

## **Selective Affinities**

by Victor Margolin

Human beings are complicated creatures. We have bodies that are discreet, bounded, and relatively fixed in their identity, yet yoked inextricably to them are inner selves that are amorphous, fluid, and frequently uncertain of their limits. Negotiating between the two is a difficult task. Masks, costumes, fashion, and even surgery are means by which we attempt to transform the truculent materiality of the body. But the more fluid our inner beings and the more intense our quest to see ourself in multiple guises, the more frustrating it is to drag our bodies along behind.

Children explore the boundary between the inner self and the body by dressing up. Putting on her mother's dresses, jewelry, and makeup allows a girl to imagine herself as an adult. The belief that she can take on the attributes of an older person, perhaps one recognized for her allure or charm, is a form of empowerment for a young girl who assumes that the fluidity of her inner desires can actually alter her identity. Generally, children dress up within conventional norms. They emulate movie stars, soldiers, policemen, or rock musicians. But dressing up can be transgressive when children put on the clothing of the other sex or garb themselves as antisocial beings.

Through the work of Cindy Sherman, Joel Peter Witkin, and other photographers for whom dressing up is central to their practice, we have come to recognize theatricality as a distinct genre of contemporary photography. However, this form of representation is still little understood. What is particularly unresolved is whether to read theatrical photographs as representations of artifice in which the identity of the performer disappears behind the facade of a theatrical tableaux or whether to see the photograph as a self-representation that reveals to us the photographer's negotiation between a fluid inner self and the limitations of the body. In the first instance, the performer is clearly separated from the tableaux, concealed, as it were, behind it; in the second, he or she is part of the tableaux, which becomes a mirror to disclose an unforeseen aspect of the artist's identity.

For Susan Sensemann, photography is an act of disclosure rather than concealment. Her pictures summon references to disguise, dressing up, and masking, but she does not try to pass as a garden gnome or a marble bust. Instead, she wants to engage with those images, to explore them as signs of self. What she brings to this project is her own countenance. We see her face in different moods and positions; eyes open and eyes closed, full face or profile. Each

example reveals a distinct aspect of her being and as Alexander Rodchenko argued in his essay against the photographic portrait and in favor of the snap-shot, we know someone better through multiple representations than through a single composite image.

The photographs which Sensemann superimposes on her face were all taken by her during twenty five years of travels. She is captivated by the most diverse subjects – prickly cacti and seaweed, sculpted Thai vegetables, marble busts of historic figures, Roman wall murals, a statue of the Buddha, delicate lace, and a fiercely male countenance of Bacchus on an Italian serving plate. In some of these pictures, we see the shape of her face particularly clearly; in others, the overlay of the joined image is so seamless that it appears to be a new skin with its own contours.

The mood of these photographs is rich and sensuous. Color, texture, and shape reach into the chasms of our psyches to evoke primal responses. There is much at stake in these pictures. They are intended to be deeply felt rather than surveyed in a shallow manner. For they are less about seeing than being. They probe into that realm of the imagination where each of us investigates the boundaries of our own identity. What would it be like to be a plant? Or a garden gnome, or someone of the other sex? This can be transgressive territory if we attempt to act it out in social situations. But art allows the freedom to ignore conventions.

These photographs of Susan Sensemann's are liberating both for her and us. She courageously exposes the trajectory of her own psyche as it seeks out its counterparts in the material world. Some of these pictures strike us with particular force because of the uncanny alignments of one image with another. Consider, in particular, the plate with the head of Bacchus on it. Instead of donning the head as a mask, Sensemann actually unites her face with it so that the two affect each other reciprocally. We not only see the artist as an intensely masculine Bacchus but we also encounter Bacchus with a feminine side. The same might be said of the photograph of a serene Buddha, which she maps onto her face. Whereas a mask by itself is a weak object until animated by a living being, the images of Bacchus and Buddha are powerful in their own right and the artist's relation to them becomes an exchange of qualities rather than the inhabiting of an otherwise inanimate object.

Sensemann creates her pictures through photomontage. She aligns one image with another, working with micro measurements of contiguity. Her eye is as sure as that of John Heartfield or Hannah Hoch, an artist she greatly admires and her pictures are no less memorable than Hoch's, particularly those of the German artist's later ethnography series. Hoch, however, relied on photographs extracted from the mass media to compose her private visions while Sensemann works exclusively with pictures she has taken herself.

Her expansive imagination far outstrips the possibility of using her own body as the locus of its revelation. She needs the more ethereal realm of photography to convey the fervent and ongoing impulse of her inner self to seek aspects of its identity in the world around her. As viewers, we are invited to share that adventure and to contemplate how we ourselves might look as a Roman wall, a tangle of seaweed, or a garden gnome.

Copyright © 2001 Victor Margolin. All rights reserved.  
From a catalog of photographs by Susan Sensemann.