

Visual Aging Studies: Exploring Images of Aging in Art History and Other Disciplines

Sabine Kampmann

No research discipline exploring aging places the visual at the center of its epistemological interest. This is especially surprising given that “images of aging” have long attracted the attention of academic research (Featherstone and Wernick). Usually, however, these images of aging are taken to mean individual and social notions of age (the state of being old), of aging (the process of becoming older), or of elderly persons (the social group of older persons) (*Sechster Bericht zur Lage der älteren Generation* 36). The understanding of images here is thus limited to ideas, beliefs, or attitudes towards age and aging that are primarily analyzed in the medium of language.

Images of aging in the visual sense also constitute a rich source for investigating contemporary and historical ideas and attitudes about age, on both social and individual levels. Up until now, however, they have played only a secondary role in research. The goal of this essay, therefore, is threefold: firstly, to underline the importance of the visual for considering age from the perspective of the humanities; secondly, to trace a few developments and present key research questions from those disciplines concerned with images; and thirdly, to highlight the potential value of analyzing age in art and visual culture.

It is fundamentally important, in analyzing images of aging in pictorial representations, to move away from an approach that takes such images to be merely “illustrations” of social developments; instead, their visual autonomy and specific mediality need to be considered. Pictures of age and aging are not only symptoms of general ideas about age, but also play an important part in producing ideational images and models of age. It is therefore necessary to examine visual material in terms of its different manifestations and its modes of production and reception,

as well as to inquire into the functions images of aging assume in diverse social contexts.

THE VISUALITY OF AGE: PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Traditionally art history is recognized as possessing the necessary methodological expertise to analyze images, but archaeology is another discipline that has furnished productive insights. Archaeological studies have generated valuable knowledge on how age and aging were variously seen in antiquity, ranging from philosophy and statecraft through to mythology and literature in Greek and Roman society, as well as in medicine (Brandt; *Alter in der Antike*; Wagner-Hasel). Analyses of antique sculptures have shown that specific physical features of age were by no means simply a naturalistic rendering of real models; rather, they are to be read either as iconographical signs for the dignity and wisdom of the represented person, or, in contrast, for their ridiculousness and low social status, depending on the context and gender of the pictorial representation (Thomas; Zanker).

In art history the theme of old age has hitherto found only sporadic attention, and one factor contributing to this is that the portrayal of older persons is not a genre as such but, in fact, cuts across this organizational category. Old people can appear in portraits, history paintings, allegories, or any other genres; the aged male body is a distinguishing mark of patriarchs, prophets, hermits, or scholars in Biblical scenes, or it might denote wise philosophers of antiquity. Vices such as avarice, greed, or lust are visualised traditionally in genre paintings through the aged bodies of foster mothers and panders, while pious older couples function as moral role models. The depiction of an old person may serve as an allegorical representation of time, the transitory, and mortality, while a face marked by age can be a portrait of a famous person or an anonymous old man, perhaps even a “character head” (Döring). A visual cultural history of old age has to deal with this iconographic diversity as well as with the various genres, contexts, and functions of portrayals of older people, and this complexity is one reason why an art history of the representation of old age is yet to be written.

There are, however, initial attempts in this direction. Most of the art historical studies on images of older people concentrate on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, discussing the portrayals of old age in the framework of the Christian discourse on morality and the context of the *ars moriendi* of the Early Modern period (Janssen; D'Apuzzo; von Hülsen-Esch and Westermann-Angerhausen). What these studies tell us is that with respect to visual representations of old age, it is impossible to discern clear-cut trends as to whether age was held in high esteem or disparaged in the different historical epochs. On the contrary, the pictures testify to different, simultaneous semantics about old age: the emaciated body of an old hermit evokes an ascetic life, highly esteemed in the Christian doctrine of salvation, whereas a similar depiction of a woman of around the same age can be read as an embodiment of vice.

