

LORNA SIMPSON'S *9 PROPS*: DECONSTRUCTING  
PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITURE

By

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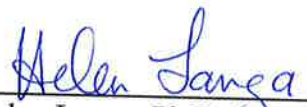
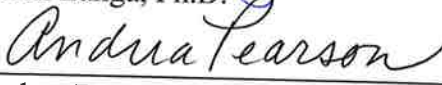
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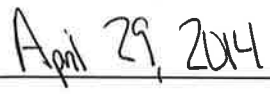
In

Art History

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, who instilled within me a love and appreciation of art from an early age. Your love, unwavering support and encouragement to follow my passion have made this possible.

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PHOTOGRAPHIC

PORTRAITURE

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ABSTRACT

Lorna Simpson's artworks are generally discussed in terms of race, gender and stylistic shifts. Without ignoring these perspectives, it is important to consider the artist's challenge to the photographic medium itself in a postmodern context. My investigation into Simpson's oeuvre focuses on one artwork, *9 Props* (1995) to demonstrate how she has challenged, or deconstructed previous norms of photographic portraiture. This thesis outlines several approaches to Simpson's work, including critical theories of photography, as well as post-colonial and feminist methodologies. By contextualizing *9 Props* within the larger scope of the theoretical inquiries about photography, this text makes Simpson's challenge more apparent. In *9 Props*, Simpson surprisingly eliminates images of people and instead creates photographic metonyms, the glass objects accompanied by textual descriptions of absent figures. Simpson seems to be asking the question: "To what extent can portraiture be understood and still regarded as such without its usual signifiers?"

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Lorna Simpson's large-scale, conceptual photographs from the late 1980s are some of her most recognizable and celebrated works. Take for example, *Gestures/Reenactments* (1985) [Fig. 1], *Waterbearer* (1986) [Fig. 2], *Stereo Styles* (1988) [Fig. 3], and *Untitled (Necklines)* (1989) [Fig. 4]. These artworks mark a pivotal time in the artist's career, in which she was gaining individualized, artistic momentum and receiving critical attention for the first time. Unsurprisingly, Kellie Jones labels works such as these "classic Lorna Simpson photograph[s]."<sup>1</sup> These "classic photographs" share several qualities: each features a partially obscured black individual, surrounded by monochromatic negative space and accompanied by enigmatic text. Simpson uses several tactics to obscure her subjects: she photographs them with their back towards the camera or crops their eyes from the frame. Either way, the viewer's gaze is denied access to full recognition of her figures' subjectivity. Though similar, these artworks are far from homogeneous; Simpson exhibits a wide range of creative exploration: *Waterbearer* features a singular image, while *Stereo Styles* offers a repetitive composition; *Gestures/Reenactments* is comprised of six, large rectangular photographs, while *Untitled (Necklines)* features two circular frames, mirroring the textual part of the artwork ("ring," "loop,") as well as the title. The earliest of these works, *Gestures/Reenactments*, features a male body, but Simpson quickly turned her attention to the female form, as exemplified by *Waterbearer*, *Stereo Styles* and *Untitled (Necklines)*.

There is no denying that these works are essential to understanding the artist's oeuvre and process. As Jones states: "What Simpson does in *Waterbearer* and in other works from this

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<sup>1</sup> Kellie Jones, Thelma Golden and Chrissie Iles, *Lorna Simpson* (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 28.



period is to comment on the lived truth of women in general and black women in particular.”<sup>2</sup>

Given these works’ prominent place in Simpson’s career and in the scholarship, it is often hard to disentangle these formative works and their themes from Simpson’s lesser-known artworks and thematic explorations. Therefore, Simpson’s investigation of gender and race are usually at the forefront of scholarly attention, while her examination of photographic portraiture, for example, is left less studied.

Furthermore, generalization pervades the literature, with the theoretical scholarship often discussing Simpson’s œuvre as a whole, or as having distinct stylistic and formal shifts, rather than focusing, in depth, on specific artworks, other than those aforementioned highly-esteemed few. These trends occlude the individual importance of any one artwork, and more specifically Simpson’s less-iconic works, ignoring key distinctions that exist from one to the next. However, Simpson’s artworks are not homogeneous, but need to be considered individually.

Additionally, a lack of formal and aesthetic examination pervades the study of works by many African-American artists. As Celeste-Marie Bernier argues:

Far too many critics celebrate African American artists solely for their ability to survive political disenfranchisement, racist brutality and cultural annihilation, rather than for the ground-breaking formal qualities and aesthetic properties of their art...attempts by scholars to define a black visual arts canon or a key set of aesthetic principles have led to over-generalised and reductive readings which eschew the complexities of the tradition.<sup>3</sup>

David Driskell similarly claims: “The most crucial issue will always be the quality of the work and its relevance to the society in which it was created.”<sup>4</sup> Following these ideas and without ignoring political contexts, I will address Simpson’s crucial formal choices as well as her

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<sup>2</sup> Jones, Golden and Iles, *Lorna Simpson*, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008), 4.

