

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: RINEKE DIJKSTRA AND CONTEMPORARY
SUBJECTIVITY

Jennifer Eileen Quick, Master of Arts, 2008

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In this thesis, I argue that the work of contemporary Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra (b. 1959) complicates how we understand subjectivity, or the way that humans come into being and exist in the world, by both reinforcing and countering the idea that the subject is a product of social relations. Dijkstra's large-scale photographs of individuals propose a dialectical subject who is constituted both by his or her own agency as well as within exterior social circumstances. This is especially significant in light of the fact that influential scholarship on contemporary art has largely been dominated by the construct of the subject as socially determined. The theory of subjectivity represented in Dijkstra's photographs therefore demonstrates a certain ambivalence that is descriptive of contemporary subjectivity. As such, Dijkstra's photographs offer a fresh take on how we conceive of subjectivity today.

RINEKE DIJKSTRA AND CONTEMPORARY SUBJECTIVITY

by

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Introduction: Situating Contemporary Subjectivity

The young woman in Rineke Dijkstra's *Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26, 1992* (fig. 1) is sometimes referred to as the "Polish Venus" because of her resemblance to the mythological goddess in Botticelli's canonical work (fig. 1).¹ Yet it is more accurate to say that she both suggests and deflects this comparison. She is at once graceful, possessing a nascent beauty, and timid, exhibiting signs of awkwardness and uncertainty as she poses for the camera. Her head is tilted to the side almost inquisitively, and she holds her arms at her sides, with her left hand hovering at her thigh, as if she is unsure of where to place it. She stands, framed by the sea and sky in the background, with her weight on her right leg and her torso curved in a modified *contrapposto*, the folds in her lime green bathing vaguely reminiscent of classical drapery. Yet her left leg is bent just slightly too much to give her form the balance of perfect *contrapposto*. Sand is stuck to her feet, so that they blend in with the shore, and the lower portion of her bathing suit is wet, evidence she was wading in the ocean shortly before Dijkstra took the photograph. Her long arms, gangly legs, and flat chest are physical signs that though she is approaching adulthood, she is still partly a child. The subtle details of the portrait – the folding of her swimsuit at her waist, her sandy feet, the unruly tendrils of hair – embody her status as in between life stages as well her uncertainty of how to present herself before the camera.

¹ Hripsimé Visser, Curator of Photography at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and organizer of the exhibition *Rineke Dijkstra* (Stedelijk Museum, November 4, 2005 – February 26, 2006) uses this term in her essay "The soldier, the disco girl, the mother and the Polish Venus," in Hripsimé Visser, ed. *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2004), 7 – 14. The exhibition, one of Dijkstra's largest to date, also traveled to the Jeu de Paume, Paris (December 14, 2004 – February 28, 2005), Fotomuseum Winterthur (March 12 – May 22, 2005) and the Fundació La Caixa d'Estalvis i Pensions de Barcelona (June 9 – August 21, 2005). Andy Grundberg also compares the young woman to Botticelli's Venus; see Andy Grundberg, "Out of the Blue," *Artforum* 35 (May 1997): 84 – 87.

The *Kolobrzeg* photograph, which focuses on an individual in a liminal state, is characteristic of Dijkstra's practice. In this thesis, I argue that Dijkstra's work complicates how we understand subjectivity, or the way that humans come into being and exist in the world, by both reinforcing and countering the idea that the subject is a product of social relations. Dijkstra's large-scale photographs of individuals and small groups of people propose a dialectical subject, an individual who is constituted both by his or her own agency as well as within exterior social circumstances. Subjectivity is shown to be a process, a complex and unstable negotiation between the individual and society. The theory of subjectivity represented in Dijkstra's photographs therefore demonstrates a certain ambivalence that is descriptive of contemporary subjectivity. As such, her work offers a fresh take on how we understand subjectivity today.

Dijkstra, a Dutch photographer who has gained notoriety in the art world in the past decade, was born in 1959 in Sittard, the Netherlands. She studied art at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, and her first assignments as professional photographer were commissions for formal portraits of businessmen.² In the early 1990s, she began to pursue her own independent practice. Dijkstra's straightforward, large-scale chromogenic images depict people who are engaged in or just emerging from moments of transition: slightly awkward adolescents standing on beaches, young women dressed up for a night out, and mothers photographed very shortly after giving birth (figs. 1, 2, and 3). In general, the current literature on Dijkstra's work characterizes her photographs in terms of awkwardness, liminality, and transition. As Michael Kimmelman has noted in

² Dijkstra explains her earlier work in Claire Bishop, "Rineke Dijkstra: The Naked Immediacy of Photography," *Flash Art* (November – December 1998): 86 – 89.

a review of Dijkstra's work, "her subject is life in transition...passages through which people become themselves and in the process reveal themselves."³ Because Dijkstra prefers to allow her subjects a degree of freedom in how they pose, although she is certainly somewhat involved with the positioning of her subjects, the young men and women in her images are shown to be caught up in the paradox of consciously trying to pose naturally.⁴ Dijkstra's photographic strategies, therefore, work to reveal aspects of her subjects that might otherwise remain concealed. As Claire Bishop notes, Dijkstra's photographs possess "a naked immediacy."⁵ Dijkstra's technique and the way in which she represents her subjects is considered to be a blend of the straightforward realist aesthetic of *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography as well as the visual rhetoric of New York School photographers, most notably Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus.⁶ As Katy Siegel notes in her essay "Real People," included in the catalogue of an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Dijkstra's photographs combine Sander's use of photography to render subjects as emblems of social class as well as Arbus's "cruel" tendency to create portraits of awkward or out-of-place subjects.⁷ Siegel argues that in Dijkstra's photographs, "the effort of trying to consciously 'be yourself' lends to another kind of truth-telling: facts slip from behind representation, whether that truth be

³ Michael Kimmelman, "Art in Review: Rineke Dijkstra," *The New York Times*, September 26, 2003.

⁴ Dijkstra, as the photographer, does exhibit a degree of control over how her subjects pose. In an interview with Claire Bishop, Dijkstra notes the tension in her work between a staging the photographs and capturing a natural, unposed moment. She does not want her subjects to pose and smile as one does for a studio portrait, and explains to them that she wants to "make a natural portrait." Dijkstra also notes that she does not give many directions and that "people choose their own pose." See Claire Bishop, "Rineke Dijkstra: The Naked Immediacy of Photography," 86 – 89.

⁵ Claire Bishop, "Rineke Dijkstra: The Naked Immediacy of Photography."

⁶ Dijkstra notes Avedon and Arbus as influences in Anne-Celine Jaeger, "A Conversation with Rineke Dijkstra," 136 – 145, in *Image Makers, Image Takers* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 144, as well as in Claire Bishop, "Rineke Dijkstra: The Naked Immediacy of Photography."

⁷ Katy Siegel, "Real People," in *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*, ed. Katy Siegel, 8 – 19 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art/ Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001), 8 – 10, 13.

sociological (like that of Sander) or psychological (like that of Arbus).”⁸ The terms “sociological” and “psychological” point to the dialectical nature of subjectivity in Dijkstra’s work. In Dijkstra’s photographs, subjectivity is shown to be the unstable and unpredictable process of negotiating the individual and the social.

One of my overarching concerns in this thesis, then, is how theories of subjectivity shape the interpretation of works of art and how works of art propose certain theories of subjectivity. As I have stated above, I understand subjectivity in the most general sense to refer to how and on what terms we, as human beings, come into being and exist in the world. The principal questions that I ask of Dijkstra’s work are as follows: Who are the subjects of the photographs? What kind of subject does the work propose? How do the photographs propose that the subject comes into being? In my analysis of Dijkstra’s work, I focus specifically on contemporary theories of subjectivity that understand the subject to be shaped and even determined by social conditions. Some of the most influential contemporary cultural critics and philosophers, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida, have argued for a subject constituted along these lines. Michel Foucault, for example, conceived of the subject as a product of discourse formations, or epistemes. His theory of subjectivity is founded upon the notion that the subject is not an autonomous, self-determined and therefore self-constitutive being, but rather that the subject comes into being as a result of his interaction with governments, institutions, laws, regulations, and other systems that structure his particular historical

⁸ Ibid, 12.

episteme.⁹ In fact, the shift that Foucault traces from the self-reflexive / self-constitutive subject to the socially-determined subject is one way to conceive of the broader shift from modernism to postmodernism.¹⁰

My overarching concern in this thesis is the influence of the construct of the socially-determined subject, as exemplified by Foucault, to cite only one example, on the historicization of contemporary art and especially on art that is considered to be “postmodern.” Though this line of inquiry could take many directions, I want to focus briefly on the debate in the 1960s and beyond concerning Minimalist sculpture. In established art-historical accounts, Minimalism is seen to propose a specific theory of subjectivity, in that it initiated a fundamental shift concerning the location and nature of meaning and by extension the nature of the subject. As Hal Foster argues in his important essay “The Crux of Minimalism” (1996), Minimalism announces “a new interest in the body” and in the “presence of objects,” leading to a “fundamental reorientation” of the subject.¹¹ Foster writes:

⁹ In his earlier work in particular, such as *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault argues that the subject is formed by discourse and social systems, rather than possessing an eternal essence or core self that exists before socialization. Foucault expounds upon this idea in his essay “What is an Author?” (1969), in which he argues that the author, and the subject, are discursive constructs. In regard to the subject, Foucault argues that the following questions should structure inquiries of subjectivity: “How and under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules?” The questions are definitive of Foucault’s theory of subjectivity. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, first published in 1969, Foucault makes explicit his archaeological methodology, the premise of which is that historical epistemes are governed by certain rules that determine the boundaries of thought for a particular period. See Michel Foucault, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972). “What is an Author” is included in the volume *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 141 – 160.

¹⁰ For an overview of theories of subjectivity from the ancient world to the present, and for more on the shift from the modernist to the postmodernist subject, see Robert M. Stroizer, *Subjectivity, and Identity: Historical Constructions of Subject and Self* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Hal Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism,” 35 – 69, in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 38, 43. In this essay, Foster is also responding to earlier scholars who have argued for a similar

In short, Minimalist sculpture no longer stands apart, on a pedestal or as pure art, but is repositioned among objects and redefined in terms of place. In this transformation the viewer, refused the safe, sovereign space of formal art, is cast back onto the here and now; and rather than scan the surface of a work for a topographical mapping of the properties of its medium, he or she is prompted to explore the perceptual consequences of a particular intervention in a given site. This is the fundamental reorientation that Minimalism inaugurates...the stake of minimalism is the nature of meaning, and of the status of the subject, both of which are held to be public, not private, produced in a physical interface with the actual world, not in the mental space of idealist conception.¹²

In Foster's view, the subject that Minimalism proposes is conditional, materialist, and formed within the public sphere, "or the physical interface with the actual world." The theory of subjectivity that Minimalism counters, conceives of the subject as transcendent, stable (in that they are not altered by the contingencies of the mundane world), and a product of "the mental space of idealist conception." Foster borrows some of these terms from Michael Fried, undoubtedly the most prominent, and the most insightful, critic of Minimalism. In his seminal essay "Art and Objecthood," (1967), which Foster cites in "The Crux of Minimalism," Fried condemns Minimalism as a negation of art itself. In Fried's view, Minimalism, which focuses the viewer on the circumstances of the here and now, embodies a sense of durational, mundane time.¹³ This counters Fried's notion that

definition of subjectivity. For example, Foster specifically cites Rosalind Krauss' "The Double Negative: A New Syntax for Sculpture," from Krauss' *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1977), 243 – 288. In this chapter, Krauss argues that the development of modernist sculpture since Rodin is characterized by a shift from interiority to exteriority and from "core" to surface. For Krauss, the orientation of Minimalist sculpture and Earthworks, with its emphasis on exterior surface and repetition, amounts to a view of subjectivity as constituted within the public sphere, so that the subject can only know himself through concrete, bodily, external experience and consequently in relation to another. Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* embodies this view of subjectivity, since it requires that the viewer physically occupy the space, and know it through phenomenological experience, to fully apprehend it. The work functions, in Krauss' words, as a "metaphor for the self as it is known through its appearance to another" (280). Foster is clearly indebted to Krauss, though he seeks to distance himself from what he sees a rigid structuralist conception of sculpture as either "materialist" or "idealist," noting that this very opposition is in itself representative of idealist thinking. See Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," fn 12, 243.

