At the age of 75, acclaimed American painter Alice Neel began work on her first and only self-portrait. In Self-portrait (1980), Neel is perched on the edge of a wide, blue-striped chair. Her hair is short and completely white; she wears gold-rimmed glasses. In her right hand she holds a brush, in her left a rag. Neel gazes directly at the viewer. She's completely naked. This image has been described as shocking, endearing, and unconventional (see Dabbs 2012, Garrard 2006). It is a key image in the contemporary representation of old age, partly because it sidesteps the art historical conventions that so often link the old body with, on the one hand, degeneration and death, and on the other hand, wisdom and self-reflection. It is also significant that it is through self-representation that Neel explores the question of ageing. Like many of the artists discussed below, Neel begins to reflect on the matter of ageing in response to her own experiences of getting old. Indeed, much contemporary art that reflects on ageing is produced by artists who have moved into or beyond middle age, and much of their work is self-representational. The chapter first considers the ways in which art historians have talked about the matter of age in the history of western art, and then examines the emergence of art, mostly but not exclusively self-representational, that positions age and ageing as central themes of exploration.

Art historical approaches

Art historian Linnea Dietrich describes ageing as a subject and theme in art as ‘uncharted territory’ (1999: 185). Indeed, there have been relatively few art historical investigations that centre on the matter of age. Those that do consider age tend to take one of two routes. The first is to consider the way in which age affects the artist, and the other is to consider what art can tell us about ageing in its historical and cultural contexts.

Art historians have often used the term ‘old-age style’ or ‘late style’ to describe an apparent tendency on the part of artists of all variety of creative activity to produce in old age work characterized by—to use Kenneth Clark’s terms—‘a special character common to nearly all their work’ (1972/2006: 79, see also Rosand 1987, Sohm 2007). For Clark, the special character shared by old artists is a ‘transcendental pessimism’ (Clark 1972/2006: 80). For others, old age style is characterized by an abandonment of the body. Dietrich describes it this way: ‘having gained wisdom and spiritual vigor in their later years, these artists abandoned their weakening bodies, and
concentrated on abstract or visionary—less physical—forms and themes’ (Dietrich 1996: 185).

Dietrich, however, is deeply suspicious of both the view that spiritual understanding of later life comes at the cost of the body and the notion that there is something universally shared by artists in old age. More recently, Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon have challenged the ageism linked to broad generalizations about the work of old artists. They question and ultimately refuse ‘universalizing theories’ that link age with, for instance, serenity, wisdom, or a ‘consolidation of themes and techniques’ (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 2012: 2, see also Berlind 1994: 21).

Another approach to age in art is to examine images of older people in order to consider what they might tell viewers about the socially constructed category of age. Herbert C. Covey (1991) maintains that when artists depict the aged or select old age as a topic, they also depict social attitudes and perceptions. With this in mind, social art historians have assessed the deployment of ageist stereotypes, paradigms, or themes in art. Old men and women often appear in western art as the embodiment of a final stage of life and a symbol of impending death. In The Three Ages of Man (1512–14), the celebrated early modern Italian painter Titian, for instance, represents three distinct periods of the human lifespan: childhood, adulthood, and old age. Old age is personified here by a balding man with a long white beard who sits contemplating two skulls. Skulls—widely recognized as symbols of death—are not infrequently included in paintings of older people, affirming the association of older people with death. Indeed, as Covey points out, the ‘theme of the elderly in contemplation of death can be observed in art over the centuries’ (1991: 173). Thus, one key paradigm for the representation of old age is through an association with decline and decrepitude. Another seemingly contradictory paradigm is the depiction of the old as wise and dignified. Covey describes Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn’s portrait of himself as an older man as characterized by ‘serenity, solemnness, and self-reflection’ (1991: 7). Additionally, it is important to recognize that the representation of age is mediated by artists’ cultural beliefs and values. In the artistic traditions of China, for instance, age is frequently celebrated—the 1507 Self Portrait by the Chinese artist Shen Chou, for instance, depicts the artist as serene, powerful, and vital in his eighties.