Another observation emerging from studies on pictorial representations of age, then, is their massive gender-specific coding. A research alliance between art history and gender studies would be particularly productive here. Historically focused studies of images are able to assess and extrapolate the visual validity of the theses on gender put forward by gerontology approaches informed by the humanities. Examples of such theses are the observation—made by Susan Sontag and subsequently pursued by other thinkers—that varying standards are employed for judging the aging of men and women; Kathleen Woodward's discerning of a double marginalization of older women as not male and not young (“Figuring Age”); the rejection of an essentialist view of the aging body in favor of distinguishing between “biological aging” and “cultural aging” (Gullette); or the tradition of socially discrediting post-menopausal women (Friedan; Hartung). Interesting complementary art historical studies on the emergence of the iconographical figure of the old woman in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries address the categories of the body, sexuality, and motherhood (Schuster Cordone) as well as misogynist pictorial traditions since the Middle Ages (von Hülsen-Esch).

Gender difference remains a pivotal category for images of aging in the art and visual culture of modernity and the present age. Furthermore,

as the physical appearance of age in terms of a new dependency on body technologies and beautification comes into view (Mehlmann and Ruby), so, too, does the significance of the various visual media deployed in the production, reception, and distribution of images of aging (Kampmann et al.). Not least, the (de-)constructivist perspective on age, often explicitly presented in contemporary artworks, also influences research. Beyond looking at positive and negative stereotypes of aging (Dietrich), age is being increasingly understood as a category of difference that marks an “Other” and produces specific visual semantics of aging (van den Berg; Kampmann, “Fotografische Bildwelten des Alter(n)s”).

Scholars active in the fields of media studies and cultural studies are proving especially prolific in analyzing contemporary images of aging in art and visual culture. Whereas art history often regards the study of visual media like film, television, or advertising as merely an extension of its core task of analyzing artworks, the aforementioned disciplines focus on popular culture. Here, films and television formats are of interest because they are at once both symptoms of society’s notions about and attitudes towards aging as well as active producers of age discourse. Life in retirement homes, love in old age, dementia, or the aging body caught in the conflict between identity and practices of rejuvenation—these are only some of the themes increasingly attracting attention in recent years (Woodward, “Performing Age”; Wearing; Küpper, “Filmreif”; Swinnen and Stotesbury). One future research perspective is to think of the images present in the mass media and those produced artistically in conjunction, to discuss and analyze their confluence: while mass media images captivate primarily thanks to how they pervade society, it is the historical-cultural imprint on our visual memory that carries weight with artistic images. Intensifying interdisciplinary exchange among art history, archaeology, and all disciplines informed by gender studies, media studies, and cultural studies would be desirable.

PICTURES ON THE THEME “MUTTON DRESSED AS LAMB”—A CASE IN POINT

That pictures of aging deserve special attention in their mediality, historicity, and contextuality can be illustrated by examining a specific motif: judging physical appearance as to whether it is age-appropriate, a category often discussed in terms of the polar opposites of either “ageing gracefully” or “mutton dressed as lamb” (Fairhurst). Starting from this polarity, in an empirical study Rexbye and Povlsen have sought to identify the concrete visual signs of aging, the cultural markers and symbols of identity that provoke such judgements. The portrait photographs specially taken for this study were presented to the test subjects, who were to assess the “levels of activity” they believed they could discern in the facial expressions, clothes, and (also observable in the photos) the furniture in the background. As far as dress code was concerned, the test subjects fell into the patterns of traditional moral evaluations when seeing older women wearing jeans or high heels: those women perceived as not wearing clothes appropriate for their age were characterized as “mutton dressed as lamb.” It was assumed that they are vain and sexually active, both allegedly inappropriate characteristics for old women. But unlike Rexbye and Povlsen, who draw on Thane, suspect, the negative image of the sexually active older woman did not come into existence in the seventeenth century (Rexbye and Povlsen 75-76); on the contrary—in visual culture, at least, it has a much longer tradition, one going back to antiquity (Zanker).

