confrontation with the glossy surfaces of the fashion industry which failed to assimilate her independent talent on her way back from Rome. By comparison, Emma Bee Bernstein’s vintage aesthetic took an inverted path: from the American interiors filled with memories of her family’s resistant past to the art venue in Venice where her life and art career ended, Emma defined another transatlantic self-portrait in transition, in a performative autobiographical style that, like Francesca Woodman’s, boldly played with the many ironies and refractions produced by an estranged sense of time and space exploring, through the vantage point of a progressive heritage, the fake seduction of the fashion industry as a parodic object of deconstruction.



Francesca Woodman. From *Polka Dots*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. 5 1/8 x 5 1/8 in. Gelatin silver print. © Woodman Family Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The significance of their art dwells in the gap between utopian past and disenchanted present, between real and ideal, interrogating the social and creative possibilities of a rebellious past which collapses and fades in the traumatic present, yet produces a safe imaginative interval, a niche of self-reflection that merges a distinctive radical heritage with a present experience of distress and dispersal. This duplicity and ambivalence is well expressed in *Emma's Dilemma*, the title aptly chosen by Henry Hills for his 2012 experimental movie about Emma Bee Bernstein, perfectly caught by the filmmaker in her candid interrogations as a girl ill at ease with a growth that conventionally imposes a step away from her family's values toward a prospective present which for Emma historically coincided with a

disintegrating dystopia of trauma and terror. In this dilapidated context, Emma's feminism persists as a masqueraded but firm regression to the values of equality of her foremothers, demonstrating, along with Woodman, that time never necessarily progresses, especially when a heroic past hardly matches the digital restlessness of a new generation obsessed by self-representation and seduced by beauty standards that are politically indifferent and mostly aimed to a fashion-conscious commodification and self-consumption. As these deceptive simulacra dominated the youth communities in the new millennium, imposing distorted beauty standards and prescriptions, Emma lucidly realised that fashion could not be merely rejected but rather questioned in its conventions and stereotypes, by embracing a girlhood ready to claim a multiplicity of historically-aware selves. This malleable sincerity and mutability of approach in her self-exploratory use of the camera makes her photographic gaze partake of Woodman's vintage taste. It can be argued that in their intergenerational search for meaning and identity and through a feminist autobiographical stance, both of them found in their personal focus a way of transcending time in an attempt to preserve and protect the countermemory of utopian practices against the disciplinary and dispersive pressures of their times. Their artistic masquerades consciously embody a variety of transient selves revealing the retrospective power of reminiscence against the pressures of voyeurism and consumption ingrained in the rhetoric of digital communication and social media. Against the multiplicity of sketchy self-depiction and the quotidian exposure that is enforced on young adults, the nostalgic fashion of Francesca's and Emma's photographic self-portraits exorcises that Orwellian consuming gaze, advocating a time lapse, an interval of reflection and awareness where the aspiration to a creative community of peers, impermeable to reified and consuming impulses, may come true. The photographic entries of Emma's intimate visual diary in the making consciously reject fashion poses engineered in dazzling studios and in a vastly commodified public sphere, in order to return to familiar interiors where figments of feminist memory can still be possible (Caws, 2019). She is thus gesturing toward a personal redefinition of aesthetic canons able to resist reification and the distance imposed by the grinding industry of mainstream fashion and self-exposure. In this respect, it is not surprising that Woodman and Bernstein do not privilege the magnified glass of hi-fi resolution but rather adopt a *démodé* aesthetics in whose auratic halo they protect themselves from the risks of amplification implicit in the incessant, autobiographical spectacle of social media. Against insistent demands for growth and progress, Their pervasive memory and



vintage relics become an ultimate shield from the contingencies and the imperatives of self-management.