<sup>4</sup> David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750-1950* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 11.

challenge to social issues. My investigation focuses inquiry on one of Simpson's lesser-known artworks *9 Props*, created in 1995. In particular, the artist's deconstruction of photographic portraiture in a postmodern framework will come to the fore.

## CHAPTER 2

### LORNA SIMPSON

It seems as though Lorna Simpson felt from an early age that she was called to experiment with various forms of creative endeavors. Simpson was born in 1960 in Brooklyn, New York, where she still presently lives and works. She describes her family as having “an appreciation of Modernism and Minimalism” and leading “a very privileged life, with access to all sorts of things.”<sup>5</sup> Even as an adolescent, she harbored an appreciation for artistic endeavors. While attending the High School of Art and Design in New York, she practiced violin, ballet and photography.<sup>6</sup> In her late teens, she interned at the Studio Museum of Harlem. While there, she met artists David Hammons and Charles Abramson, “a significant moment”<sup>7</sup> for Simpson. Simpson later dedicated her education to the visual arts, and received her BFA in Photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1983.

There, Simpson primarily focused on documentary photography. Prime examples of her early documentary style are *Flushing Meadows Park* (1980) [Fig. 5] and *Morocco (Moroccan Women)* (1980) [Fig. 6]. Comparatively, these images are more straightforward than her “classic photographs.” There is no elaborate framing, no repetition, no enigmatic text, no deliberate denying of the viewer’s gaze. The viewer gazes upon people and their environment: in *Flushing Meadows Park*, a bridesmaid and her family exit a car in order to attend a wedding in New York, and in *Morocco (Moroccan Women)*, a Moroccan woman walks down a street while a man leans on a stall and looks back at the camera. These early photographs reveal the non-conceptual, documentary photography origins of Simpson’s education and photographic interests. Okwui

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, Golden and Iles, *Lorna Simpson*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, Golden and Iles, *Lorna Simpson*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, Golden and Iles, *Lorna Simpson*, 8.

Enwezor situates these early works with artists such as Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, Walker Evans, in the long trajectory of documentary photography in the United States. He writes: “Most practitioners who employed the documentary form had great belief in the mediated truth of the image, especially one that was generally concerned with the human condition; with the poetic beauty of the ordinary and the metaphysical power inherent in observed nature.”<sup>8</sup> *Flushing Meadows Park* and *Morocco (Moroccan Women)* embody these qualities and Simpson was a practitioner of documentary photography for several years. However, she later rebelled against the “truth” purportedly imbedded within the genre.

While a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego, where she received her MFA in 1985, Simpson became more interested in conceptual modes of artistic practice. There, under the auspices of conceptual and performance artists, such as Eleanor Antin and Allan Kaprow, the curriculum focused on performance art and “process-oriented work.”<sup>9</sup> Simpson describes her shift in interest: “I did a lot of documentary photography in college—it’s an interesting practice, but as you distribute these photographs, what are you really saying with them? I found conceptual photography took that issue up.”<sup>10</sup> Simpson seems to have been questioning the power that comes when disseminating a photograph, particularly a documentary style image. Especially in a pre-Photoshop era, many viewers unquestioningly take photographs, especially those of a documentary or photojournalistic nature, as truthful reproductions of reality. In actuality, documentary photographs are just as mediated as any other form of visual culture. As Susan Sontag reminds: “But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the

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<sup>8</sup> Okwui Enwezor et al. *Lorna Simpson* (Abrams, NY: American Federation of Arts, 2006), 107.

<sup>9</sup> Enwezor et al. *Lorna Simpson*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Ross, “Conversation: Ellen Ross with Cindy Sherman and Lorna Simpson,” *Yard* (2004): 22.

usually shady commerce between art and truth.”<sup>11</sup> To combat this ostensible truthfulness of documentary photography, Simpson seemingly shifted her focus to more conceptual outlets, as they invite the viewer’s speculation and challenge the “truth” of photographic representation. Enwezor labels Simpson’s repudiation of her own photographic beginnings a “crisis of method.”<sup>12</sup> This crisis ultimately led Simpson to produce what are often thought of as her first “mature” works. At the time of her graduation from the University of California, Simpson was “already considered a pioneer of conceptual photography.”<sup>13</sup>

Another shift took place in the mid-1990s, when according to Okwui Enwezor, Simpson “meticulously began scrubbing her images of the iconography of racial and gendered bodies.”<sup>14</sup> She turned instead to what he labels as the “rumor of the body.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, by the explicit absence of the human form, a presence is paradoxically suggested. In these works, she photographs objects or utilizes text to suggest the human form without explicitly depicting it. For example, *Wigs II* (1994/2006) features over fifty photographs of wigs of various cut, color and texture. Without a human presence, the wigs cannot fulfill their sole purpose: they hang uncannily in the photographs, yet the viewer is reminded explicitly of the absent heads. In other works, such as *The Rock* (1995), Simpson introduces textual components to accompany her photographic images that remind the viewer of the otherwise absent human figure:

*But here we are, sick of driving. We get out of the car and start to hike to find a spot and it will probably replace the last one, completely. Haven’t seen any week-end hikers for a while and since we are miles away from any rest stops it*

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag. *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Enwezor et al. *Lorna Simpson*, 111.