¹² *Ibid*, 38 – 40.

¹³ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, 116 – 147 (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995). "Art and Objecthood" was originally published in *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 12-23. For more on the materialist v. the idealist subject, see the exchange

the purpose of art is to exhibit “presentness,” or a suspension of real time, that allows the viewer to rise above, as it were, material circumstances. Minimalism, in its insistence upon the imminent present, instead embodies a kind of “presence” that is akin to that of another human being. This emphatic sense of presence and focus on the mundane and the conditional, Fried argues, keeps the viewer anchored in the here and now and as such makes Minimalism closer to the realm of theatre than the sphere of art. Fried’s critique of Minimalism, therefore, is largely based upon its refusal of a transcendent and autonomous subject.

The debates on Minimalism, which unfold in the writings of numerous other artists, critics, and art historians, underscore what is at stake in contemporary debates concerning postmodern art and subjectivity. Significantly, Foster and Fried agree upon the fact that Minimalism proposes a subject who is caught up within material, present circumstances, though they clearly disagree on the implications of this theory of subjectivity. It is the materialist and conditional subject that Foster describes, rather than Fried’s idealist and transcendent subject, that has been the most influential in the practice and interpretation of postmodern art. The materialist and conditional subject is considered to be definitive of the shift from modern to postmodern art. As Foster, borrowing Fried’s language, writes, the goals of modernist art are to “compel conviction” and to “seek the essential,” while postmodernist art seeks to “cast doubt” and to “reveal the conditional.”¹⁴ Foster

between Michael Fried and T.J. Clark, reproduced in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 2nd ed., ed. Francis Francina, 71 – 86 (London, New York: Routledge, 2000). Clark’s essay “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art” elicited an impassioned response from Fried, to which Clark responded in a directed letter. The dialogue between Clark and Fried elucidates the nature and implications of both a materialist and an idealist conception of the subject. See Michael Fried, “How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark,” 87 – 101, and T.J. Clark, “Arguments About Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried,” 102 – 109.

¹⁴ 58.

argues that the materialist conception of subjectivity that Minimalism helped to open up is the beginning of the genealogy of postmodern practice, which he traces from Minimalism to Conceptual, feminist, performance art, and so on.¹⁵ Within these practices, there is an emphasis on perception, the body, and the conditions of viewership, thus locating the meaning of the work in the subject themselves and reinforcing a theory of the subject as partially, and even entirely, socially determined.

The contention that the socially-determined or “conditional” subject is definitive of postmodern practice and of the postmodern subject as such, however compelling, has limited the exploration alternative, and perhaps more compelling, theories of subjectivity. Now, almost ten years into the twenty-first century, it is time to reexamine this conception of contemporary subjectivity. Dijkstra’s work, I argue, expands the terms in which we conceive of contemporary subjectivity, showing the subject to be both self – determined and socially determined, or to borrow Foster’s terms, formed within both the private and public spheres. In other words, the subjects in Dijkstra’s work are shown to negotiate a dialectic of the individual and the social, demonstrating that subjectivity itself is ultimately unstable and impossible to define. Because they are situated somewhere in between the opposing terms with which Fried and Foster describe subjectivity, Dijkstra’s photographs present a more nuanced definition of subjectivity, one that shows that we come to exist as subjects both through our own agency and through the influence of social conditions. This decidedly ambivalent view of subjectivity is, in my view, more descriptive of the complexities and ambiguities of selfhood. It also allows us to break away from the rigid dichotomies of subjectivity as entirely self-determined or entirely

¹⁵ Ibid, 58.

socially determined, private or public, and idealist or materialist. Dijkstra's work therefore represents a critical intervention into the discourse on subjectivity as it has directed the interpretation and historicization of contemporary art. Her photographs allow for a questioning and interrogation of which theories of subjectivity seem most compelling for our own historical moment.

Though subjectivity is the main focus of my thesis, identity is by implication an important term in my consideration Dijkstra's work. Though these two terms overlap, and are often used interchangeably, identity more frequently refers to the specific self-conception of an individual or group, whereas subjectivity is a broader term, a theorization of how humans as such come into being. In other words, the construction of identity is a condition of subjectivity. As Richard Meyer has noted, contemporary usage of the word "suggests that individuals recognize themselves through a shared condition or quality, be it one of race, religion, gender, sexuality, class, or cultural origin."¹⁶ By extension, then, identity also connotes a sense of difference, a way in which individuals distinguish themselves from others. Meyer, citing historian Philip Gleason, points out that the social and political upheavals of the 1960s contributed to the idea that identity designates a "shared sense of difference from, and often opposition to, the dominant culture."¹⁷ In contemporary scholarship on the topic of identity, scholars often conceive of identity in terms of difference, focusing on categories such as feminine identity, black identity, or queer identity. However, as Meyer reminds us, the term first became popular in the 1950s. It was used in the social sciences to speak of the self as an existential

¹⁶ Richard Meyer, "Identity," in Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 345.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 345

category, when it was often used to describe an individual's "search for identity" or "identity crisis."¹⁸ Dijkstra's photographs, as I will argue below, reinforce the instability of identity as an existential category. Therefore, the photographs show how and on what terms the subject comes into being, while also demonstrating the instability of identity, or the specific construction of the self that is particular to every individual. The subjects of Dijkstra's photographs are for the most part adolescents, caught somewhere in between childhood and adulthood and in the process of negotiating their identities. Adults rarely appear in Dijkstra's oeuvre, though there are a few exceptions, such as Dijkstra's photographs of mothers after giving birth (fig. 3). Even in these cases, the subjects are in moments of transition or in liminal stages, which suggests that their identity is neither coherent nor static. Dijkstra's work reminds us that identity is cannot be simply and easily communicated in visual form. Meyer, speaking specifically on the identity of the artist, writes:

If, as Freud contends, the individual subject is never self-transparent, so the work never captures or contains the identity of its maker. Artists should not be construed, therefore, as the transcribers of their own identities into plastic form, as though the terms of selfhood were clear, consciously understood, and easily available to them for illustration, as though the psychic, social, and historical conditions of identity were transparent to them, or for that matter to us.¹⁹

Meyer's argument also applies to the identity of the subject represented in the work. The straightforward realism of Dijkstra's photographs, and the way that they play upon the conventions of portraiture, makes it seem as if they counter Meyer's remarks, in that the images seem both literally and figuratively transparent and the subjects' identities easily readable. In this way, Dijkstra's work may seem to propose coherent subjects whose identities are clearly embodied in the photographs. However, as Dijkstra's work

¹⁸ Ibid, 345.

¹⁹ Ibid, 348.

demonstrates, realism as such cannot necessarily be equated with a faith in the transparency of photography or an overt positivism. Ultimately, Dijkstra's photographs, which invite speculations as to the subject's identity, but never reveal it fully, suggest the fundamental ambiguity of the self.

Working from the premises outlined above, I aim to define and explicate the theory of subjectivity at work in Dijkstra's photographs. My own understanding of the Dijkstra's work, that is, that it proposes a theory of subjectivity as dialectical and fundamentally unstable, is sometimes at odds with what she had said about her own practice. Dijkstra at times seems to suggest an underlying essentialism to her project. For example, she notes that she gets "excited about authenticity" and that her photographs are about "a climax...a moment of truth."²⁰ Dijkstra has also stated that through her photography she is "looking for a kind of purity, something essential from human beings...I believe in a sort of magic."²¹ However, Dijkstra is also attracted to subjects who are in transitional stages of their lives and whose identities are not yet fully formed. In explaining her strategy of photographing subjects who are physically exhausted, slightly awkward, or vulnerable, Dijkstra has noted that "what interests me is that ambivalent zone where you almost lose control."²² This suggests that Dijkstra's photographs are defined by a tension between one's social identity and a less public self, one that at times slips out from behind a carefully constructed outward façade. Dijkstra has not to this point, however, articulated an established theory of subjectivity. Therefore, I am arguing for the theory of subjectivity that I take Dijkstra's work to propose. Rather than directly contradicting

²⁰ Rineke Dijkstra, quoted in "A Conversation with Rineke Dijkstra," 145.

²¹ Rineke Dijkstra, quoted in Katy Siegel, "Real People," 19.

²² Rineke Dijkstra, quoted in Daniel Birnbaum, "Rineke Dijkstra," *Artforum* 8 (April 2001): 119 - 124

Dijkstra's own conception of her work, I see my interpretation as making explicit what is latent in some of her own statements but especially within her photographs themselves.

I begin by considering Dijkstra's *Buzzclub* photographs (1995), which show young women dressed up for a night out at a Liverpool club, in relation to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977 – 80). Because Sherman's work is specifically relevant to feminine subjectivity, I focus in this thesis on Dijkstra's representations of women, though Dijkstra's other photographs, such as those of soldiers and of matadors, speak more specifically to the construction and representation of masculine identity.²³ Sherman's work seems to fit directly into Foster's history of the avant-garde, in that her photographs show the self to be conditional and socially-determined.²⁴ A survey of the literature on Sherman confirms that by and large, her *Untitled Film Stills* are understood to propose a subject, in particular the female subject, is a product of culturally-constructed notions of feminine identity. In this regard, two essays are particularly notable: Douglas Crimp's "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," which first appeared in *October* in 1981, and Judith Williamson's "A Piece of the Action: Images of 'Woman' in the Photography of Cindy Sherman," published in its original form in *Screen* in 1983.²⁵ I aim not to contradict Crimp and Williamson's arguments, which have for good reason achieved a virtually canonical status within Sherman literature, but to

²³ For reproductions of these portraits, see Hripsimé Visser, ed., *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*. Dijkstra's portraits of soldiers in the Israeli army are reproduced in pl. 122 – 130, while the photographs of matadors, taken in Portugal, appear in pl. 60 – 64. For more on Dijkstra's portraits of Olivier, a soldier in French Foreign Legion whom Dijkstra photographed at various intervals between 2000 - 2003, see Michael Kimmelman, "In the Studio With: Rineke Dijkstra; An Artist Exploring An Enlisted Man's Look," *The New York Times*, 3 August 2001. The *Olivier* series is reproduced in Hripsimé Visser, *Portraits*, pl. 132 – 142.

²⁴ Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," 58.

²⁵ For both of these essays, see the *October Files* volume *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Johanna Burton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006). Crimp's essay is reprinted on pp. 25 – 37 and Williamson's on pp. 39 – 52.

explain how Dijkstra's photographs show that the individual constructs an identity by assimilating, or failing to assimilate, the social factors that Crimp and Williamson take to be generative of identity. The *Buzzclub* photographs reinforce the conditional nature of the subject, while also showing that the individual interacts with social forces to construct an identity, or identities, for herself. Subjectivity as a lengthy and deliberate process, rather than as an already-existing construction, provides an alternative to the theory that Crimp and Williamson take to be definitive of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. My analysis of Dijkstra's photographs in relation to Sherman's work demonstrates the significant influence of feminist theory on contemporary representations and theories of subjectivity, a complex issue that I can only just touch upon here, but which demands further investigation.