The image of vain and lustful old women is especially popular in the Baroque period. Bernardo Strozzi’s painting known as *Vanitas* or *Old Coquette* (1630) was conceived with a dual purpose in mind: on the one hand, the painting could be appreciated in the Christian moral discourse as a visualization of vice or vanity or as a stark reminder of the transitory nature of earthly existence; on the other hand, the viewer was also to be amused by the figure’s folly (fig. 1). The work shows a woman who, assisted by two servants, is sprucing herself up in front of a mirror. Expensive fabrics, elaborate draping, abundant pearl jewelry, and striking accessories like feathers and fans, not to mention the flacons of



FIG. 1. BERNARDO STROZZI, *VANITAS (THE OLD COQUETTE)*, [c. 1637], 135 x 109 cm. OIL ON CANVAS, PUSHKIN MUSEUM, MOSCOW.

cosmetics and perfume, testify to an infatuation with trying to look beautiful, using the surrounding wealth and luxury to pamper vanity. But the image of a beautiful, rich woman grooming herself is ruptured, for the body depicted is covered with the markings of age and all the effort of applying makeup and adhering to fashion seems to come to nothing. Numerous details emphasize that beauty is tied to youthfulness, while the idea of beauty in old age is completely discredited. In contrast to the

bony, emaciated body of the old woman, her breasts swell out of the laced up décolletage. With the scene staged in this way, the old woman is presented as a sexual creature but also mocked. Unlike the fresh flowers in her hands, her body has long withered and become infertile. On the visual level alone, the top of the flacon in front of the mirror touches what would be—in the imagination of the viewer—her bared nipple. A real sexual stimulation of the old body is exposed as utopian. In Strozzi's painting the mirror not only functions as a symbol of vanity but also acts as a controlling instance and a medium of reflection. With the mirror and the painting we are dealing with two mediums that bring age into visual focus, and perhaps with the body we have another antecedent medium in play, without which human aging would simply be inconceivable.¹ In the Baroque painting the voluptuous bodies and rosy skin of the maids in the background serve as a youthful contrast to the body of the aged mistress; on the other hand, their smirking faces function as a guided response—they stand for the amusement that shall seize the viewer.



FIG. 2. ERWIN OLAF, *ANTIQUÉ DIRTY DENIM*. ADVERTISEMENT CAMPAIGN FOR DIESEL DENIM, 1998.

In another image also assigned to the “mutton dressed as lamb” theme, a photograph from almost four centuries later, such an imminent guide to the reception appears superfluous (fig. 2). In *Antique Dirty Denim*, the old couple sitting on a sofa wearing Diesel jeans are most definitely expected to provoke laughter. While the man, supported by a cane, has fallen asleep, the woman grabs him in the crotch and underlines her lustfulness by revealing the tip of her tongue between her lips. This shot by the photographer Erwin Olaf was used in the advertising campaign *Dirty Denim* (1998).² The image conveys to the viewer that Diesel jeans are so sexy that they are even capable of reviving the libido of old people. It would seem that the pictorial tradition of lusty women, in combination with the motif of “mutton dressed as lamb,” has remained to the present day. At the same time, it is astonishing that, given the prevalent political

correctness of contemporary society, which includes lending older people a voice against discrimination, such a discriminatory visual statement has failed to have a negative impact on the brand's image. Here the context in which the photo appears is of decisive importance. In advertising, provocation and taboo-breaking are traditionally considered to be tried and tested means for attracting attention. Moreover, the lighting evokes a stage-like setting and the old man's beard and eyebrows, which seem phony, give the impression of costuming: the staged character of the photograph is highlighted, enabling the discrediting of the aged to be read by viewers as an intended exaggeration that has precious little to do with the reality of old people.

In contrast, another set of contemporary photographs of older people—this time by Ari Seth Cohen—relies on the promise of reality associated with the medium, the commonly held assumption that photographic images are “genuine” and merely show reality. In 2008 the street style photographer Cohen began to photograph in New York women in their seventies and eighties whose style and attitude had caught his eye. Initially published solely on his internet blog, *Advanced Style*, the great media resonance of these photographs—often combined with small anecdotes or statements—led to the publication, between 2012 and 2013, of a coffee-table book, a documentary film, and a coloring book for kids. Cohen focuses exclusively on strong, life-affirming, and active old women, and they are presented as role models



FIG. 3. ARI SETH COHEN, STATEMENT EARRINGS, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2014 (COLLEEN).

