

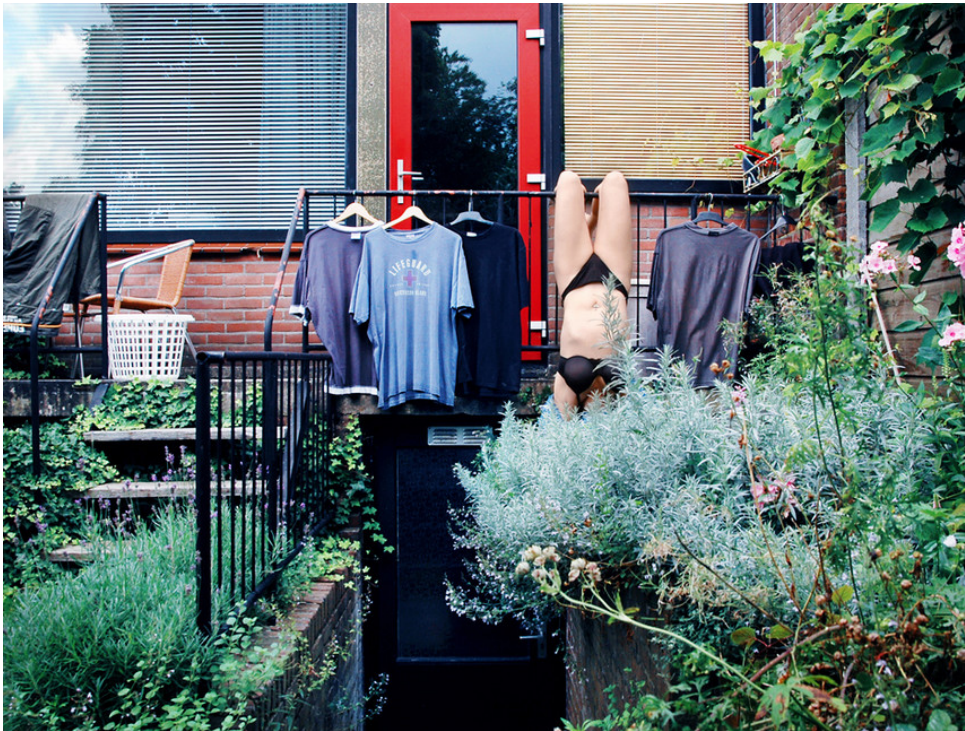
# Wall Street International

## ART

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# Lilith: Self-portrait forms of feminism

Intrauterine illusion of voyeuristic separation



Doing The Laundry, 2007

“Am I in the picture? Am I getting in or out of it? I could be a ghost, an animal or a dead body, not just this girl standing on the corner...?” — Francesca Woodman

I was reading an article about Jacques Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud’s Voyeurism and Fetishism. He was pointing out to the psychological effect of the “gaze” and to the fact that subjects lose autonomy as soon as they become conscious of the fact that they are visible objects. This anxiety is related to childhood and the reflection stage (when the child becomes aware of his external appearance in front of a mirror). The gaze alienates subjects from themselves. They identify their own selves as objects of the drives, thus becoming strangers unto themselves.

I began correlating these ideas with photography as I was trying to understand how it controls images and subsequently the ways of “gazing”. That’s when I put my finger on the best liaison ever: Henriëtte van Gasteren (using the artist name Lilith), Dutch art photographer playing with the split between the woman photographer and the self-portrait. She uncovers the myths of femininity from the inner to the outer body, unbalancing the relationship between authentic body and its plastic representation, between original images of body vulnerability and phantasmagoria. The artist appears thus a hybrid being between the empowered subject and disempowered object of the gaze.

By going through Lilith’s photographic projects I must confess that I couldn’t have found a



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more perfect representation of the idea that femininity is not fixed and shouldn't be limited in cages, as stereotypes are.

### *Who is Lilith ?*

Lilith is a storyteller with an extraordinary passion for photography. Since 2006, she has been using the self-portrait technique to convey her stories. Her recurring themes have been women, identity, female archetypes, gender bending and life itself. In 2012, Lilith's work moved in a new direction. For her latest series of self-portraits called 'A house is not a home' home owners, who were unknown to her, offered their houses as a set. Responding to an ad in local newspapers, dozens of house owners offered their homes to her as the backdrops for her new self-portraits. Lilith visited these houses without the owners being present, and was able to stage her portraits as she wished. Just as a house can tell who we are, so can a circle of friends. And in her new series 'Bit player', it is the circle of friends who adds an additional dimension to the stories that Lilith brings to life. Her friends play the leading part in this series of self-portraits whilst Lilith is the bit-player. Once again, while her photography is changing and evolving, it's wit, insight and humanism make it unmistakably 'Lilith'. Lilith's work is constantly evolving as she keeps discovering new lessons that life has to bring. The directions she flirts with are sometimes shocking, often playful, occasionally erotic and invariably surprising. Her art is meant to invite controversy, and often out of this controversy, new directions for her creativity appear. Lilith's alter egos reflections are brought out in the limelight, exposing not only the female identities but also the vulnerability and delicacy within any human being in the external world.