<sup>13</sup> “Lorna Simpson Biography,” Lorna Simpson Studio, accessed March 18, 2014, <http://lsimpsonstudio.com/biography.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Enwezor et al. *Lorna Simpson*, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Enwezor et al. *Lorna Simpson*, 124.

*seems plausible that we will not be patrolled. I asked, "How's this?" "Is it secluded enough for you?"*

This narrative conceptually adds the human element to the large serigraph of a lonesome boulder.

This "retreat from and of the figure"<sup>16</sup> as Huey Copeland labels it, coincided with a shift in material process as well. Simpson transitioned from the silver process of photography to works lithographically printed on wool felt. Both previous examples, *Wigs II* and *The Rock* are of felt. As Kellie Jones argues: "Simpson's turn to felt was a brilliant one, for it spoke to issues of sensuality on a number of levels. As a fabric it was incredibly tactile, calling out for our touch. Even the process of its creation recalled sexual performance: felt is made by adding moisture to hair and compressing it. Finally, the word itself conjured bodily contact."<sup>17</sup> Despite the lack of visual references to the human form, these mid-1990s works carry with them numerous allusions to the body. Simpson explains the catalyst for this shift in subject and medium:

In the late 1980s, early 1990s, I made a decision not to use the figure with the text in the way I had before. I decided to investigate the surface and started working with felt. That decision was also prompted by wanting to expand, because after seeing a survey show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, of ten years of my work, I really felt the necessity to change. My works had become so familiar to me in terms of process that there was no more joy or surprise left in making them. It was just to free up my relationship to materials and then see what ideas would come...in terms of process it was really important that I was not in a comfortable, familiar relationship to the work I was doing.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Huey Copeland, "'Bye, Bye Black Girl: Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat,'" *Art Journal* (June 2005): 73.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, Golden and Iles, *Lorna Simpson*, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, Golden and Iles, *Lorna Simpson*, 16.

The erasure of the black figure from these works led many critics to suggest that Simpson had forsaken her previous political and racial investigations. As New York Times art critic Holland Cotter explains, that “accusation...points to one of multiculturalism’s major downsides, the Otherness syndrome: if you’re black, you’re supposed to make recognizably black art.”<sup>19</sup>

Though mostly recognized for her conceptual photography, Simpson is also a prolific film and installation artist. Her first film project *Interior/Exterior, Full/Empty* was accomplished in 1996-97. As Sherri Geldin explains, the transition from photography to film “was more a glide than a leap” and allowed the artist “to play even further along the visual, emotional, and psychological spectrum, alternating between close-up and distant views, intimacy and aloofness, voyeurism and engagement.”<sup>20</sup> Simpson has continued to create both film and conceptual photography. In 2013, at the first European retrospective of the artist’s work, she debuted a new film titled *Chess* (2013) [Fig. 7]. The film consists of three screens: a woman playing chess, a man playing chess and a piano player. Simpson, donning wigs and a dress and suit to fulfill each gender role, performs both chess players. Similarly, in another work, *LA-57 NY-09* (2009) [Fig. 8], Simpson inserts herself into her photographs. Up until this point in her career, Simpson has remained behind the camera, never occupying the space in front of it. In *LA-57 NY-09* (2009), she collected old photographs (circa 1950s) featuring black men and women, and recreated the scenes, using herself as the subject. The artwork is comprised of both the original and recreated photographs. In this series, the title refers to the year and place in which the original photographs and their new counterparts were taken.

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<sup>19</sup> Holland Cotter, “Exploring Identity as a Problematic Condition,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2007, accessed March 25, 2014. [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/arts/design/02lorn.html?pagewanted=print&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/arts/design/02lorn.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0)

<sup>20</sup> Sherri Geldin, “Foreword” to *Lorna Simpson: Interior/Exterior, Full/Empty*. 4-5. Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1997. 4.

It is evident, therefore, that although Simpson is most recognized for her early works, her artistic career has been marked by several dramatic shifts in creative process. Indeed, she has proven to be a prolific and enterprising artist, continually changing and challenging formal and political perspectives through her work. In *9 Props*, the artist draws on her interests in race, gender and black photographic history, but takes on a new focus by redefining how portraiture could be conceptualized as a postmodern practice.