In *Art and Photography*, David Company stresses the value of photography as a retrospective producer of biographical traces (89,98) which narratively document an existence, letting different temporal levels overlap in a representation suspended between facts and fiction, and beyond any predictable expectations. The inventive and retrospective strata of Francesca Woodman's and Emma Bee's self-portraits lies exactly in their being simultaneously inside and outside their own selves as critical reporters of a complex teenage world which diverts the voyeuristic attention from a girl's body to its performative possibilities of self-expression. Long before Trisha Low's satiric poetics of selfie (Low in Broqua et al. 2020, 105-25), Emma Bee, like Sophie Calle, intentionally chose to perform her doubts and vulnerabilities by placing herself in front of the camera and enacting a potential form of self-consumption independently from her intentions, in reaction to the reifying and commodified conditions of glossy self-modelling in mainstream digital communication. In this way, it can be argued that she provides a lyrical, audacious portfolio of auto-da-fé: her pictures provoke and challenge, but also reject the voyeur's gaze through a feminist legacy which resonates across generations, finding solace in her family's political and aesthetic counter-memory.

Emma Bee's ability to turn her self-portraits into a vintage show is a political act resistant to consumption, responding to her own apparent fascination with fashion photography and its empty, polished surfaces of pure vanity. Through the interiors of her grandmother's home, she is redefining a group autobiography that fills the gaps across feminist generations. Her art echoes a political history that prevents her from becoming complicit with a mass culture that enthralls youth in its libidinal media flow. By creating an affective community with her family and peers, Emma relies upon an emotionally significant past and upon a tradition inherited along with her grandmother's vintage clothes. They become her favorite tool to revive, in a transfixing mixture of candor and glamour, the underground charm of the late 1950s, in a playful show of *d'antan* fashion in counterpoint to the punk allure of pop icons like Courtney Love and Chloë Sevigny. Suspended between memory and self-awareness, Emma Bee's vintage masquerades transcend, like Woodman's Roman self-portraits and Antin's historical travesties, the realistic proclivities of her medium and create domestic tableaux that resist the high resolution and color correction of technically impeccable art studios. The wallpapered domestic interiors full of relics from the pop underground

become the natural set for her travesties, demonstrating the deep existential engagement of her photography, and her reflection on time and history as an antidote to the tedium and amnesia of media culture. In this downtown location, Emma resituates her New York friends and relatives in an old-fashioned space of the mind that parallels in its architectonic decay Woodman's favourite setting, the dilapidated historic buildings that were occupied by students in Rome in the 1970s.

Nostalgia, languor and regret give a special aura to this evoked past that is reenacted in disorderly rooms once filled with friends not too distant in time from Robert Frank's informal reportage on Beat lifestyles in *The Americans* (1958). Before being revived by Emma Bee's camera, the existential uncertainty and the exhausted relations of the New York Underground reappeared in the punk era in Nan Goldin's photographic sexual psychodrama from the Lower East Side visually accounted for in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986). Emma Bee's domestic "Masquerades" add new interior and microsocial contexts to the history of the downtown New York culture gathered in the sequence of psychedelic slides of *Exquisite Fucking Boredom*, assembled in the gritty tones of Goldin's Polaroids. In the cosy ambiances of her domesticity, Emma Bee redefines the canon of female beauty by appropriating her grandmother's nonconformist style based on vestimentary codes and venues representative of that late avant-garde. Amidst her family legacy and the lively turbulences of her wayward adolescence, that underground experience kept moving Emma's creative impulse along the feminist legacy which also inspired her *on the road* trip across the country, to document what was left of the American feminist activism in women's bookstores, rock and *burlesque* venues located deep into rural areas and in city margins. Emma's audacious 'intimate diaries' nurtured by the feminist and autobiographical performances of the 1970s maintain elements of guerilla action which haunt the photographer herself, in a mixture of situationism and private narrative that also recalls the work of Sophie Calle. Like Emma, the French photographer is both the object and the subject of her photographic art which documents her life, becoming both the focus and the astonished voyeuse of her transformations. In *Leviathan* (1992), Paul Auster portrayed Sophie Calle as Maria, a performance artist who made a critical use of the self through photography. And Emma Bee partakes of this performative practice, deeply mourned in another Auster's novel *Sunset Park* (2010) in which a whole chapter is dedicated to a memorial by the Brooklyn intellectual community for the young, talented artist.