### *Amendment (in first person) to 'Who's Lilith?':*

As a child, I dreamt about becoming a dancer: show ballet, classical ballet. I've been brought up in a very strict religious way, for these reasons, my parents wouldn't let me. They were convinced the world of dance and of arts is a dangerous one. It was hard for me to deal with, because I was told I was talented and I loved to dance. I was always dancing about the house. As I grew older, I managed to live with this tough decision because I understood my parents loved me that much and therefore tried to protect me for all possible dangers. I also was fond of writing and drawing and wrote poems and little stories, an alternative way to express myself.

I've been a management secretary for 17 years (since 1983). After my third child was born I quit my job completely to take care of my children at home. But after a couple of years I felt unfulfilled. I needed to express myself, being housewife and mother wasn't enough for me. I started to disappear, I was losing myself, I felt like I was dying inside of myself. In 2005 I started writing stories again which I published on the internet. One day a good friend of mine gave me a second hand webcam, of which I thought would come in handy to create illustrations to accompany my stories. I found out that I could tell stories with my face as well. I never knew that before. From then on slowly my way of story telling changed. Body language suited me better than written words and my self-portraits were telling my stories. But at the moment I am trying to find balance between images and words. Since the beginning of this year my urge to write has returned.

From the beginning I felt completely free in my self-portraits, probably because I am in control myself. Though at first I was very alert regarding my three children. They can handle my art very well, are open-minded (no wonder being brought up by me), they are proud of me like I am proud of them. They didn't get teased in school due to my art and that gave me 100% freedom.

### **Why did you first become interested in how womanhood is represented in art and the media?**

My story is not only about me. It's about women. It's about people fighting for their identity. Being a woman is not always easy in a world dominated by men. Being gay neither, despite

being a man. Being black in a world dominated by white people isn't easy as well. And so on. I recognize the struggle. It's also my intention to support the underdog, my alter egos holding up a dead sharp mirror in front of women and men - calling out society's ancient convictions.

Do you know what's strange? At least I think so. Before I started with photography I didn't consider myself a feminist. I always thought: when people are equal feminism has no use anymore.

But my self-portraits taught me I AM a feminist. For me the following seems logical: a feminist creating feminist art. But I wasn't aware of my feminism and my self-portraits opened my eyes. Especially the past 20 years I experienced people aren't equal at all. We have a long way to go. In some other countries other than the Netherlands where I am living, it's even worse. Since I am telling my story through my self-portraits I photograph myself how I feel that day. It all has to do with emotions. Especially my 'Domestic Goddess' series has been a mirror to me. I am/was that old-fashioned housewife. Nothing wrong with that as long as I get the respect for it and am happy about it. But I didn't get respect and felt taken for granted. So I had to stand up for myself and that's why this series is ironic, tongue in cheek, sometimes a tiny bit evil, and this makes it feminist in my opinion.

In fact all of my work is feminist because it shows my freedom. It's my right to show myself the way I am and the way I feel. No need to cover any part of me. We all do have that, right? So when someone asks me: 'Are you feminist?' nowadays my answer is: 'Yes, I am, because there is much to fight for and no way to bail out.'

The Intrauterine photo project was my first contact with the root of scopis satisfaction in Lilith's work. I was particularly drawn by your "Intrauterine" project, in which you took self-portraits with your cell phone in the tub. This may be viewed as documentary photography or portraiture, with a special regard to the theme of the human bond (mother-daughter).

**Could you tell me more about it? Is there any Freudian connection between the delicacy of the inner world and the brutality of the surface?**

I like to take a bath, back to the womb that encircled me. Back to the fetal stage where I could completely be myself. It was safe, when I did not know better. The hot water cherished me.