## CHAPTER 3

### SIMPSON AND PHOTOGRAPHY: FIVE APPROACHES

The literature regarding Simpson and her œuvre comes from a varied of types of sources. A majority of these sources are magazine or newspaper snippets, dating from the early part of Simpson's career. These are usually brief and convey little scholarly information, but do provide contemporary evidence as to how her artwork was received by critics and the public.<sup>21</sup> Exhibition catalogues are a useful source, although many of them were created for group shows, and therefore less attention is given to each individual artist. These catalogues usually include only brief biographical information, a chronology, or occasionally a short interview with Simpson.<sup>22</sup>

The artist is also discussed in many survey texts devoted either to African-American artists, women artists, or photography. These sources also are limited in their analysis, as they are intended to introduce their reader to the artist or artworks, but fail to provide a complex analysis or scholastic discussion.<sup>23</sup> More recently, a few monographs have been published on the artist: the chief examples are entitled all *Lorna Simpson*.<sup>24</sup> The two most recent catalogues, from 2006 and 2013, are both for solo exhibition catalogues, and therefore include more scholarly information than previous studies. To understand the artwork of Lorna Simpson, it is therefore

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<sup>21</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "Lorna Simpson at Josh Baer," *Art in America* (1989): 185; Regina Joseph, "Lorna Simpson Interview," *Balcon Magazine* (1990); Roberta Smith, "Linking Words and Images Explosively," *The New York Times*, July 20, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Lawrence R. Rinder, et al. *Whitney Biennial 2002* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002); David A. Ross and Jürgen Harten, *American Art of the Late 80s: The Binational* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Sylvia Wolf, *FOCUS: Five Women Photographers* (Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman and Company, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Okwui Enwezor et al. *Lorna Simpson* (Abrams, NY: American Federation of Arts, 2006); Kellie Jones, Thelma Golden and Chrissie Iles, *Lorna Simpson* (New York: Phaidon, 2002).

helpful to consider prior sources by methodology and/or theme, as certain approaches and ideas are consistently employed in relation to Simpson's artworks.

### The Critical Contexts of Photography Studies

In regard to Simpson's predominant medium, photography, it is necessary to understand the complex aesthetic and social issues associated with the art form. Photography as artistic medium and conveyor of meaning has received much attention because of its cultural and political implications. Presently, photography is widely accepted as an art form, but this was not always the case. At its inception, photography was regarded as a lesser form of art than painting. Even as late as 1969, when James Van Der Zee's photographs were exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art show *Harlem on My Mind*, photographs "were not considered art by the standards of the Met."<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, because of the technical process of photography, the medium has often been thought to record truth, due to its empirical indexicality. As John Tagg discusses, photography, in part due to its technical and mechanical nature but more so because of its extensive use as a means of control and power, is often unquestionably understood as a "means of record and source of evidence."<sup>26</sup> Susan Sontag has also focused on the consequences of the medium's ostensible objectivity in its use and reception. Photography operates as a double-edged sword, for it has the potential to simultaneously bestow significance on its subject but also implicit in the practice is a power dynamic that can be detrimental to the person photographed. As Sontag suggests: "To photograph is to confer importance."<sup>27</sup> Carla Williams argues further that

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<sup>25</sup> Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 77.

<sup>26</sup> John Tagg, "Evidence, Truth and Order: Photographic Records and the Growth of the State," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003): 257.

<sup>27</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 28.

photography does not only depict memories but creates them.<sup>28</sup> At the same time however, the act of photographing something or someone generates a power dynamic between photographer and subject. Implementing Foucauldian analysis, Sontag argues: “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and therefore, like power.”<sup>29</sup>

Allan Sekula furthers this line of thinking, specifically applying photography to the nature of “othering” by dominant cultures:

Photographic portraiture began to perform a role no painted portrait could have performed in the same thorough and rigorous fashion. This role derived, not from any honorific portrait tradition, but from the imperatives of medical and anatomical illustration. Thus photography came to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*, to define both the *generalized look* – the typology – and the *contingent instance* of deviance and social pathology.<sup>30</sup>

This typological usage stems directly from the pseudosciences of phrenology and physiognomy aimed at defining and classifying the “other” in an attempt to justify the dominance of a single group: historically white, Eurocentric culture.

Numerous scholars have examined Simpson’s relationship with, and more specifically her subversion of photography’s underpinnings, including its inclination to create a power dynamic based on typology and “othering.” Deborah Willis argues that Simpson has created her own methodology of depicting corporeal imagery, a method that synthesizes metaphor, biography and portraiture and is similar to advertising, forcing a consumer-oriented society to take up a critical examination of race and gender. Willis states: “Simpson is one of the few

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<sup>28</sup> Carla Williams, “Collecting Memory: Portraiture, Posing, and Desire,” in *A Century of African American Art: The Paul R. Jones Collection*, ed. Amalia K. Amaki (Newark, DE: University Museum, University of Delaware, 2004), 66.