In the second section of my thesis, I examine two of the principal ways in which Dijkstra's photographs, in particular her *Beaches* series, (1992- 96) reinforce the instability and ambiguity of identity and of the subject: an engagement with certain conventions portraying the individual as well as the use of a straightforward photographic realism. It is important to understand the implications of Dijkstra's portrayals of individuals in light of recent debates on the validity of mimetic representations of the individual and the status of portraiture, as these debates intersect with theories of subjectivity that emphasize the public and the external.²⁶ In his important essay "Residual

²⁶ For more on contemporary portraiture, see Anthony Bond and Joanna Woodall, eds., *Self-Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2005); Melissa E. Feldmann, *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art* (Philadelphia, PA: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994); Robert Graham, "Here's Me! or The Subject in the Picture," In *Thirteen Essays on Photography*, 1-12 (Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990). Anne Collins Goodyear and James W. McManus, *Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture* (Washington, DC: National

Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture,” (1994) Benjamin H.D. Buchloh establishes what is at stake in representing the contemporary subject. Buchloh argues that mimetic images of the individual have been, since Cubism and the dismantling of “the myth of the natural motivation of the sign,” no longer sufficient to represent the subject in the twentieth century and beyond.²⁷ The disappearance of the individual, by which Buchloh means the unified, self-determined individual, from representation became a “pictorial necessity and epistemic condition” in the twentieth century, corresponding with a shift from bourgeois humanism to a logic of commodification. For Buchloh, this is evidence of “the destruction of all remnants of the model of an autonomous and self-determining subjectivity in the present.” Dijkstra’s straightforward photographs of individuals counter Buchloh’s argument by proposing that the contemporary subject is both socially and self-determined and by representing selfhood as ambiguous and incomplete.²⁸ One way that Dijkstra’s photographs suggest this ambivalent model of

Portrait Gallery, distributed by MIT Press, forthcoming), in particular Anne Collins Goodyear, “Reflections on ‘A Made-Up History’: Documenting Duchamp’s Impact on Recent Portraiture;” Paul Moorhouse, *Pop Art Portraits* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Dean Sobel, *Identity Crisis: Self-Portraiture at the End of the Century* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1997); Wendy Steiner, “Postmodernist Portraits,” *Art Journal* 46 (Autumn 1987): 173 – 17; Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

Monique Yaari, “Who/What Is the Subject? Representations of Self in Late Twentieth-Century French Art,” *Word and Image* 16, no. 4 (Oct- Dec 2000): 363–77. For more on the foundations of modern portraiture, and early development of conceptions of the subject as decentered and mutable, see Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 2006). In the scholarship of contemporary art, there exists a tendency to undertheorize or disregard portraiture despite its significance for questions concerning the status and construction of the subject. Weighted down by associations with essentialist notions of identity and bourgeois subjectivity, portraiture in the traditional sense of the term, that is, the depiction of an autonomous, unified individual human subject, has been derided and dismissed as antiquated and irrelevant. The list that I give here represents a recent renewed interest in contemporary portraiture. There is indeed much work to be done on the topic, especially in terms of considering contemporary portraiture in relation to theories of subjectivity.

²⁷ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Three Notes on the End of Portraiture,” in Melissa E. Feldmann, *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art* (Philadelphia, PA: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), 54 – 58.

²⁸ An interrogation of the relationship between photographic realism and subjectivity is timely, considering the rise of straightforward photographic realism, exemplified in the work of Düsseldorf school photographers such as Thomas Struth and Thomas Ruff. It is important, therefore, to establish on what

subjectivity is to depict individual subjects that are clearly influenced by mass media imagery, therefore registering a condition that is significant, and as Buchloh would argue, even definitive of, to the formation of the contemporary subject. Her subjects, however, are depicted as individuals whose identities are influenced by, yet not determined by, society. The ambivalence that characterizes Dijkstra's photographs, moreover, works against a conservative model of identity, instead pointing to the breakdown in coherent categories of identity that is a direct result of mass media, commodification, globalization, and shifting models for social relationships.

In order to further demonstrate that Dijkstra's photographs work against an essentialist and conservative view of subjectivity, I compare her *Beaches* series to August Sander's monumental photographic atlas *People of the Twentieth Century* (1924 – 1964). Though Dijkstra engages with the mimetic, straightforward realist mode of *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography, her subjects do not fit neatly into a fixed and determined social structure, as is the case in with the subjects of Sander's sociological portraits. At the same time, this distinction between Dijkstra and Sander, whom Dijkstra has cited as one of her artistic inspirations, is not entirely clear-cut, as Dijkstra's photographs have an ambivalent relationship to the typifying impulse that characterizes Sander's work.²⁹ This is especially apparent in the *Beaches* series, which shows adolescents posing on beaches around the world. The series at first seems at first to be an atlas of humanity that

terms photographers are engaging with realism and to examine implications of realist strategies for theories of subjectivity.

²⁹ Rineke Dijkstra, in Anne-Celine Jaeger, "A Conversation with Rineke Dijkstra," 144. For more on the Dijkstra-Sander connection, see Hripsimé Visser, "The soldier, the disco girl, the mother and the Polish Venus," in Hripsimé Visser, ed., *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*, 11 – 13; Julian Stallabrass, "What's in a Face?"; and Katy Siegel, "Real People," especially pp. 8 and 15.

transcends cultural and national borders. James Rondeau, curator of the exhibition *Rineke Dijkstra: Beach Portraits*, writes that the *Beaches* photographs are a “quasi – scientific, cross-cultural study of human behavior in front of the camera.”³⁰ However, the dialectic between photography as classifying tool and photography as partial and incomplete representation prevents the subjects of the *Beaches* series from becoming social emblems or the quasi – scientific specimens that Rondeau describes. In Dijkstra’s photographs, the subjects are always in the process of coming into being and are fundamentally incomplete, just as photography itself can only promise a partial view of any one individual.

Subjectivity is a pressing issue, for our status as subjects is constantly open to question. In a society in which individuals are exposed to the myriad influences of advertising, mass media, and ever-growing networks of communication, who we are, and how we become who we are, are most exigent. It is these very questions that form the basis for this thesis.

³⁰ James Rondeau, “Archetypologies,” in Carol Ehlers and James Rondeau, *Rineke Dijkstra: Beach Portraits*, unpaginated.

Chapter 1

Representing Contemporary Subjectivity: The *Buzzclub* Photographs

“In the end, it’s the individual that I’m after.”

-Rineke Dijkstra, quoted in *Artforum*, April 2001³¹

“There is no real Cindy Sherman in these photographs; there are only the disguises that she assumes.”

-Douglas Crimp on Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Films Stills*, in “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism”³²

The comments above suggest two conflicting and irreconcilable views of subjectivity. Rineke Dijkstra’s use of the word “individual” connotes a self-determined subject, and moreover a subject whose self can be clearly rendered by means of photography. Douglas Crimp’s assessment of Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*, on the other hand, reinforces the idea that there the subject comes into being by assuming “disguises,” or pre-existing identities. As such, the essence of the individual cannot be represented, because there is no essential self to represent. However, Dijkstra’s and Sherman’s projects are not in fact opposed as they seem to be in terms of theories of subjectivity. In fact, the dialectical formation of the subject in Dijkstra’s photographs confirms, and also contradicts, the model of subjectivity that Crimp attributes to Sherman’s work. In this way, Dijkstra’s photographs demonstrate that subjectivity is constituted both by the individual and by society.

³¹ Rineke Dijkstra, quoted in Daniel Birnbaum, “Rineke Dijkstra.”

³² Douglas Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Johann Burton, 25 – 37 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 35.

The *Buzzclub* photographs (1995), shot on location at the Buzzclub, Liverpool, England, exemplify the dialectical nature of subjectivity as represented in Dijkstra's photographs (figs. 2, 4).³³ Dijkstra took the photographs in a makeshift studio, where she set up her 4 x 5 camera on a tripod and photographed the subjects, who are posed against a stark white background, outside of the loud disco atmosphere of the Buzzclub. *The Buzzclub, March 3, 1995* depicts a young woman of perhaps thirteen or fourteen years of age (fig. 2). She stands with shoulders back, head tilted down, box of cigarettes in hand. Her makeup, short black dress, tights, and blonde hair, quite obviously dyed, are purposefully sexy, as are the two strands of hair placed just so as to frame her face. *The Buzzclub, Liverpool, England, March 11, 1995*, another image from the series, shows a young woman dressed in a black shirt, which reveals part of her midsection, and short black shorts (fig. 4). The makeup on her face and her painted nails signify a desire to be attractive. She grips her purse and places a hand on her leg, her tilted head and facial expression seeming all at once alluring and wary.

Sherman's seminal *Untitled Film Stills* (1977 – 1980) encompass a series of black and white photographs that depict various feminine types drawn from Hollywood films. Sherman notes that her photographs evoke “the Hitchcock look, Antonioni, Neorealist stuff” and furthermore that she wanted the early film stills to seem “obscure and

³³ In addition to the photographs, Dijkstra filmed of these young people dancing to techno music. The resulting video, *The Buzzclub, Liverpool, UK/Mysteryworld, Zaandam, NL* (1996-1997) is a real-time sequence of young people, some visibly self-conscious and some less inhibited, dancing in front of the camera. The video, which is beyond the focus of this paper, raises different but not unrelated questions concerning cinematic realism, performance, and identity.

European.”³⁴ The terms that Sherman uses to describe her project reinforce the idea that the women in her photographs are generalized feminine types rather than characters from specific films. Sherman staged the photographs herself and appears in each of them, using costumes, makeup, wigs, and staged sets to transform herself into a series of female roles, from the sexy starlet to the innocent country girl. In *Untitled Film Still #14* (1978), Sherman, dressed in a lacy black outfit, stands in front of a mirror in what appears to be a dining room (fig. 4). She looks to her right, as if gazing expectantly at someone who has just entered the room. The glass on the table, reflected in the mirror hanging on the wall, and the oven mitt on her hand suggest that this person is a male companion, perhaps a husband or a boyfriend, for whom she has possibly prepared a meal. Her left hand, held to her neck, betrays her eagerness, but also a sense of anticipation or a slight anxiety at the arrival of her visitor. The contrast between the woman’s alluring appearance and the domestic activities in which she seems to be engaged evokes the multiple, and often contradictory, roles that women are expected to fulfill, in this case both the role of sex kitten and domestic goddess. The setting that Sherman has staged, which suggests both a dining room and a bedroom, embodies the simultaneously sexual and domestic feminine identity that Sherman represents.

In their essays on Sherman’s work, both Crimp and Judith Williamson maintain that Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* deny the existence of self-determined and autonomous subject. Crimp sums up this point succinctly:

For though Sherman is literally self-created in these works, she is created in the image of already known feminine stereotypes, her self therefore understood as

³⁴ Cindy Sherman, “The Making of Untitled,” in David Frankel, ed., *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 8.

contingent upon the possibilities of the culture in which Sherman participates, not by some inner impulse...There is no real Cindy Sherman in these photographs; there are only the disguises that she assumes.³⁵

Crimp and Williamson both argue that the *Untitled Film Stills* propose that the subject comes into being by taking on pre-existing identities that are presented in popular culture, and especially in media imagery. Crimp in particular considers Sherman's use of photography to be crucial to her representation of a socially-determined subject. He argues that Sherman adopts the style of what he calls "the so-called directorial mode" of photography, using her own self and the seeming veracity of the photograph not to create a believable picture of reality, but to expose the fiction of the unitary self "as a series of representations, copies, and fakes."³⁶ Crimp sees Sherman's work as the epitome of "the photographic activity of postmodern" in that it enacts a reversal of the quasi-magical quality of photography that Walter Benjamin famously defined as its "aura."³⁷ Benjamin conceived of photographic aura as "the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has seared the subject."³⁸ Sherman's photographs play upon the idea of aura, which reinforces photography's relationship to the real, by staging the presence of

³⁵ Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity," 34 – 35.