for dress-conscious aging, exuding confidence in the style chosen. As our example for discussion I would like to look at the photo of Colleen (fig. 3) taken in Palm Springs in 2014: a beautiful old lady in a strapless, full-length dress that she combines with long arm warmers. Her grey hair is backcombed into a wild mane while the giant earrings catch our attention. The striking pattern of her dress and the extravagant accessories, combined with her bare shoulders and black varnished fingernails, most certainly do not match what the test subjects in Rexbye and Polven's study would classify as "ageing gracefully." Moreover, Colleen is wearing a great deal of makeup, and it looks as if she has had a facelift. Is Colleen's style to be categorized as "mutton dressed as lamb" or, as some of the women Cohen frequently photographs like to put it, is she an example of a "geriatric starlet"? A professional photographer, Ari Seth Cohen knows exactly how he has to set the scene, taking into account the context of publication and insuring that his models make a positive impression on the viewer, but how would Colleen be judged if she were photographed in terms of the rules set in Rexbye and Povlsen's study, i.e., in the style of a reputedly "ordinary photography"?

This scenario can illustrate how any judgement of age-inappropriateness not only is linked to the model—the body of the protagonist—and her clothing, but also strongly depends on the respective image presented to the viewer. Following Thomas Küpper, it can be assumed that transgressing generally accepted age limits with respect to how one dresses also harbors potential subversion (Küpper, "Of Mimicry"). It needs to be emphasized, however, that the perception and appraisal of the fashion choices made by people are inseparable from the production and reception context. As a collector's piece, Bernardo Strozzi's painting of an old lady seated in front of a mirror was meant to provide private amusement and its reception context was the narrow confines of seventeenth-century moral discourse; a subversive character can therefore be precluded. Although Erwin Olaf's advertising photograph features a couple undoubtedly attractive for their age, cutting a pair of fine figures in their Diesel jeans, since it also links into the Baroque pictorial

tradition of the lusty old woman and refashions a negative stereotype of age to fit a contemporary situation, it is difficult to discern any subversion of the category of age-inappropriateness. In contrast, with respect to Ari Seth Cohen's photographs, the context of their publication—his *Advanced Style* blog—prompts a reading that appreciates the images as media for challenging and extending the confined limits of what constitutes age-appropriate styling and dress sense. The question that emerges here, however, is: to what degree does the physical appearance of the models contribute to the subversive potential, and to what degree can it be attributed to skillful photography and the context of reception?

VISUAL AGING STUDIES – CONCLUSION

The complexity that becomes apparent over the course of analyzing an individual case is at once a challenge and an opportunity for Visual Aging Studies. A first formulation of this perspective within age studies could read as follows: an exploration of how age and aging are rendered and represented in art and visual culture. The guiding interest is how age appears in all kinds of images, its particular pictorial rendering subject to the respective medium and the specific contexts of production and reception, how this appearance alters historically, and how the images are positioned and communicate with one another in the visual discourse. This interest extends, furthermore, to how the visual artefacts relate to images of aging mediated through language, including clearly identifiable topoi of age, as well as the functions these images of aging take on in social processes or, viewed diachronically, have taken over time. This entails considering a broad palette of image types, encompassing not only artwork but also commercial and other images. Visual Aging Studies works with the rich and multifaceted pool of old age and aging in the history of art as well as with the mass media images circulating in journalism, advertising, film, television, and the internet. Availing itself of both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, Visual Aging Studies traces the shifts, recoding, and superimposing of images and the transitions taking place in the semantics of age. Pivotal here is the basic assumption that age is a discursive construction. This assumption makes it possible to

explain the diversity and contrariness of images—existing parallel with and competing with one another—within a visual discourse, while taking into consideration the different functions these images have for the various groups making up a society.

NOTES

¹For the connection among age, body, and visual medium, see Kampmann, “Das alternde Bild.”

²For an in-depth discussion of this advertisement, the interplay between text and image, its previous reviewers, the play with gender roles, and a comparison to other works by the artist, see Swinnen, “To Pin Up or Pin Down Women of Age?”

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Sabine Kampmann teaches art history and cultural studies at the Leuphana University Lüneburg, in Germany. She has done research as a fellow of Max-NetAging at the Max Planck Institutes in Rostock, Germany, and in Florence, Italy. Her scholarly focus is on age as a cultural concept, contemporary art, body image, authorship, and theories of visual culture. Dr. Kampmann is co-editor of the cultural studies journal *Querformat*. In 2016 she is finishing her book, *The New Visibility of Age*. Readers may write to Sabine Kampmann at Sabine.Kampmann@leuphana.de.

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