<sup>29</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* (1986): 7.

photo-artists [*sic*] working today to have convincingly challenged and re-invented photography's narrative and visual potentials."<sup>31</sup> Lisa Gail Collins argues Simpson challenges this traditional function of the camera, thus refusing to be an accomplice within this larger exploitative history.<sup>32</sup>

Conceptual photography, another practice deployed to undermine the traditional uses of photography, is also a widely discussed topic that frames Simpson's artwork. Many scholars focus on Simpson's shift from documentary style photography to conceptual artworks. Okwui Enwezor traces Simpson's documentary photography roots, which he labels "concerned photography" to the conceptualization of photography, in which images are defamiliarized from their referent. Simpson, he claims, was drawn to the "brazenly subjective" conceptual art, rather than the "putatively objective" documentary kind.<sup>33</sup> Beryl J. Wright, too, discusses Simpson's penchant for avoiding "conventional, closed meanings" and labels her photograph/text combinations "conceptual word games and impassive figures" that invert documentary portrait's "role as instruments of repressive social control."<sup>34</sup>

#### Trends in Scholarship on African-American Artists

Since Simpson's work draws on significant elements common to works by African-American artists, it is useful to survey the types of scholarship that pervaded studies of such art before the rise of postmodernism. As Sharon F. Patton describes, it took a relatively long time

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<sup>31</sup> Willis, *Lorna Simpson*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Lisa Gail Collins, "Historic Retrievals: Confronting Visual Evidence and Imaging of Truth," in *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* ed. by Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010): 82.

<sup>33</sup> Enwezor et al, *Lorna Simpson*, 107-108.

<sup>34</sup> Beryl J. Wright, "Introduction," in *Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer*, ed. by Beryl J. Wright and Saidiya V. Hartman (New York: Universe Publishing, 1992), 8-9.

for the cultural awareness of black aesthetics to develop.<sup>35</sup> This is, however, only part of a more specific problem in relation to Simpson's work, for it took a longer amount of time for the awareness of black women artists to progress. Even with the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, which sought to combat the discriminatory ideologies of patriarchal society, black women artists were still excluded from art world recognition. Lisa E. Farrington explains: "The first major feminist art histories gave precedence to women of European descent, while by and large neglecting women of color. The numerous histories of African-American art that began to appear in the first half on the century devoted most of their pages to men."<sup>36</sup> Black female artists had the misfortune of being identifying with two so-deemed "marginalities" by the hegemonic white, patriarchal culture.

With the rise of postmodernism, however, came an interest in pluralism that facilitated more attention to diversity. Artists that were once situated on the periphery of the art world (due to the exclusive nature of canonization) were finally gaining recognition. As Charles Jencks states: "The most encompassing trend...is not so much away from belief as towards an increasing plurality of beliefs."<sup>37</sup> The postmodern era emphasizes diversity and pluralism. Andy Grundberg argues: "Simpson is part of a renaissance of African-American art that, in its cultural visibility and aesthetic resonance, rivals the storied Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>36</sup> Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), from unpaginated preface.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Jencks, *What is Postmodernism?* (London: Academy Editions, 1989), 50.

<sup>38</sup> Andy Grundberg, "Afterword," in *Lorna Simpson* ed. by Deborah Willis (San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1992), 62.

## Museum Theory and Exhibition Practices

Closely linked to the fluctuations in the scholarship on African-American artists is the examination of museum practices, or museum theory. Since Maurice Berger's influential 1990 essay "Are Art Museums Racist?," critical examination of art institutions and their exclusion of African-American artists, critics, visitors, and curators has slowly developed, eventually coming to the fore in the late 1990s.<sup>39</sup> Museums, and more specifically, methods of curatorial practice have been an influential factor in the artistic careers of black artists, including Simpson. Bridget R. Cooks argues: "The history of the relationship between African-Americans and the American art museum is a study of American race relations, nationalist ideals, and contested investments in definitions of quality, beauty, and art."<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Carol Duncan explains: "To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths."<sup>41</sup>

As Deborah Willis explains that Simpson's relationship to art institutions is atypical, for unlike other black artists whose artwork has remained somewhat inaccessible to the general public, Simpson has garnered much attention from art world institutions across the globe. Willis notes: "She was the first African-American woman to show in the Venice Biennale and to have a solo exhibition in the 'Projects' series of the Museum of Modern Art in New York."<sup>42</sup> Cooks labels the new emphasis on solo shows for black artists a "corrective approach" to past exhibition and curatorial tactics and a viable method to incorporate African-American artists

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<sup>39</sup> Maurice Berger, "Are Art Museums Racist?" *Art in America* (1990): 69-77.

<sup>40</sup> Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 155.

<sup>41</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Deborah Willis, *Lorna Simpson* (San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1992), 7.

within the museum setting. Simpson herself has been featured in many solo exhibitions, the most recent in 2013 at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, the first European retrospective of the artist's work.

According to Cooks, the corrective mode is only one of the dominant practices of curatorial strategy, the other being an ethnographic approach, of which the 1969 monumental (but problematic) exhibition *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968* is emblematic. Cooks defines the ethnographic/anthropological approach as “display[ing] the difference of racial Blackness from the elevated White ‘norm.’”<sup>43</sup> Deborah Willis-Braithwaite<sup>44</sup> similarly argues that the Met, “ostensibly dedicated to art suddenly adopted a documentary stance when confronted with the visual presence of the ‘other’ within its walls.”<sup>45</sup> The now (in)famous *Harlem on My Mind* was a positive turning point in the career of James Van Der Zee, the now highly respected Harlem photographer, propelling him to celebrity status, a renewed photographic career and numerous exhibition opportunities. On the other hand, with its ethnographic focus, the exhibition presented Harlem as historic, documentary and “other.” Van Der Zee's photographs, though admired, were consequently labeled as documentary photographs rather than objects of visual culture, reducing Van Der Zee's status as a fine artist and photographer. Willis-Braithwaite concludes that the show's lasting influence was to wrongly confer upon his photographs the label of “historical document” rather than art.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 1 & 158.