³⁶ Ibid, 34.

³⁷ For more on aura, see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World Inc., 1968), 217 – 251. For Benjamin's thoughts on aura and photography, see Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," 240 - 257 in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979).

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," 243. Crimp quotes Stanley Mitchell's translation of Benjamin's essay (*Screen* 13, 1972). Mitchell's translation exhibits several important differences from the Jephcott and Shorter version that I reference here. For example, Mitchell uses "chance" instead of "contingency" and "character of the picture" instead of "subject." He also does not capitalize "here and now." I find Jephcott and Shorter's version more accurate, especially because Benjamin's description of aura in photography entails his claim that in the early period of photography, technique (daguerreotype) and subject (the bourgeois) were perfectly congruent (*A Small History*, 248). Benjamin's description of aura, therefore, does not address simply the character of the picture itself, but the subject as pictured within the photograph. Additionally, "Here and Now" suggests the specific, imminent present that Benjamin had in mind when he described "that tiny spark of contingency" with which reality has "seared the subject."

an authentic subject, both the authentic Cindy Sherman and an authentic embodiment of femininity itself. However, Crimp argues, when we see image upon image in which Sherman seems to effortlessly assume different “disguises,” we understand that there is no real subject, both no real essence of woman and no real Cindy Sherman, to be found. It is the absence of this authentic subject, the denial of the existence of an original or essential self from whom the aura in the photograph emanates, that in Crimp’s view defines the photographic activity of postmodernism.³⁹

Williamson, whose writing is more specific to feminine subjectivity, similarly argues that Sherman represents the absence of an essential self and more specifically of an essential femininity. In Williamson’s view, Sherman’s succession of various feminine types show femininity itself as “multiple, fractured, and yet each of its infinite surfaces gives the illusion of depth and wholeness.”⁴⁰ Williamson notes that the success of Sherman’s project lies in her ability to construct images of women that seem to have depth, and that seem so poignantly vulnerable and so utterly *real*. This quality of reality incites in the viewer an obsessive desire to search for the real Cindy Sherman, as well as a tendency to see her project as a search for identity through self-portraiture. In Williamson’s view, the combination of the erotic and the vulnerable that characterizes Sherman’s feminine types embodies a key quality of femininity, or more precisely “the *image* of Woman, an imaginary, fragmentary identity that is found not only in photos and films but in the social fabric of our thoughts and feelings.” The details and implied narratives of the photographs, carefully constructed to tap into the visual codes of popular representation,

³⁹ Douglas Crimp, “The Photographic Activity,” 28 – 32.

⁴⁰ Judith Williamson, “A Piece of the Action: Images of ‘Woman’ in the Photographs of Cindy Sherman,” in Johanna Burton, ed., *Cindy Sherman*, 39 – 52 (Cambridge.: MIT Press, 2006).

embody this “imaginary, fragmentary identity.” *Untitled Film Still #14*, for example, literally shows a woman reacting to the arrival of a visitor (fig. 4). What it embodies, however, is the image of woman as sex kitten/domestic goddess, represented in Sherman’s subtle yet sexy clothing, her oven mitt, pearls, and even her eager yet anxious facial expression as she waits for her male visitor to enter the room. In Sherman’s photographs, this image becomes the identity, and identity becomes the image, so that the two are virtually inseparable. Every part of the photograph itself embodies the identity that Sherman aims to convey. For both Crimp and Williamson, the play between image and identity, between interior and exterior, and between authenticity and fiction, which in the end reveals an elusive subject, characterizes Sherman’s representation of subjectivity.

The *Untitled Film Stills* and the *Buzzclub* photographs both show subjectivity to be, at least to a degree, a performance. In both sets of photographs, the subject is performing different identities that represent culturally-held notions of femininity. In Dijkstra’s photographs, the subjects’ performances entail constructing a self-image to convey a certain identity, or identities, to the world. Their appearance and their manner of posing makes visible the subtexts of their performances, such as fashion imagery and peer pressure. The *Buzzclub* photographs show that the formation of these young women is conditional upon their particular social circumstances as adolescents in urban Liverpool, England. The young women in Dijkstra’s *Buzzclub* images project an image of simultaneous sexiness and vulnerability that is an essential part of their performances, both for the camera and for their peers at the *Buzzclub*. The young woman in *The Buzzclub, March 3, 1995*, tilts her head downward and gazing boldly at the camera

through two strands of carefully-placed hair (fig. 2). She seems especially to be posing in imitation fashion models, such as the women in Victoria's Secret advertisements, who seem all at once edgy and inviting. Her arms are held at her side, and she clutches her box of cigarettes against her right thigh as if she wants to make sure they are captured by the camera's lens. Likewise, in the *Buzzclub, March 11, 1995*, the young woman's sexy clothing and appearance and inviting yet tentative glance show that she is highly aware of being watched, both by her peers in the club and by the camera (fig. 4). Her half-smile and tilted head conveys shyness and perhaps a slight sense of playfulness, yet her short shorts and midriff shirt is distinctively sexy. The performances of these young women are searches for identity, as they negotiate the process of shaping their own self-images.

In Sherman's photographs, the performance of identity is even more obvious, as Sherman assumes different roles from photograph to photograph. Though Butler's writing postdates Crimp and Williamson's essays, both Crimp and Williamson see subjectivity as performative. Williamson is especially specific to this idea, beginning her article by reflecting upon the importance of clothing for feminine identity. She notes that choosing one's clothing for the day amounts to occupying the identity embodied in that clothing.⁴¹ A smart suit, for example, does not at all project the same, or even a similar identity, as a leather skirt. "You know well," Williamson writes, "that you will be seen differently for the whole day, depending on what you put on..."⁴² Sherman's photographs evoke the way in which identity, particularly feminine identity, is a performance.

⁴¹ Judith Williamson, "A Piece of the Action," 39.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39.

The idea of identity as a performance is a familiar one in contemporary art and theory. Notable on this count is Judith Butler's concept of performativity, which she defines "not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains."⁴³ For Butler, who builds upon Michel Foucault's notion that the subject is constituted within the power structures and forms of discourse that constitute a particular episteme, performativity is the essence of contemporary subjecthood. Butler extends Foucault's theories of subjectivity to further emphasize that identity is not simply socially constructed, but socially *generated*, so that there is no essential self, not even a blank slate, onto which cultural norms are inscribed. Identity is not constituted within one action or event, nor even within a number of monumental life events, such as birth, marriage, and death. Nor is identity simply assumed, as one puts on a garment. Rather, identity is constituted in the repeated acts that a subject performs over the course of a lifetime. These acts are regulated by power structures, as the subject learns to adhere to or rebel from gender norms, social expectations, and political systems, all of which are meant to constrain the subject and mold them to fit particular identities and ideologies. Butler has sought to refute stability of gender, which she takes to be a social construction, and also of sexuality, which is often assumed to be essential and pre-determined, but which she also argues is a social construction. Butler's theories represent one of the most

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2-3. My summary of Butler's theory is drawn both from *Bodies That Matter* as well as from Butler's seminal *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York : Routledge, 1990).

prominent extensions and revisions in feminist terms of a socially-determined construct of subjectivity.⁴⁴

Though both Dijkstra and Sherman show the subject to be, to a degree, performative, the nature of this performance as represented in their work is quite different. Simply put, Dijkstra's subjects are real young women who are "playing" themselves, while Sherman's figures are allegories of the real, a series of established feminine roles. The two young women in the *Buzzclub* photographs are in the process of finding their public selves, the selves that they present to the world (figs. 2, 4). Their developing bodies and heightened senses of self-awareness embody the awkward and extended process of forming one's identity as it affects both the exterior, physical self and subject's internalized self-conception. Therefore, their identities are not, as in Sherman's photographs, presented as ready-to-wear. Dijkstra's technique of photographing the subject on site at the Buzzclub, a place where these young women go to see and to be seen and where they are especially subject to the pressure to look and act right and to fit in, captures the subjects at a moment of heightened self-awareness, so that their careful construction of their self-images is especially apparent. This is especially evident in the way that the subjects display vulnerability. Dijkstra's subjects exhibit a real vulnerability, a vulnerability that is the result of their liminal status as adolescents as well as of their slight awkwardness or heightened self-awareness before the camera. In *The Buzzclub, March 3, 1995*, small and subtle details, which slip from behind the subject's carefully constructed façade, exhibit the ways in which this young women cannot convincingly

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* 2-3.

assume the fashion-model identity that she tries to embody (fig. 2). Her dark roots, made even more visible by the part of her hair, the slight gap of her dress at the bust, and the fact that her body, with its soft curves, is still developing, are signs of the ways in which she departs from the artificial perfection of fashion models. The young woman in *The Buzzclub, Liverpool, England, March 11, 1995* exhibits an even more obvious vulnerability, embodied in her tilted head and half-smile, as well as the careful placement of her hand upon her purse (fig. 4). The vulnerability that these young women display is indicative of the difficulty and awkward nature of forming one's identity. In the *Buzzclub* photographs, vulnerability is a result of the ways in which the subjects' performances, and so the subjects themselves, are shown to be partial or incomplete.

In Sherman's photographs, vulnerability, and specifically an eroticized vulnerability, is definitive of already-constructed ideas of femininity. In *Untitled Film Still #14*, for example, Sherman displays vulnerability in the gesture of her hand upon her neck (fig. 5). In *Untitled Film Still #39* (1979), Sherman, dressed in a lacy negligee, anxiously examines her body as she stands before the mirror, exhibiting an eroticized kind of vulnerability (fig. 6). Williamson characterizes vulnerability as represented in Sherman's photographs as definitive of cultural constructs of femininity. She writes:

in linking the erotic and the vulnerable she [Sherman] has hit a raw nerve of 'femininity.' I don't mean by this women (though we do experience it) but the *image* of Woman, an imaginary, fragmentary identity found not only in photos and films but in the social fabric of our thoughts and feelings.⁴⁵

Thus, while Dijkstra's photographs represent vulnerability as a condition, but not the only condition, of subjectivity, Sherman's emphasize the ways in which vulnerability becomes

⁴⁵ Ibid, 46.

descriptive, even definitive, of feminine subjectivity as it is represented in the mass media. Sherman's performance of vulnerability, then, is made to reinforce the stereotypical nature of cultural constructions of feminine identity. As Williamson notes, the feminine identity that Sherman conveys is not real, but imaginary and fragmentary. Sherman hits a "raw nerve" because her photographs show that cultural conceptions of "the feminine" are inextricably linked to eroticized vulnerability. Indeed, from fairy tales to modern-day movies, this construction of femininity pervades our culture.