Each unexpected thing which comes my way is a test which I had not foreseen, despite my wandering thoughts about the future. The reality is larger than my imagination, but also far more cruel than my fears. I put my head under water so I cannot breathe. Maybe I do not want to breathe anymore; it's so much to take in. The fear, the sadness, the helplessness, it is all overwhelming, it presses on my chest, it presses on my mind. Some days it makes me feel so small and weak. A day later I start to scratch and crawl and become big and strong again.

I open my eyes underwater until halos appear around the lights in the ceiling. Then I come up gasping for air, my eyes blurred and hardly noticing the tears flowing from my eyes. They are warm as bath water, the tears and the bath water have mingled.... amniotic fluid. What would it be like to live backwards? Starting at the end?

The water cools. I must get out, but do not feel, dreading to resume life. I will not be born! I want to stay in the womb. I miss my mother. I am now a mother myself. Still, I miss her even though I'm grown. She had never seen my children. Mama where are you? Do you see me, do you see us? Do you like what I do and how I live? Are you proud of me?

My child - if I were to relive my life he would probably never have been born and neither would his two sisters. There is nothing more precious and important than my children. It is for this reason that I never look back with regret. It is because of them that I never think: if only I had ..., as any other decision would have probably meant that they never would have been.

Yet again I dive underwater. Try to hold my breath for as long as possible. Then the moment

comes when I will be reborn. I am no longer connected to an umbilical cord. I need to breathe and live with my own strengths however difficult this can be for me. If it really does not work for me I take a bath. By myself, within the safe shelter of the womb. With fluttering thoughts until I find the courage to be born again. Until I have enough guts to live on... only then do I come out.

### *Freud*

I know too little about Freud's theory to make a judgement about my work from his point of view. Sometimes when people are talking 'Freud this and Freud that...' I think 'crap' and consider his theory to be a valid excuse for many people to talk openly about sex. It turns them on and they have a legal excuse named 'Freud' for it. I don't need an excuse to talk about sex, because it's an important part of our lives as human beings and of relationships. As a matter of fact I never need any excuse. My work shows all my sides. In my opinion one can only lead a fulfilling life being aware of and being in good contact with all ones sides. For me it would be suffocating to hide parts of me due to e.g. a job or due to being a mother. It's my freedom to have and show all my sides. And it goes without saying that I don't 'deserve' to get punished for it. Example: when I wear a short skirt I am not begging to get raped. You see? I wear that skirt for my own pleasure, because it makes me feel good. People shouldn't misinterpret that skirt and translate them only from their own point of view. Women make themselves attractive for themselves to feel good. At least that's how I feel about it. I am showing myself in my work because I feel the need to tell stories using my body. Not to become a prey for men.

### *Nudity*

Being nude can emphasize one's vulnerability. Just like clothes can determine the atmosphere of an image and make it completely different.

There's also one practical aspect: sometimes I just didn't take the right clothes with me, because I never know what I will photograph that day in a stranger's house. I communicated with the strange environment and that's how I created my self-portraits in those houses. Being nude doesn't interfere with the atmosphere. A naked body (especially in art) seems natural to me. It's like a dancer using his body telling stories while dancing. Or a potter using clay to create something beautiful. I consider my body to be the clay and I am the potter.

I am not comfortable in my own skin. For example, I hate to wear bikinis showing my body at the public pool. I am very insecure and not being that young anymore is making me even more uncomfortable. My body shows I have been carrying babies. Since I am a perfectionist I notice that not everything is perfect. That's also evidence my self-portraits are about vulnerability. I show myself in a vulnerable way and try to see and show the beauty of it, both my naked body and mind. Most of the time I think my mind is even more exposed than my body. The usual photos in glossy magazines are not my cup of tea. Plastic people without imperfections. It's unreal and frustrating for others, because no one can reach that kind of perfection. It just doesn't exist in the real world. My photography is very confronting for myself. I trust I'll have the guts to continue shooting myself despite aging and becoming more and more 'imperfect'. I would like to be an example for others and give them strength by telling: you're not alone in this. It happens to all of us. Just look at me.

### *Voyeur/Exhibitioner*

Talking about voyeurism, photographers such as Diane Arbus or Germaine Krull play with this relationship between the woman photographer and the self-portrait. In doing so they made visible the impossibility for a totalizing exterior gaze to be able to appropriate the feminine body. Do you feel you are somehow engaging with this cultural fetishisation of femininity by portraying your nude body in order to increase the viewers 'awareness of the common stereotypes that society ascribed to them?

I neither consider myself voyeur nor exhibitioner. Since I work alone my camera is on a

tripod. I use a remote control. So... there is no one to view me and there is no one to show myself to.