<sup>44</sup> Note that I am using two last names (hyphenated and unhyphenated) for scholar Deborah Willis or Willis-Braithwaite depending on the name used on the source text.

<sup>45</sup> Deborah Willis-Braithwaite and Rodger C Birt. *VanDerZee: Photographer 1886-1983* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 8.

<sup>46</sup> Willis-Braithwaite and Birt, *VanDerZee*, 8.

By appropriating James Van Der Zee's portraits in *9 Props*, Simpson's interest in black photographic history and race relations in the art world is apparent. Furthermore, Simpson implements a "corrective approach" of her own design. She inserts Van Der Zee's work into a postmodern context and thusly confers upon his photographs the label of "art."

### Oppositional Gazes: Feminism and Post-Colonial Theory

Not surprisingly, much of the scholarship about Lorna Simpson is derived from a Post-colonial and/or feminist methodology, as her artworks more often than not include the black female body. Laura Mulvey's influential feminist film theory article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," informs the work of many scholars in the field, and her article has been labeled a "lynchpin in feminist critiques of gender and sexuality."<sup>47</sup> Michael D. Harris uses Mulvey's critical idea of the male gaze to discuss Simpson's work directly. He argues of Simpson's inaccessible black bodies: "Gone is the returned gaze, the openly available body, and any hint of dominated compliance...[Simpson] is, in essence, 'talking back' to male authority."<sup>48</sup> Mulvey's theory of the male gaze also encouraged cultural critic bell hooks to formulate what she labels the "oppositional gaze," specifically in regards to black women. hooks states: "Those black women whose identities were constructed in resistance, by practices that oppose the dominant order, were most inclined to develop an oppositional gaze."<sup>49</sup> hooks further argues that in a culture dominated by racist and sexist images Simpson portrays the black female body in innovative ways while interrogating art practices in general. According to hooks, Simpson

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<sup>47</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* (1975): 6-18; Beryl J. Wright, "Back Talk: Recoding the Body" in *Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer*, ed. by Beryl J. Wright and Saidiya V. Hartman (New York: Universe Publishing, 1992), 12.

<sup>48</sup> Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 141.

<sup>49</sup> bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 127.



refuses the transparency, or “surface understanding” so often imbued in photographs of black women; therefore, her subjects are not static and deny a simple definition of identity.<sup>50</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s argument is similar. She claims Simpson takes the hyper-visible black woman, whose body has been a receptacle of gendered meaning, and changes her to a generator of meaning.<sup>51</sup> Beryl J. Wright posits: “An impassive figure encapsulates Simpson’s opposition to the way the black and female body historically has been represented as a system of repressive biological signs.”<sup>52</sup> Many scholars are interested in the ways in which oppressive ideologies, of both gender and race, are combated by Simpson’s artistic choices.

Simpson imbues her artwork with many complex elements, but scholars usually bring her interrogation of gender and race to the fore, utilizing feminist and post-colonial methodologies. However, Simpson also challenges concepts of photography and portraiture, particularly in some of her lesser-known artworks. By examining one of these works, *9 Props*, it becomes apparent that Simpson should not be classified only as an artist interested in the gendered and constructed meaning placed on black women, but also in the constructed meaning of an art form itself: photographic portraiture.

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<sup>50</sup> bell hooks, “Facing Difference: The Black Female Body,” in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 97.

<sup>51</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Mistaken Identities* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993).

<sup>52</sup> Beryl J. Wright, “Introduction,” 9.

## CHAPTER 4

### *9 PROPS*

Simpson's mid-90s transition from images of anonymous African-American women's bodies to the postmodern visual concept that Okwui Enwezor has called a "rumor of the body" is the particular shift that I am most interested in exploring.<sup>53</sup> To do so, I focus my examination on one artwork, *9 Props* (1995) [Fig. 9], a superb example of this drastic change, both in terms of material process and stylistic choices. Without ignoring the crucial examination of race and gender in Simpson's work, I focus on her interrogation of photographic portraiture, an aspect of her work largely ignored by scholars. Like many of her other, well-known works, *9 Props* challenges a multitude of traditions. In this series of photographs, however, along with focusing on the construction of gender and race, Simpson also interrogates the construction and meaning of photographic portraiture.