The way in which the *Buzzclub* photographs and the *Untitled Film Stills* construct and convey meaning is crucial to understanding how they represent subjectivity. Though Dijkstra gives her subjects a degree of freedom to pose as they wish, she does exercise a degree of control over the construction of her photographs, creating a closed studio outside of the Buzzclub, using a minimal background, and directing her subjects to pose frontally (figs. 2, 4). The straightforward realism and the lack of background details and other objects directs the viewer's attention to the subject, thus locating the meaning of her photographs within the subjects themselves. In other words, subjectivity as represented in Dijkstra's photographs is embodied within the individual. Because Dijkstra's photographs show subjectivity to be characterized by liminality and instability, however, they are necessarily incomplete and partial representations of individuals, thus rendering both her subjects and her photographs contingent, conditional, and incomplete. Contingency in Dijkstra's photographs is defined as a quality of the unstable and the ordinary, even the awkward. It is embodied in the small details that the 4x5 camera renders in great detail: dark roots that reveal dyed blond hair and wrinkles and gaps in

clothing that does not quite fit the body, as with the young woman in *The Buzzclub, Liverpool, England, March 3, 1995*, or in the slight tilt of the head and the stiffly-held hand of the young woman in *The Buzzclub, Liverpool, England, March 11, 1995* (figs 2, 4). These subtle qualities and gestures disrupt the subjects' facades and suggest that they are neither fully formed nor fully in possession of themselves. It is this that Dijkstra seems to be after when she says that she says "what interests me is that ambivalent zone where you almost lose control."⁴⁶ Dijkstra's subjects, therefore, are shown to be not only contingent in that they are shown at a moment in the course of their development, as well as contingent upon the society of which they are a part. Paradoxically, the visual qualities of the *Buzzclub* images, such as the minimal background and close focus on the subjects, suggest a closed, hermetic space, and thus a view of the subject as autonomous and outside of time. However, the photographs in fact point outside of the frame, to the cultural influences that shape the subjects' identities. The way that the photographs can exist on their own terms and also as part of a series reinforces their contingency. When examining the two *Buzzclub* photographs side-by-side, the correspondences between the subjects, in terms of posture, clothing, and even the developmental state of their bodies, serves to reinforce the nature of subjectivity as a process, rather than a stable entity (figs. 2, 4).

The *Untitled Film Stills*, on the other hand, are carefully staged so that every detail, from the clothing that the woman wears to the furniture in the room that she occupies, conveys the already-constructed nature of the multiple identities that Sherman represents (figs. 5, 6). The images are carefully composed to tap into popular culture, so that the viewer's

⁴⁶ Rineke Dijkstra, quoted in Daniel Birnbaum, "Rineke Dijkstra."

understanding of the image is conditioned by their knowledge of cultural conceptions of femininity. Moreover, as Williamson notes, the meaning of Sherman's images is dependent upon implied narrative and the implied presence of others outside of the frame. Within each photograph, the expression of the woman "is an index of something and someone else, something that we don't know about but which everything in the frame points to."⁴⁷ It is the "imprintedness" of the woman, her function as a "thermometer" of the narrative suggested in the photograph, as well as her relationship to the "someone" that we cannot see, that structures the meaning of the image and condition the identities that Sherman represents. Therefore, the photographs themselves, and the identities that they represent, are contingent upon that which is external to them. Meaning is not fixed in the *Untitled Film Stills*, just as femininity itself is a malleable construction. The serial nature of the *Untitled Film Stills* reinforces this fluidity of meaning. Each photograph seems in itself to embody femininity. Yet, when considered as a series, it is clear that no single image, and therefore no single identity, can embody femininity as such, since each *Untitled Film Still* shows a different manifestation of femininity. The opposition between the photographs, as Williamson points out, denies the existence of an essential femininity.⁴⁸ Sherman's photographs are contingent in the way that they reveal the photograph's meaning to be dependent upon that which is not actually within the image itself. In the *Untitled Film Stills*, this quality of contingency is bound to the contingency of the subject itself. The subject as such is seen to be contingent upon the external circumstances of its production, even as the photographs assume meaning from that which is outside of the frame.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 42 – 44.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 46.

Dijkstra's photographs do not imply that the subject is wholly contingent, for they highlight the individual's role in the formation of their own identity. Even as they focus on the individual as creator of identity, they acknowledge the individual's embeddedness in social conditions. Understanding the contingent nature of Dijkstra's photographs, then, is one way to reconcile her desire for authenticity with the way that her photographs reinforce the socially-constructed and conditional nature of subjectivity. Authenticity in Dijkstra's photographs does not connote an essential self or a believable likeness, but a representation of the self that shows subjectivity to be a process and the subject's identity to be ever-shifting and perpetually incomplete. As Michael Kimmelman has observed, the photographs show the "passages through which people become themselves and in the process reveal themselves."⁴⁹ Yet these passages are never depicted as finished, but as a never-finished process of becoming. In Dijkstra's photography, the depiction of the individual does not therefore amount what Buchloh calls "an autonomous and self-determining" model of subjectivity, but rather a model of subjectivity that is *both* self-determined and socially-determined. If identities are kaleidoscopically fractured in Sherman's project, so that we search for a real Cindy Sherman who in the end remains elusive, Dijkstra's photographs show the distillation of various identities into one individual, an individual who is not elusive but only fluid, changing and developing over time.⁵⁰ The formation of the self is shown to be an unstable process of negotiating between one's own self-conception and social pressures and conventions, as the

⁴⁹ Michael Kimmelman, "Art in Review: Rineke Dijkstra," *The New York Times*, September 26, 2003.

⁵⁰ I borrow the idea of a kaleidoscope as descriptive of Sherman's project from Judith Williamson, who writes of Sherman's photographs: "Others might try to break up that web of mirrors, but Sherman's way of revealing it is just to keep on skillfully turning the kaleidoscope where a few fragments of fantasy go a long way." See Judith Williamson, "A Piece of the Action," 52.

individual assimilates or departs from the demands of her particular social niche.⁵¹ Therefore, it may not be quite so easy to reconcile Dijkstra's desire for authenticity and the socially-determined nature of subjectivity as represented in her work. It is the tension between authenticity and conditionality, rather than their reconciliation, that structures Dijkstra's representation of her subjects.

The *Buzzclub* photographs, in that they both correspond with and revise the theory of subjectivity that Crimp and Williamson attribute to Sherman, allow us to step back from established interpretations of the *Untitled Film Stills* and to question the idea that Sherman's work entirely dismisses the possibility of a self-determined subject. The *Untitled Film Stills* underscore that media imagery simplifies and abstracts subjectivity by representing various identities that seem ready-made and easy to assume. Williamson gets to the heart of this when she says the *Untitled Film Stills* demonstrate that because femininity is not any one thing at all, and certainly not any one thing that the media portrays it to be, "women don't have to get trapped trying to 'be' the depth behind a surface..."⁵² The *Untitled Film Stills* point to the way in which our conceptions of subjectivity and identity heavily shaped by the public realm, and especially by what we see on television, in films, and in advertisements. As Williamson argues, however, the *Untitled Film Stills* do not imply that we cannot have an identity outside of what our culture offers to us. Instead, they allow us to be more aware of influences that shape our identities, and therefore to ask what it would mean to not be caught up in the "surfaces," or cultural construct of identity, that can only pretend to possess real depth. How would it

⁵¹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Residual Resemblance," 58.

⁵² Judith Williamson, "A Piece of the Action," 51.

alter our understanding of ourselves – and of others – if we were to, as Williamson suggests, understand that our identities are far more complex than the surfaces that our culture tends to reinforce? Dijkstra's photographs, which show awkward, imperfect, and liminal subjects who are in the process of becoming, present one possible answer to this question.

Chapter 2

Depicting the Contemporary Subject: The *Beaches* Series

“My pictures are about looking at somebody, and up to a point the bigger they are the more they relate to how you actually see another person, another body.”

-Rineke Dijkstra, 2001⁵³

“The individual does not make the history of his time, he both impresses himself upon it and expresses its meaning.”

-August Sander, “The Nature and Development of Photography,” 1931⁵⁴

Dijkstra’s photographs are striking for their clear, straightforward focus on the individual. The crystalline quality of the chromogenic print and the large size of the images makes it seem, in the artist’s own words, as if the viewer is confronting another person, another body, in the photograph.⁵⁵ This quality of Dijkstra’s photographs raises questions concerning both the representation of the individual and the role of mimetic representation in portraying the subject.⁵⁶ In this section, I will examine the interrelated issues of portrayal of the individual and realism in Dijkstra’s photographs in order to argue against the idea that a realistic mode of photography is necessarily congruent with a

⁵³ Rineke Dijkstra, quoted in Michael Kimmelman, “In the Studio With: Rineke Dijkstra; An Artist Exploring An Enlisted Man’s Look.”

⁵⁴ August Sander, “The Nature and Development of Photography,” Lecture 5, 1931, quoted in Beaumont Newhall and Robert Kramer, *August Sander: photographs of an epoch, 1904-1959* (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1980), 40.

⁵⁵ Rineke Dijkstra, quoted in Michael Kimmelman, “In the Studio With: Rineke Dijkstra; An Artist Exploring An Enlisted Man’s Look.”

⁵⁶ While many of Dijkstra’s photographs are of single individuals, there are many that also depict groups of two, three, or four. I use the term “individual” in this section to include both the photographs of single individuals and of small groups, as the subjects are pictured as distinct individuals who are part of a group rather than as members of an undifferentiated group.

traditional view of subjectivity as stable and essential. While the idea of the subject as self- or socially-determined structures the first section of my thesis, the terms of stability and instability will serve as a framework for this section. As a way to address the issues of representing the individual and realism, I focus specifically on the photographs of early twentieth-century German photographer August Sander, whom Dijkstra has cited as an influence on her work.⁵⁷ Katy Siegel, Hripsimé Visser, and Julian Stallabrass, among others, have also made note of Dijkstra's and Sander's similar approaches and styles.⁵⁸ August Sander, who is associated with the realist movement *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), is best known for his monumental *People of the Twentieth Century* (1924 – 1964), a comprehensive atlas of German society, which Sander began in 1924 and worked on until the end of his life in 1964.⁵⁹ Sander envisioned the project as a summation of his era through the means of portrait photography, a “physiognomical time

⁵⁷ Dijkstra cites Sander as an influence in Anne-Celine Jaeger, “A Conversation with Rineke Dijkstra.” *Image Makers, Image Takers*, 144.

⁵⁸ For more on the Dijkstra-Sander connection, see Hripsimé Visser, “The soldier, the disco girl, the mother and the Polish Venus,” in Hripsimé, Visser, ed. *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*. München : Schirmer/Mosel, 2004), 11 – 13. The connection, noted by many critics, is also discussed in Julian Stallabrass, “What’s in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography.” *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 71 – 90; Katy Siegel, “Real People,” in Katy Siegel, ed. *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*, 8, 15

⁵⁹ Sander’s original title for his project, *Menschen des 20 Jahrhunderts*, is literally translated as *Man of the Twentieth Century*, though “People” is likely the most accurate translation to convey Sander’s ambition of depicting humanity itself. The progression of the project was impeded by the National Socialist Party, who were undoubtedly threatened by Sander’s depiction of a heterogeneous German society. In 1934, the Nazis confiscated existing copies of Sander’s *Antlitz der Zeit (Face of the Time)* (1929), a collection of 60 portraits that were intended to become a part of the larger *People of the Twentieth Century* project. For more on August Sander, see Beaumont Newhall and Robert Kramer, *August Sander: Photographs of an Epoch, 1904-1959*; Gunther Sander, ed., *Citizens of the Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, text by Ulrich Keller, trans. Linda Keller (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1986); Gunther Sander and Golo Mann. *Men Without Masks: Faces of Germany, 1910-1938*, trans. Maureen Oberli-Turner (Greenwich, Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1973). For a collected edition of the *People of the Twentieth Century* photographs, see Susanne Lange, Gabriele Conrath-Scholl, and Gerd Sander, *People of the 20th Century: A Cultural Work of Photographs Divided into Seven Groups* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002).

exposure of German man.”⁶⁰ His photograph of a pastrycook, which shows the subject in a frontal pose and surrounded by objects that he uses on a daily basis, is characteristic of the project as a whole in that it epitomizes the social role that the subject occupies (fig. 7).⁶¹ It is clear that Dijkstra borrows a straightforward realism from *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography, and also that she, like Sander, prefers to focus on the individual subject. . Her *Beaches* series, which shows adolescents standing on seashores in various locations around the world, exemplifies these tendencies (figs. 1, 8 –10). The *Beaches* series and the *People of the Twentieth Century* photographs therefore invite an aesthetic comparison as well as a comparison of content. In other words, the fact that both Sander and Dijkstra use a straightforward mode of realism to portray their subjects suggests that, like Sander, Dijkstra represents subjectivity in terms of a distinct and organized social order and identity as coherent and stable.