Being in control without being directed or watched gives me ultimate freedom you know? I couldn't do this with another photographer.

I have in mind photographer Cindy Sherman's notion of femininity as a distortion. Do you also play with the idea of transforming your own body in order to proclaim that a woman's femininity, as any other public identities, can be thought only in terms of disguises?

There's a big difference between Cindy Sherman and me, the way we work. In my opinion she plays roles and I show all sides of me. Just me, not playing any role. Perhaps emphasizing details or emotions to make clear what the picture is about.

I will document the natural transformation of my body, but I won't transform my body on purpose.

I feel more connected to Francesca Woodman's work. I recognize her emotions despite our age difference as well as the struggle about identity, life, love (by others and ourselves).

#### *Working method*

Since I am photographing myself for a couple of years now I am experienced but still it can be tough to get the image exactly right. I always start with the background. It seems I love playing with lines, it's in my system, in my way of looking, and I cannot help it. Sometimes I am astonished because I've only made 4 photographs of one situation to get the perfect image, but once in a while the perfectionist inside of me needs about 200, for example when I am smoking. I am a non-smoker, but think smoke can be a sexy element in photos. It's hard to control and get it exactly right. At the other hand I do welcome the unexpected. I never have a complete image in my mind, only half an idea, and just go with the flow. The accident sometimes turns out to be much better than the original plan. I encourage an open mind. To me it's always a challenge to create an image in a difficult position; it's some kind of sports to make it succeed. Physically and mentally. I never go to the gym because I practice my photography.

I know there are computer programs which allow you to see what you are photographing but I definitely don't want to use them. I think using them will stimulate 'posing'. I am afraid I will lose my spontaneity, meaning being too much aware of what I am doing and not being completely natural and free anymore. Even when I shoot an ordinary cell phone selfie I don't want to see what I am doing, therefore I neither use a front camera nor a selfie stick.

#### *Artistic credo*

I am trying to make people think about things in life, social issues: that often seem logical, natural, evident, but often aren't (e.g. the division of family roles along stereotypical gender lines). Or homosexuality, discrimination, abuse etc. Sometimes people talk about my work being tongue in cheek and that's also one of my tasks in life: to make people happy (with my work). Mankind is vulnerability incarnate. One can easily wound this creature, severely if one wishes. This is frightening. What lies around the next corner? Today's online revolution makes this question even more loaded. A whole new world is at the disposal of people with an evil mind. At the same time kindheartedness is being given wings like never before. For me as an artist vulnerability represents the ultimate goodness. My art, every single self-portrait, is a reconnoitering expedition to discover maximum delicacy carried by a human being. By me. Every image is a step forward. Through my photography I rediscover faith in humanity.

#### *Projects in progress:*

'A house is not a home' self-portraits in strangers' houses 'Bit player' self-portraits about and with my circle of friends and relatives 'Intrauterine' self-portraits with the cell phone in the tub 'Come closer' self-portraits with the cell phone in bed Without title, self-portraits in the atmosphere of Edward Hopper's paintings 'Faded glory' self-portraits with withering



flowers showing the beauty of the circle of life 'As equal' project about discrimination And, still continuing to photograph myself in my own house and garden

#### Exhibitions:

Till September 25, 2015: Intrauterine at [Galerie Kunst Keller Dresden, Germany](#)

Till September 21, 2015: Next 1 at [Galerie Vorn und Oben at Eupen, Belgium](#)

July 19-August 30, 2015: Over hoeren & madonna's (About whores and madonnas) 12 biblical women in different perspective) at [Museum Van Bommel van Dam at Venlo, The Netherlands](#)

July 29-August 30, 2015: Without title group exhibition at [Eusebiuskerk at Arnhem, The Netherlands](#)

October 2015: Launch of Snoecks magazine exhibition included at [Schipperkapel, Brugge \(N\)](#)

2016: Bit-player at a museum in The Netherlands, more news will follow

#### Information:

['A house is not a home' book preview](#)

['Over hoeren&madonna's' book preview](#)

[Artist Website](#)

[Facebook page 1](#) and [Facebook page 2](#)

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## Rebeca Scurtu

26 August, 2015

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#### Captions

1. A House Is Not A Home, Queen Bed, 2012
2. FadedGlory Spirea, 2015
3. Bit Player, Wood Carver, 2014
4. Banquet, 2008
5. Domestic Goddess, Mice Balls, 2009
6. I Could `ve Had Religion, Forgive Me Father For, 2009 (Detail)

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