The creation and final manifestation of *9 Props* are almost at odds with one another: the creative process is purposefully complicated, or "process-oriented," while the final product is simple and stark in its appearance. To create *9 Props*, Simpson gleaned a single decorative element from nine individual portraits by Harlem Renaissance artist James Van Der Zee, known for his dignified depictions of African-Americans. For example, Simpson chooses the prominent glass goldfish bowl from Van Der Zee's *Woman with a goldfish bowl* (1923) [Fig. 10] to create one of the panels [Fig. 11]. While attending an Artists-in-Residence Program at the Pilchuck Glass School in Seattle, Simpson recreated these elements in shiny black glass. It is worth mentioning that the original props in Van Der Zee's images were not black and vary greatly: some are opaque and floral while others are clear. Simpson's deliberate choice to recreate the props in black glass speak to her persistent interest black individuals as subjects, but also allude

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<sup>53</sup> Enwezor et al. *Lorna Simpson*, 124.

directly to the black sitters of Van Der Zee's portraits. Simpson photographed each glass element individually on a bare wooden table, with a neutral, negative space background. She then printed each lithographically onto felt. The felt gives the nine panels a tactile quality not normally found in other types of photographic processes, such as gelatin silver prints.<sup>54</sup>

In her usual style, Simpson then added textual elements; in this case, below each photograph is a brief textual component, including James Van Der Zee's original titles, the date of creation, Van Der Zee's name, and in Simpson's own words, descriptions of Van Der Zee's photographs. The body may have disappeared from the photographs in *9 Props*, but the text still alludes to it directly. Unlike her usual enigmatic and open-ended textual accompaniments, the textual elements of *9 Props* are straightforward and succinct. That is, if you know to what they are referring. When comparing Simpson's descriptions to Van Der Zee's original photographs, her words seem obvious, even redundant. Without knowing the original context of these descriptions, Simpson's simple descriptions become abstracted, retaining her usual open-ended and enigmatic style. Take for example, the textual description accompanying a solitary, black vase, with a bulbous base and a gently expanding opening, sitting on the corner of a wooden table [Fig. 12]:

*Reclining Nude*  
*date unknown*  
*James Van DerZee*  
*A smiling woman rests her face on her right arm as her left arm crosses her breasts. Fabric is draped over the edge of the couch, around her hips and continues to the floor. Her legs are exposed, knees bent, and her left foot is tucked under her right. Flowers are strewn over the edge of the couch and on to the floor. An*

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<sup>54</sup> Since *9 Props* consists of nine different prints, it has been displayed in a variety of ways, from a grid layout (three rows and three columns) or a completely horizontal arrangement (one row of nine). When laid out in the grid arrangement, the piece measures 47 ½ x 35 ½ inches. This flexibility in arrangement brings with it some curatorial freedom, allowing the work to change depending on its setting. There are thirty editions of the artwork.<sup>54</sup> The Milwaukee Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago and The Metropolitan Museum of Art each own a version.

*upside down vase sits on the flower, as if its position and the  
arrangement of flowers had been disturbed.*

Although Simpson references the vase specifically in her description, if one is unaware of the details of Van Der Zee's black and white portrait [Fig. 13], it is difficult to infer the signification of Simpson's pairing of text and image. The vase to which Simpson refers and which she recreated for her own artwork reposes in front of the couch on which the nude figure rests. As Kellie Jones explains of Simpson's early text/photo combinations:

On one hand, the pairing of text and photograph appeared to ground the meaning of these pieces, arresting free-floating signification by attaching another layer to the process of contemplation and thus undoing their 'own seeming innocence.' On the other hand, it often had the effect of adding ambiguity to rudimentary visual signification, for the two parts were rarely meant to mesh easily.<sup>55</sup>

In *9 Props*, Simpson keeps this complicated relationship between text and photo: the visual and textual do not mesh easily, though they simultaneously rely on one another to create and complicate meaning. Though the words of *9 Props* represent a fairly accurate, easily imagined scene, if one is unaware of the connection to Van Der Zee's original photograph and the particular prop within that photograph, one is left to ponder the connection between this black vase and its subordinate text. What should be straightforward is not; what is an unusual style for her to write in becomes usual in its enigmatic sense. Susan Sontag argues: "What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire."<sup>56</sup> Following Sontag, we might infer that Simpson's texts and images play an identical role; Simpson uses both

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<sup>55</sup> Kellie Jones, "(Un)Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson," 28-103, *Lorna Simpson*, ed. Kellie Jones, Thelma Golden, Chrissie Iles, 39, 2002.

<sup>56</sup> Sontag. *On Photography*. 4

to defamiliarize the ordinary objects in Van Der Zee's photographs and portraiture itself.

Simpson's text and image are both interpretations of Van Der Zee's images, which of course, are interpretations themselves.