If mimetic realism is indicative of a conservative view of subjectivity, then Dijkstra’s project would seem to be essentialist and regressive. This notion counters my argument that Dijkstra’s photographs propose a dialectical theory of subjectivity that shows the subject as both self- and socially-determined. Dean Sobel expresses this view of realism and subjectivity in his essay for the 1997 exhibition *Identity Crisis: Self Portraiture at the End of the Century*, maintaining that “recent self-portraits demonstrate that realism and traditional representation fall short in expressing what artists think of themselves and how

⁶⁰ August Sander, Radio Lecture 6, 1931, quoted in Ulrich Keller, “Conceptual and Stylistic Aspects of the Portraits,” in Gunther Sander, ed., *Citizens of the Twentieth Century : Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 24.

⁶¹ For more on Sander’s approach and methodology, see Ulrich Keller, “The Conceptual and Stylistic Aspects of the Portraits,” in Gunther Sander, ed., *Citizens of the Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, text by Ulrich Keller, trans. Linda Keller (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 23 – 35, for more on Sander’s mode of portraiture.

they conform to contemporary culture.⁶² To make this error, however, is to treat realism as merely a style rather than as a mode of representing the world. As John Roberts writes in his important study on photographic realism, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography, and the Everyday*, realism must be treated as a style and as a “method.” In a passage that is worth quoting at length, Roberts writes:

Realism is neither an outmoded pictorial style nor an untheorised account of representation. On the contrary, it represents a continuing philosophical commitment to the application of dialectical reason to cultural production...This distinction between “realism-as-style” and “realism-as-method” is fundamental because it draws attention to the contextual basis of realism in art. The “realist-effects” of works of art are not reducible to and pre-given set of contents or forms but the product of a discursive reconstruction of a given work of art’s claim to “truth.”⁶³

In regard to Dijkstra’s photographs, understanding realism as a method means interrogating the images for the historically and culturally specific ways that they represent the individual subject. In maintaining that Dijkstra’s photographs of individuals do not reinforce the construction of an entirely self-determined subject, I am challenging Benjamin Buchloh’s notion, expressed in his essay “Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the End of Portraiture,” that the disappearance of the individual became a “pictorial necessity and epistemic condition” in the twentieth century.⁶⁴ Dijkstra’s photographs engage with a mimetic and straightforward mode of representation not only to show that subjectivity is self-determined and socially determined, but also to show the instability and incoherence of identity. My invocation of Sobel and Buchloh, both of whom address contemporary portraiture, begs the question of how Dijkstra’s photographs

⁶² Dean Sobel, *Identity Crisis: Self-Portraiture at the End of the Century* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1997), 12.

⁶³ John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography, and the Everyday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 11.

⁶⁴ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Residual Representation,” 54.

function as portraits. A survey of the literature on Dijkstra demonstrates that her photographs are almost ubiquitously referred to and interpreted as portraits.⁶⁵ It is worth questioning this designation, for the principal goals of her photographs are not to convey likeness, though they do this by virtue of their status as photographs, or to represent the specificities of the subjects' personalities, though they hint at the subjects' temperaments or other aspects of their personalities.⁶⁶ It is more accurate, then, to say that Dijkstra often plays upon the conventions and aims of portraiture in order to convey the instability and of the subjects and the ambiguity of their identities. In this way, Dijkstra's photographs work in a fundamentally different way from Sander's, in which the subject's social identity is presented in a clear and readable manner.

A closer look at Dijkstra's *Beaches* series and Sander's photographs for *People of the Twentieth Century* demonstrates that while the projects are aesthetically similar, the theories of subjectivity that they propose is quite different. For the *Beaches* series, Dijkstra photographed adolescents, generally between the ages of 12 and 18, in

⁶⁵ Dijkstra's photographs are referred to as portraits in Hripsimé Visser, ed., *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*; Katy Siegel, *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*, Carol Ehlers and James Rondeau, eds., *Rineke Dijkstra: Beach Portraits*; Claire Bishop, "Rineke Dijkstra: The Naked Immediacy of Photography;" Jennifer Higgie, "Review: Rineke Dijkstra, The Photographer's Gallery, London, U.K.," *Frieze* 39 (March – April 1998); Andy Grundberg, "Out of the Blue;" Michael Kimmelman, "In the Studio With: Rineke Dijkstra; An Artist Exploring An Enlisted Man's Look." Phyllis Rosenzweig included Dijkstra's photographs in the exhibition *Portraits* at G Fine Art in Washington, D.C., January 12 – March 1, 2008. The exhibition also included the work of Chan Chao, Alex Soth, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Malick Sidibe, Collier Schorr, and Beat Streuli. The exhibition raised important questions of realism, likeness, empathy with the subject, and the status of the photograph in representing the subject. See Phyllis Rosenzweig, "Notes On: Formal Snapshots, Ethnography, and Contemporary Political Photography," in conjunction with the exhibition *Portraits* (G Fine Art, Washington, D.C., January 12 – March 1, 2008).

⁶⁶ The question of whether Dijkstra's photographs are in fact portraits is more than a matter of definition. It also has important implications for what Dijkstra's photographs propose about subjectivity and the way in which they represent the identity of the subject. Therefore, it would also be worth pursuing a sustained analysis of Dijkstra's portraits in relation to other forms of portraiture, both historical and contemporary and both painted and photographic. It would be especially insightful to situate Dijkstra's work in relation to portraiture that engages with a realist mode. For more on the indexical claims of portraiture, see Anne Collins Goodyear, "The Portrait, the Photograph, and the Index," in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins, *The Art Seminar*, Vol. 2, 211-5, 385-88 (New York: Routledge, 2007).

Kolobrzeg and Hel, Poland, Hilton Head and Long Island, the United States, as well as the in Belgium, Gabon, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom (figs. 1, 8, 9, 10).⁶⁷ Dijkstra approached young people that she saw on the beach and asked if she could photograph them. In many cases, the subjects had just finished engaging in activity, such swimming in the ocean (fig. 1). Dijkstra prefers to photograph her subjects after they have just finished performing some other task or participating in another activity, as she feels that her subjects are then less guarded and less prepared to pose when exhausted or slightly distracted. Dijkstra relates that she first came to be interested in this technique after taking a self-portrait that shows her exhausted from an intense workout in the swimming pool, which was a part of her physical therapy following a serious bicycle accident. In an interview with Claire Bishop, Dijkstra contrasts her portrait to the carefully-posed formal portraits that she took of businessmen, writers, and other professionals, remarking that she liked the “bareness” of her own self-portrait.⁶⁸ This experience is what led Dijkstra to begin the *Beaches* series. In these photographs, the subjects, who are shown in a full-length view, stand in a frontal pose on the sand in front of the ocean, directly facing the camera. A combination of sunlight and a camera flash illuminates and emphasizes the contours of their bodies, which are clearly delineated against a natural backdrop of sand, ocean, and sky. Dijkstra shot the *Beaches* photographs from a low vantage point, a technique that she uses often, so that the horizon is more than halfway down the picture plane, with the effect that the subject is monumentalized and every detail of their physical appearance magnified. *Hel, Poland, August 12 1998*, for example, a particularly striking

⁶⁷ For more on the *Beaches* series, see Carol Ehlers, “Interview with Rineke Dijkstra, June 11 – 13, 2002,” in Carol Ehlers and James Rondeau, *Rineke Dijkstra : Beach Portraits*, 53- 64.

⁶⁸ Claire Bishop, “Rineke Dijkstra: The Naked Immediacy of Photography.” This story also appears in Michael Kimmelman, “In the Studio With: Rineke Dijkstra; An Artist Exploring An Enlisted Man’s Look;” Hripsimé Visser, ed., *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*, 9.

image, shows a young girl who appears to be around twelve or thirteen years of age (fig. 6). She is thin and slightly gangly, with long arms that reach halfway down her thighs and long, slender legs. Her navy and white bikini, with traces of red detailing, is loose, and reveals a body that is not yet developed. The girl stands with her weight on her left leg, her right leg bent and hip cocked in a pose in way that lends a touch of vivacity to her appearance. Every imperfection, every incongruity, is transcribed by Dijkstra's lens, from the slight wispy hair and subtle imperfections in her skin to the sand between her toes and the bandage on her bellybutton.

August Sander's *Pastrycook* embodies his ambitions for *People of the Twentieth Century* (fig. 7). His original, though never completed, plan for the project entailed ordering the photographs into forty-five portfolios of twelve images each. Sander further subdivided the photographs into seven categories: "The Farmer," "The Skilled Tradesman," "The Woman," "Classes and Professions," "The Artists," "The City," and "The Last People," which examines subjects who were elderly, sick, or mentally disabled. The photography of the pastrycook shows the cook in his kitchen (fig. 7). He stands in a frontal pose and looks directly at the camera, as Sander typically photographed his subjects in traditional poses, either standing or sitting, and generally from the front. The pastrycook holds the handle of a large metal bowl with one hand while stirring the contents of the bowl with another. In the background, there is a tray of pastries on the counter, and the lines of a stove installed in a brick wall are visible in the shadows. The cook has an imposing presence; his unblinking stare, neat white coat, and shiny black shoes are evocative of a meticulous nature and commanding personality. He is a man who is lord over his domain.

Every detail of the photograph, from the cooking implements to his very pose, embodies his social identity.

Dijkstra's use of a straightforward photographic style and her use of similar poses and settings, seems to elide the differences between individuals, with the result that the project as a whole appears to be a cross-cultural representation of adolescence, even as Sander's project is a visual catalogue of an era.⁶⁹ Andy Grundberg, for example, in a short review entitled "Out of the Blue," argues that the *Beaches* series is "a convincing catalogue of passage that appears to transcend geography and culture."⁷⁰ His description of *Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26, 1992* suggests that the photographs surpass not only geographical and cultural barriers, but historical ones as well (fig. 1):

Half a millennium after Botticelli painted Venus as the central figure in the mysterious parable of Primavera, Rineke Dijkstra brings the figure back for a solo turn in the form of a Polish adolescent on the beach of Kolobrzeg. Venus has the look and slouch of a Renaissance beauty, to be sure, but she is also the picture of a wary, awkward, late-twentieth-century teenager, half wet, half exposed, half accessible, half grown. Like Botticelli's other masterwork, *Birth of Venus* [sic], she rises up from the alabaster zone between ocean and earth, becoming a '90s cipher of individual evolution.⁷¹

However, in the very same review in which he describes the *Beaches* photographs as representing the general idea of "passage" and the subject as individual "ciphers" of human development, Grundberg notes that Dijkstra's *Beaches* photographs generally do

⁶⁹ Dijkstra comments on this point in an interview with Jessica Morgan, in Katy Siegel, ed., *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*, 79 – 80. In response to Morgan's observation that there is a blurring of national identities in the *Beaches* portraits, Dijkstra emphasizes instead the culturally-determined differences between the subjects, such as the "easygoing" attitude of the Eastern European individuals in contrast to the more uptight and image-conscious attitudes of the American subjects.