In her oscillation between old and new, Emma captured the melancholy and stamina of her teenage friends, creating unexpected connections across time and generations, between their gritty nightlife and their parodic fashion shows, in intense, unpolished pictures which absorb all the anticonformism of feminist cultures in a contemporary, juvenile redefinition of the New York underground. Her vintage spirit engaged her disenchanted adolescence with a Surrealist fascination with found objects, in the sensual allegorisation of a Generation X eager to recover the domestic memories and the lyricised traces of a disbanded but enduring counterculture. As she candidly explored the excess and untamed eccentricity of her age group, her masquerades sought an aesthetic integrity to be preserved across time and places: Emma Bee expressed the persisting and juvenile utopian spirit of what Marjorie Perloff would define as “a radical artifice” (1991), that is a sincere assimilation of radical legacies that still provide an antidote to the amnesia of the millennium of trauma and terror.

In the parodic fashion of her old-fashioned girlhood, the young photographer gains a critical position by appropriating vestimentary relics and inspecting ruins from the Pop underground, making of her friends the ultimate Vestal Virgins of her exquisite desuetude. By reviving that radical memory, those ‘old-fashioned’ girls take pre-Raffaelite poses, expressing a sensuality independent from the standards of commodified beauty, by wearing discarded nightgowns and evening dresses that once belonged to Emma’s grand-mother who, as mentioned earlier, was a Pop muse in the 1950s. Among punk gestures and vintage taste, Emma Bee provides what Grundberg calls “denaturalized representation“ (105) which, by recycling vintage clothes and found objects, looks back to the past in an attempt to conceive a sustainable future.

The rough immediacy of Emma’s grunge and post-punk style casually dismissed the polished surfaces of mainstream fashion shows: by emphasising personal oddities and physical imperfections, she never meant to correct the blurred *flou* adopted by Richard Avedon in order to attribute to female adolescents the eternal and ethereal features of flawless nymphs ready to be consumed. Even though her post-feminist photography never reaches the subversive energy of the Pussy Riots and the abrasive intimacy of Nan Goldin’s slideshows recently documented by Laura Poitras (2022), in her nostalgia for neglected items and unrenovated interiors, Emma Bee adapts their droopy décor to a body art filled with the anxieties and the retrospective pleasures of Woodman’s fugitive self-portraits. No wonder that in his study of discarded objects, Francesco Orlando included inhabited and deserted spaces like the

Roman rickety lofts that were the perfect set for Woodman's reimagining of herself through her *rétro* sensibility. As Susan Sontag wrote in *On Photography*, "Travelling between degraded and glamorous realities is part of the very momentum of the photographic enterprise" (1977, 58); Emma Bee's combining art and glamour successfully succeeds in conjoining the sincere rebellion of her youth and her revolutionary legacy which is a feature of downtown New York culture, despite the destructive impact of gentrification and of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Her aesthetic vision is clearly uttered and admirably synthesised in "Emma Portrait on Herring Cove beach," a short manifesto by the young artist recorded by her father, the poet Charles Bernstein, on a windy morning spent on the Provincetown beach, in which Emma theorises with prodigious lucidity her understanding of commodified fashion; in a lyrical confusion of glamour and personal styles, Emma suggests, art keeps revealing intimate qualities that no fashion dares imitate: "Fashion and art are not arch opposites," she says, "Fashion has always coexisted with art. Fashion represents surface values that translate something of the interior. Art is purely the interior made exterior. Fashion is ok in presenting surface things: that's its purpose."<sup>3</sup>

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This article is based on the final paper submitted for Stefano Chiodi's Photography class which I attended as a student of the MA Programme of DAMS at the University of Roma<sup>3</sup>. It originally appeared in Italian and in that initial version in an early blog of the artist and scholar Felix Bernstein. I thank him, the Bernstein family, and the Woodman Family Foundation for their generosity and the permission to reproduce the photos by Emma Bee Bernstein and Francesca Woodman which appear in this text.*

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<sup>1</sup> Some Disordered Interior Geometries" is a collage artwork assembled by the artist in an old copybook found at the Maldoror antique bookstore in Rome.

<sup>2</sup> See *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*. Afterward by George Woodman. D.A.P., 2011.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mV3M447XQ14>

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