In discussing Simpson's conceptual investigation of photography and its challenge to the concepts of the indexicality and purported "truth" of photographic images, it is useful to compare *9 Props* to some of the earliest photographs from William Henry Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature*. *The Pencil of Nature* was published in six installments from 1844-46. It describes in detail the calotype process (which Talbot invented) and was the "first commercially available published book illustrated with photographs."<sup>57</sup> In the publication, Talbot pairs monochromatic calotypes with a brief textual description for each. Accompanying the image *Articles of China* [Fig. 14], Talbot writes:

The whole cabinet of a Virtuoso and collector of old China might be depicted on paper in little more time than it would take him to make a written inventory describing it in the usual way. The more strange and fantastic the forms of his old teapots, the more advantage in having their pictures given instead of their descriptions. And should a thief afterwards purloin the treasures—if the mute testimony on the picture were to be produced against him in court—it would certainly be evidence of a novel kind."<sup>58</sup>

Allan Sekula argues that Talbot "lays claim to a new legalistic truth, the truth of an indexical rather than textual inventory. Although this frontal arrangement of objects had its precedents in scientific and technical illustration, a claim is being made here that would not have been made for a drawing or a descriptive list. Only the photograph could begin to claim legal status of a *visual* document of ownership."<sup>59</sup> Simpson's *9 Props* [Fig. 15] and *Articles of Glass*

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<sup>57</sup> "William Henry Fox Talbot: The Pencil of Nature – Timeline of Art History," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/190018826>.

<sup>58</sup> William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*, London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844, unpaginated.

<sup>59</sup> Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 6.

[Fig. 16], aside from the simple fact that both works involve photographs of glass objects, bear a visual resemblance to each other. Simpson, however, further complicates the relationship between the indexical image and text in *9 Props*, in which each relies on the other to communicate the idea, or the portrait, of the individual; whereas Talbot esteems the image over text. Without suggesting Simpson is purposefully referencing Talbot's images, it is nonetheless interesting to note how Talbot and Simpson regard photography's indexical and truthful qualities. The former unquestioningly embraces the indexical and truthful qualities of the medium, while the latter purposefully complicates and challenges "the mute testimony" of the photograph. The word "testimony" carries with it a connotation of truth, hard evidence. Simpson's conceptual photographs, however, challenge this and to each viewer, her recreations of Van Der Zee's photographs carry with them different meanings. In her more complicated images, she defamiliarizes what the viewer knows about portraiture, subject becomes object, and object becomes metonymic. Thus, she emphasizes photography's subjective rather objective nature.

By eliminating obvious references to portraiture, that is, as images of people, but instead creating metonyms, the glass objects, accompanied by textual descriptions of the absent figures, Simpson seems to be asking the question: "To what extent can portraiture be understood and still regarded as such without its usual signifiers?" In stark contrast to "normal" portraiture, there is a noticeable lack of the human form in *9 Props*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has noted: "In *9 Props* Simpson challenges preconceived notions about what constitutes a portrait. Rather than depicting actual people, she photographs nine surrogates."<sup>60</sup> To undermine the past usage of photography, Simpson denies to her viewer specific locations, faces and clothing, leading her to

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<sup>60</sup> "9 Props," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 25, 2014.  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/490687>

more nuanced readings rather than simplified ones. She then complicates this further by including vague conceptual textual components, thus further destabilizing the images.<sup>61</sup>

By contextualizing *9 Props* within the larger scope of the theoretical inquiry about photography, Simpson's challenge to the medium becomes further apparent. Roland Barthes, in his seminal inquiry of photography and its effects on the spectator, *Camera Lucida* (1980), uses a photograph of an African-American family, which he titles *Family Portrait* [Fig. 17] by James Van Der Zee to describe his idea of the two corresponding elements of photographs: the *studium* and the *punctum*. Barthes describes the *studium* as "a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment" for a photograph and *punctum* as the poignant element that pricks the viewer. In the Van Der Zee portrait, Barthes explains:

The *studium* is clear: I am sympathetically interested, as a docile cultural subject, in what the photograph has to say, for it *speaks* (it is a 'good' photograph)... The spectacle interests me but does not prick me. What does, strange to say, is the belt worn low by the sister (or daughter)... and above all her *strapped pumps*... This particular *punctum* arouses great sympathy in me, almost a kind of tenderness... However lightning-like it may be, the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion. This power is metonymic... is this not the sole proof of its art? To annihilate itself as *medium*, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?)<sup>62</sup>

Simpson's carefully selected objects gleaned from the portraits of Van Der Zee in *9 Props* resonate with Barthes idea of the *punctum*, as piercing details with metonymic power.

Furthermore, Barthes also claims "photography transformed subject into object."<sup>63</sup> Simpson, on the other hand, inverts this, turning object into subject. It seems as though the glass objects that Simpson gleaned from Van Der Zee's photographs are the *punctum* for her, as they have the power of expansion and the power of metonymy.

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<sup>61</sup> Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 43-45.

<sup>63</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 13.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In relation to these conceptual issues, one could argue that *9 Props* transcends its own time, negotiating concepts that have lasted from photography's inception to its present, such as indexicality and the power of the individual gaze of the spectator. As thoroughly discussed in the scholarship, Simpson has challenged ideologies concerning race and gender, but the artist has also investigated the medium and conceptual contexts of photography itself. By deconstructing photographic portraiture in *9 Props*, that is, replacing people with conceptual text and metonymic objects, Simpson invites her viewer to question photography and its subjective and constructed nature. Through deconstruction, she successfully expands the possibilities of both portraiture and the photographic medium.



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