⁷⁰ Andy Grundberg, "Out of the Blue."

⁷¹ Ibid.

not lend themselves to typecasting.⁷² He points to the failure of clothing to function as an identifier in Dijkstra's work, although the bathing suits and summer garments of subjects in the *Beaches* photographs do seem to hint at variations in style between different regions of the world. Grundberg's movement between seeing the photographs as a generalizing catalogue of adolescence and as non-typifying photographs of individuals demonstrates that the comparison to *People of the Twentieth Century* is not so straightforward after all.

If Sander's project epitomizes how photography can be used to literally objectify subjects, that is, to portray them not as specific individuals, but as embodiments of social categories or broader ideas, Dijkstra's *Beaches* series show the subjects in terms of as both particular, self-determine individuals and as socially-constituted entities. The particularities and imperfections of the subjects, captured in detail by the lens of the 4x5 camera, function to show them as individuals who defy typecasting or generalizations. Yet, as a whole, they are broadly characterized by awkwardness and uncertainty, which points to their liminal status as adolescents, not still children but not quite adults. This liminality and awkwardness, as we have seen with the Buzzclub photographs, is endemic to contemporary subjectivity. The young woman from Hilton Head is an especially poignant picture of the painfully awkward nature of adolescence (fig. 7). Her expression is a blend of anxiety and melancholy, and the tension that seems to be written upon her face is visible in her body, in her tight, contained pose, the gesture of sweeping her long blond hair around her neck, and the subtle pulling in of her stomach. Her dark eyeliner, jewelry and bright orange bikini are outward signs of maturity, but her facial expression,

⁷² Ibid.

curved, inwardly-turned shoulders, and stiff left hand reveal that she is nervous and uncomfortable. Even as she poses like a fashion model, she does not assume the pose convincingly, for she is highly self-conscious in front of the camera. In her simultaneous assumed sexiness and vulnerability, she is reminiscent of the subjects of the *Buzzclub* photographs (figs. 2, 4). Like the *Buzzclub* photographs, then, the *Hilton Head* image is both a photograph of an individual at a particular place and time, as the title tells us, as well as a representation of the experience of adolescence and of contemporary subjectivity as such. The other subjects of the *Beaches* photographs likewise exhibit particularities and imperfections, whether they be slightly comical, such as the bandage on the stomach of the young woman from Hel, or awkward, such as the wet spot on the bathing suit of the “Polish Venus,” who really is not so Venus-like after all (figs. 1, 8). However, these particularities are not in and of themselves symbolic of the subject’s social status or personality. In the same way, clothing and accessories, a conventional signifier of identity in portraiture, can in the *Beaches* series only function as a partial signifier of identity. Though all of the subjects wear bathing suits or in some cases light summer garments, there are clearly differences in style between the subjects. The young woman from Hilton Head (fig. 9), for example, wears a fashionable bikini and jewelry, while a young woman that Dijkstra photographed in Belgium wears a rather old-fashioned striped bathing suit, hinting at culturally-specific differences in fashion standards or taste (fig. 11). Yet, as Grundberg notes, only these differences are not enough to typecast the subjects.⁷³

⁷³ Andy Grundberg, “Out of the Blue.”

Dijkstra's ambiguous subjects, then, are fundamentally different from Sander's social types. In Sander's photographs, every detail pictured works to communicate, in a straightforward and readable manner, the subject's social identity. Furthermore, the photographs depict social identities as stable and coherent. The pastrycook's white coat, stern visage, and collection of kitchen utensils, and even the very kitchen in which he stands, embody his occupation and his role within a larger social structure (fig. 7). He is the epitome of the orderly German pastrycook. Sander's portraits, then, convey the social positions and occupations of the subjects rather than their individual identities or inner essences. Even in portraits where occupation and social status is less obvious, there is a sense that the subject's clothing, expression, and the very way that he carries himself is indicative of his position in society. The notary that Sander photographed in 1924, while not pictured with any objects that he might use in his day-to-day work, is nonetheless "infused with self-importance and stiffness," as Roland Barthes noted, that is fitting for the role of a public official (fig. 13).⁷⁴ Sander's photographs possess a certain coherence that corresponds with the stability of the social roles that he represents. Every part of the images seems to confirm the identity of the individual pictured within.

The manner in which Dijkstra's and Sander's photographs represent subjectivity is therefore fundamentally different. Dijkstra's photographs do not typify or stereotype her subject, thereby that contemporary subjectivity is fluid and malleable. As we have seen, Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* exemplify these qualities of the contemporary subject in that they present identity as a series of ready-to-wear disguises. The *Untitled*

⁷⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 36.

Film Stills show that mass media imagery, which presents one-dimensional selves that only seem to possess depth, is a major factor in the shift from a conception of identity as changeable surfaces rather than as a fixed entity. Sherman's photographs especially point to the way that many Hollywood films are based upon a transformational narrative that involves a major alteration, albeit often a superficial alternation, of the protagonist. This is especially the case with female characters. *Sabrina* (1954), *Pretty Woman* (1990), and more recently, *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) are just a few examples of films in which the female protagonists undergo dramatic changes in physical appearance as part of a new life, to attract the attention of another, or to attain career success. The Cinderella-type plot of these films suggests that changing one's inner self is as simple as altering one's physical appearance. Advertising imagery also reinforces the idea that we can easily become someone else by purchasing certain products. Magazine covers offer us secrets to looking great fast or to achieving the social status that we desire. Broadly speaking, these circumstances have led to the idea that the self is a constantly evolving, rather than a stable, being, and that identity can be easily altered or assumed according to how we want to be perceived. The effect of these cultural conditions is especially obvious in the *Hilton Head* photographs from the *Beaches* series, as well as in the *Buzzclub* photographs (figs. 2, 4, 7). In these photographs, the subjects try to adopt certain culturally-constructed identities. Yet the slippage of these identities, or the ways that they do not cohere, reveals that forming one's identity is not in fact as simple as putting on new clothing.

In Sander's photographs, on the other hand, subjectivity is constituted along deterministic and hierarchical lines. The straightforward style of Sander's photographs is congruent with his goal of revealing and reinforcing a certain organization to society. Sander's photographs embody a distinct aesthetic positivism, or the idea that photography of everyday life is equivalent with an empirical, scientific observation of the world. In early twentieth century German, *Neue Sachlichkeit* aesthetic positivism coincided with belief in the transformational and progressive aspects of photography and the development of a democratic public sphere and modernist ideals.⁷⁵ Sander's interest practicing a scientific approach to photography is also directly related to the then-popular pseudoscience of physiognomy, the notion that one's essence or inner qualities are revealed in facial features and expressions. In Weimar Germany, physiognomy was considered a "scientific" way to justify the organization of society into occupational and labor-based categories.⁷⁶ Sander spoke of his photographs in these terms, referring to them as a

⁷⁵ I draw this summary of German photography in the early twentieth century from John Roberts' "Technique, technology, and the everyday: German photographic culture in the 1920s and 1930s," in *The Art of Interruption*, 43- 47. It is important to note that *Neue Sachlichkeit* realism, while a form of aesthetic positivism, saw the everyday as embedded with social significance, and photography as an opportunity "cognitive transformation of the everyday" (*The Art of Interruption*, 45). In this, *Neue Sachlichkeit* was in fact allied with the avant-garde. Roberts argues for the importance of this connection between *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the avant-garde, arguing that scholars have conventionally focused on the differences between them, crystallized in what has come to known as the "Moholy-Nagy / Renger-Patzsch debate." Roberts points out that while Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's photoplastics is often seen in opposition to *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography, of which Albert Renger-Patzsch was a proponent, Moholy-Nagy in fact acknowledged that both practices contained the potential for transforming experience and vision of the everyday. This is not to negate the differences between photoplastics and *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography. As Roberts points out, many critics, and even by many of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* photographers themselves, did not share Moholy-Nagy's view. Nonetheless, it is crucial to highlight the shared ideas concerning photography's relationship to the everyday, which has been obfuscated by the tendency to categorize photoplastics as socially-progressive avant-garde photography and *Neue Sachlichkeit* as merely a naïve form of aestheticized realism. For more on photographic practices in early twentieth-century Germany, see John Roberts, "Technique, technology, and the everyday: German photographic culture in the 1920s and 1930s," in *The Art of Interruption*, 40 – 47

⁷⁶ For more on physiognomy and its uses in Weimar Germany, as well as its relationship to Sander's portraits, see Ulrich Keller, "Sander and Portrait Photography," in Gunther Sander, ed., *Citizens of the Twentieth Century : Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 8 – 11. Physiognomy is also associated with the National Socialist Party, who used it as a basis for claiming the superiority of the Aryan race. Sander's use

“physiognomical time exposure of German man.”⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin’s well-known observation that Sander’s portraits served as a kind of “training manual” for how to “read” faces echoes Sander’s own remark and points to the social function of the portraits.⁷⁸ Indeed, there were many such “training manuals” available in Germany at the time, for Sander’s project was part of a general rise in illustrated surveys of contemporary history intended to shore up German national spirit and build a shared identity in the wake of World War I.⁷⁹ *People of the Twentieth Century* exemplifies the widespread desire for a cohesive national identity based upon a hierarchical social structure. In these photographs, the readability of the subjects’ identities corresponds with a wider belief in the fixed structure of society. The very organization of Sander’s portfolios, beginning with the farmer, or what Sander called the “the earthbound man,” and progressing through various stages of society to end with “The Last Man,” embodies Sander’s belief in a certain organization to society and a cyclical, deterministic model of history, in which “the individual does not make the history of his time, he both impresses himself upon it and expresses its meaning.”⁸⁰ In Sander’s mind, the individual, fixed forever within the photographic image, became a symbol of his era.

of physiognomy, through with its own problems, must be considered as a tool for creating a visual history of his time.

⁷⁷ August Sander, Radio Lecture 6, 1931, quoted in Ulrich Keller, “Conceptual and Stylistic Aspects of the Portraits,” in Gunther Sander, ed., *Citizens of the Twentieth Century : Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 24.

⁷⁸ Walter Benjamin, “A Small History of Photography,” in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979), 252.

⁷⁹ For more on these surveys of history, and the modes of representation that influenced Sander, Sander was working, see Ulrich Keller, “Sander and Portrait Photography,” in Gunther Sander, ed., *Citizens of the Twentieth Century : Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 1 – 11.

⁸⁰ August Sander, “The Nature and Development of Photography,” Lecture 5, 1931, quoted in Beaumont Newhall and Robert Kramer, *August Sander: Photographs of an Epoch, 1904-1959*, 40. As Ulrich Keller has demonstrated, Sander’s photographs evidence his cyclical view of history and his notion that society should be organized according to a guild structure. Keller also connects Sander’s views to the decadence theory of Georg Hansen as expressed in *The Three Levels of the Population* (1889). Hansen took these three levels to be the landowners, the middle class, and “the class of the propertyless worker and the

The idea that individuals can “express” the meaning of history is crucial to Sander’s project and his beliefs about the way that photographs convey meaning. In his seminal work *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes the paradoxical nature of photography’s signification:

Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), [P]hotography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask. It is this word which Calvino correctly uses to designate what makes a face into a product of society and of history.⁸¹

Barthes uses the concept of the mask to articulate the way that photography, which is essentially a mechanical, contingent transcription of a thing existing in the world, comes to bear meaning. The mask, a device used to disguise or conceal the face of the wearer in order that they may assume another identity, is therefore descriptive of the way that photography, in order to signify, evokes broader ideas and concepts that are not literally pictured within the image itself. Barthes cites Richard Avedon’s portrait of William Casby as an example of a photograph that assumes a mask (fig. 14). Casby’s wrinkled, heavy visage reads as a catalogue of the hardships of slavery, as if the long years of labor and servitude are etched directly onto his face. The very composition of the image – cropped, tight, and focused directly on Casby’s face – works to suggest such an interpretation. In this photograph, Casby is symbolic of slavery itself and suggestive of an entire era in American history. It is significant that Barthes chooses a portrait to illustrate

proletarian.” For Hansen, these levels represented developmental stages of humanity, with the farmer representing the highest and most eternal state of man and the urban proletariat man the lowest. Though Sander’s project is certainly not an illustration of Hansen’s theory, *People of the Twentieth Century* does evidence a similar view of the development and organization of society and of history. See Ulrich Keller, “The Portfolio Arrangement,” in Gunther Sander, ed., *Citizens of the Twentieth Century : Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 36 – 42. For more on the subjects of Sander’s portraits, see “On the Pictures,” Ulrich Keller, 43 – 53, in this same volume

⁸¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 34.

his discussion of the mask. Though any type of photograph can assume the mask in Barthes' use of the term, portraiture combines the photographic mask with the notion of identity as mask, capitalizing on the natural tendency to read meaning into photographic representations of the subject. In portraits that assume the mask, the subject's physical appearance as depicted within the photograph becomes the meaning, so that we see not only the individual named William Casby, but also slavery itself. Sander's "physiognomic types" exemplify this tendency to search for a subject's identity within the image.⁸² As Barthes explains, "This is why the great portrait photographers are great mythologists: Nadar (the French bourgeoisie), Sander (the Germans of pre-Nazi Germany), Avedon (New York's 'upper crust')." ⁸³ In mythologizing photographs, the subject is fixed and made to appear as stable. The coherence of the photographic image reinforces the coherence of the subject and of their identity, as every feature of their appearance and every detail of the image corresponds to the mythology or idea that the photograph supports.

Dijkstra's *Beaches* photographs have an ambivalent relationship to the production of meaning as embodied in the subject. On one hand, the *Beaches* photographs do evoke generalities and may seem to function as a catalogue of adolescence. On the other hand, the subjects always resist neat typecasting and categorization. As Hripsimé Visser has noted, Dijkstra's photographs are "almost Sander," yet their principal concern is "not the

⁸² August Sander, Radio Lecture 6, 1931, quoted in Ulrich Keller, "Conceptual and Stylistic Aspects of the Portraits," in Gunther Sander, ed., *Citizens of the Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 24.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 34.

group or individual and his or her rootage in society, but elusiveness, intangibility.”⁸⁴ The uncertain status of race as a signifier of identity in Dijkstra’s *Beaches* photographs underscores their ambivalence in regard to the production of meaning. Most of Dijkstra’s subjects are young white women, though there are several individual or double portraits of young white men. In this context, the photograph of the two young black men on Long Island especially stands out from the other images (fig. 10). On one hand, it seems to be suggestive of generalities. These young men make visible the process of development that takes place as one ages and eases out of adolescence. The young man on the right, with his long arms and legs and fairly thin body, appears to be on the cusp of adolescence, while the young man on the left, who has more well-developed muscles, broader shoulders, and comparatively narrow hips seems to be on the edge of adulthood. As such, the photograph functions to represent adolescence itself, as it embodies the passage from childhood to adulthood. In regard to race, it seems as if the photograph serves to stand in for a race as a whole and thereby to signify diversity or difference within the *Beaches* series as a whole. The status of the Long Island photograph is further complicated by the fact that the series also contains a photograph young black woman in Libreville, Gabon, a former French colony (fig. 12).⁸⁵ Yet even as the photographs capitalize on what Barthes calls photography’s ability to assume a mask, or to phrase it another way, to act metaphorically, they seem to resist it and insist upon the partiality, or contingency, of the photographs.⁸⁶ For example, if the Long Island and Gabon

⁸⁴ Hripsimé Visser, “The soldier, the disco girl, the mother and the Polish Venus,” 12.

⁸⁵ The juxtaposition of the Libreville photograph and the photographs of subjects from European countries raises questions concerning the postcolonial subject. One wonders why Dijkstra chose Libreville, Gabon, for one of her *Beaches* photographs, and what this means for her representation of the subject as a whole. This line of questioning bears further investigation. I thank Dr. Renée Ater for pointing out the importance of investigating if and how postcolonial subjectivity plays into Dijkstra’s oeuvre as a whole.

⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 34.

photographs function to convey the ideas of difference and diversity and to render the series as a catalogue of adolescence, why not include photographs of Asian or Latino subjects to make the project even more like a catalogue? Additionally, why did Dijkstra not choose to include a photograph of two young women in order to convey the nature of adolescence, since many of the *Beaches* photographs portray women? Dijkstra's comments capture the way in which her project both suggests and works against generalities. In an interview with Claire Bishop, Dijkstra noted that she is not interested in stereotypes, and is not looking for "a typical English face or American face."⁸⁷ At the same time, she remarked to Bishop that her photographs are about "experiencing something universal." These remarks capture the way that Dijkstra's photographs both seem to hint at generalities, therefore representing individuals in terms of broader categories and ideas, and to insist upon partiality, therefore depicting the particularities of the subjects and the instability of their identities.

Dijkstra's photographs of a young Israeli woman named Evgenya (2005) especially oscillate between photography's masking ability and its partiality, or to put it another way, its metaphorical capacities and its contingent quality (figs. 15 and 16). Evgenya, like all young Israeli women is obliged to serve two years in her country's army beginning at the age of eighteen. Dijkstra took the first portrait in March of 2002, at the time of Evgenya's induction into the army (fig. 15). In the next photograph, dated December of 2002, Evgenya wears the uniform of the Israeli army (fig. 16). Her hair is pulled back, and her eyes are open slightly wider as she gazes directly at the camera. Dijkstra's photographs of Evgenya differ from the *Buzzclub* and *Beaches* series in that

⁸⁷ Claire Bishop, "Rineke Dijkstra: The Naked Immediacy of Photography."

they picture a specific individual over a certain course of time.⁸⁸ In the first photograph, Evgenya appears as shy and vulnerable (fig. 15). She gazes at the camera from under her slightly too long bangs, which touch the top of her left eye. Her dark, slightly unruly hair curls softly around her face, and her head is tilted to the left. In the second photograph, taken after Evgenya has made the significant transition of entering the army, it would seem that her appearance should be quite different – perhaps more confident, strong, or reassured (fig. 16). Yet the young girl that we see is still Evgenya, looking slightly out of place in her new uniform, still a bit shy. Her hair, still unruly even in its constraints, refuses to stay in a neat ponytail, just as it goes in all directions in the earlier photograph. Even as she is officially a member of the army, she is – being female, young, and likely inexperienced – far from the archetypal image of the battle-hardened soldier. The photographs frustrate our desire to read them metaphorically, as either symbolic of Evgenya’s transition, representative of her identity, or emblematic of adolescence itself. In this way, Dijkstra’s photographs, and the subjects themselves, assume masks that have holes, so to speak, in their surfaces. The photographs, compositionally similar to Avedon’s *William Casby*, seem to aim at generalities, to signify an idea of who Evgenya is and what broader concepts she embodies, only to bring us back to the fact that she is an individual that defies typecasting, categorization, or metaphorization (fig. 13). Evgenya is represented as an unstable and ever-changing being whose identity does not unfold in a formulaic or predictable manner.

⁸⁸ Dijkstra also uses this technique in the *Olivier* series and the photographs of a young Bosnian refugee named Almerisa, who Dijkstra photographed periodically over the course of roughly ten years. For reproductions of the *Olivier* portraits, see Hripsimé Visser, *Portraits*, pl. 132 – 142.

Whereas Sander's photographs reinforce the subjects' places within a distinct social order by clearly conveying their social identities, Dijkstra's photographs convey the ultimate instability of the subjects' identities and of the subjects themselves. Therefore, Dijkstra's photographs fall somewhere between Sander's typifying and generalizing catalogue and Sherman's partial and contingent staged film stills. In this way, they suggest a subjectivity that is neither fully stable nor entirely malleable. The directed, straightforward realism of Dijkstra's photographs works to highlight the liminal status of the subjects and to show that the formation of their identities as a process. Yet this is a process that is never complete, for the shaping of one's identity lasts over a lifetime. Indeed, even as the adolescents in the *Beaches* photographs are liminal, so too are we, for we are always in the process of becoming.

Conclusion: Reconsidering Contemporary Subjectivity

Michael Kimmelman's characterization of Dijkstra's work as about "life in transition, passages through which people become themselves and in the process reveal themselves" captures the definitive qualities of Dijkstra's photographs.⁸⁹ Dijkstra's work is characterized by this process of passage and becoming, because it is in these moments that the nature of subjectivity as a complex dialectic between the self and the social and as an unstable process is made clear. The photographs of adolescents from the *Buzzclub* and *Beaches* series show young people who are clearly searching for a self, and in the process trying on various identities that they confront in their day-to-day existence. Yet what makes Dijkstra's photographs so compelling is the way in which they represent subjectivity is not endemic only of adolescence. The idea that subjectivity is defined by instability and liminality is descriptive of subjectivity in general, as the self is never a completed entity, but always being formed within the dialectic of the individual and the social that Dijkstra's photographs so subtly stage. Yet even this generality that I use to describe the photographs is a paradox, for it is a generality based upon incompleteness and partiality.

Dijkstra's *Almerisa* series, which depicts a young Bosnian girl who has fled to and taken up residence in the Netherlands, is illustrative of this point (figs. 17 – 22). Dijkstra photographed Almerisa from 1994 – 2005. In these photographs, we Almerisa evolving from an innocent-looking young girl in traditional clothing to a young woman who seems to have seamlessly assimilated into Western culture. The photographs on one hand

⁸⁹ Michael Kimmelman, "Art in Review: Rineke Dijkstra."

document the process of cultural change and assimilation as it takes shape in an individual. Jan Avgikos describes Almerisa as a “continuous subject” who grows from “a folkish girl from a war-torn country to a generic global citizen.”⁹⁰ Yet what is so striking about this series is that Almerisa is not really continuous, but constantly changing from photograph to photograph. The seeming ease of her transition raises questions regarding immigration and cultural identity. How does living in a new culture shape one’s identity? Is adapting to a new culture as easy as wearing different clothing and dying one’s hair? The way in which Almerisa changes, often so dramatically, from image to image may suggest that cultural transition is a smooth and simple process. At the same time, the photographs show that forming an identity is not as easy as assuming one, or even a few, exterior surfaces that one may choose to put on. Almerisa looks different in each photograph, suggesting that that the process of becoming oneself is not predictable, formulaic, or complete. Her identity, whether rooted in Bosnia or in the Netherlands, in Eastern or Western culture, is never stable or solidified.

Dijkstra’s photographs present an opportunity for reevaluating how we conceive of subjectivity, thereby demonstrating the richness of visual representation for thinking through complex question of being and existence. They propose a middle ground between historical theories of subjectivity and contemporary ones. The subject, a fundamentally unstable being, is not entirely self-determined nor entirely socially-determined. Instead, the subject exists somewhere, rather uncomfortably and awkwardly, in between.

⁹⁰ Jan Avgikos, “Rineke Dijkstra: Marian Goodman Gallery,” *Artforum* 42 (November 2003): 188.

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