In the face of these overarching paradigms, some art historians have examined representations of age in order to learn more about the roles played by the aged in specific historical moments and contexts. Erin Campbell, for instance, examines portraits of old women in Renaissance Italy to conclude that, contrary to common assumptions, they held positions of power and influence in the family and community (2010). Similarly, art historian Julia Dabbs examines three artists of the early modern period to argue that they actively disrupted artistic conventions of representing old women as ‘desiccated crones and devout widows’ (Dabbs 2012: 15). In their self-portraits, Sofonisba Anguissola, Rosalba Carriera, and Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch depict themselves in old age as accomplished painting professionals and wise teachers. For Dabbs, this work constitutes an early intervention, demonstrating that ‘old age could be portrayed in a positive and powerful new light’ (2012, 15). These early modern painters set the stage for contemporary artists who, as discussed below, have often deployed images of old people in order to disrupt myths of old age.

**Contemporary art practice**

Although the work discussed above reveals that old men and women have not been entirely removed from the visual field, it is clear that there is a dearth of diverse representations of the old and ageing. In the introduction to a special issue of *Art Journal* on the topic of ‘Art and Old Age,’ Robert Berlind notes that ‘much of today’s art reflects society’s deep resistance to dealing with the reality of ageing’ (1994: 19). Dietrich similarly describes ageing as a ‘relatively recent theme
in art, introduced into the fields of art and art history largely . . . through the interventions of feminist art and theory, which asserts the value of personal experience as a valid subject in art’ (1999: 185–6).

The work discussed in the remainder of this chapter explicitly addresses age from three broad and often overlapping perspectives. The first section discusses the work of artists who have been committed to producing works of art that carve out a position for the old body in the field of art. Against the limited visibility of old people in art, the artists discussed here approach the old figure as an aesthetic object worthy of representation on its own terms. The second section considers the resistant practices of ageing artists, mostly working in a feminist register and with strategies of performance. Shaped by their own experiences of cultural invisibility and marginalization, the artists discussed refuse to age gracefully and instead perform age in ways that draw attention to the constraining nature of the social conventions that attend ageing. The final section considers the work of artists who explore ageing in very personal and intimate ways. These works, which centre not only on age, but more specifically on the experience of ageing as a protracted experience of transformation, arguably map out a desirable future for art practice and theory.

Though most of the works discussed here may be placed in the categories of portraiture, self-portraiture, and the nude, some works of art about ageing are non-figurative. For instance, Bruce Cannon’s The Time of Your Life (1997–8) is a sculptural work that functions as a countdown to its owner’s death—a computer inside a cast iron clock uses actuarial charts to determine lifespan and reports on the number of days of life that might be anticipated, or, should the work’s owner outlive the prediction, the number of days by which death has been cheated. Similarly reflecting on the lifespan, Micah Lexier’s David Grid (1995) is a grid of 75 photographs, depicting 75 men between the ages of 1 and 75, all named David. Here, Lexier visualizes the anticipated average lifespan of a Canadian man in the year the work was produced.

Against invisibility: putting old bodies into the picture

Canadian photographer Jeff Wall’s 1992 photograph, The Giant, features a nude old woman standing on the landing of a stairwell in a library. Despite her imposing size—her figure has been digitally altered to make her four times larger than any other figure in the image—library patrons climbing stairs and sitting at tables seem not to notice her. Imposing but ultimately unnoticed, Wall’s giant woman ‘brilliantly captures the tension between visibility and invisibility as it is played out among elders in our society’ (Ellegood 1999: 65)

The theme of visibility and invisibility is significant to many contemporary artists. American-based artist John Coplans positions his work against the invisibility of old bodies in modern western culture and art history. Coplans took up photography after retirement from a career as an art critic and journal editor. From the mid-1980s until his death in 2003, he produced self-portrait photographs that flaunt a body described by Chris Townsend as ‘pale, flabby, [and] hairy’ (Townsend 1998: 98). His work is comprised of large, massive-scale black and white photographs of his own body, most often his torso, always headless, wrinkled, sagging, and, in a word, old. These often surprising and strangely abstract photographs use the ageing nude figure to examine questions of scale, seriality, and repetition, but ultimately work to stake out a position for the old body in a field that has largely overlooked it.

Also working in the medium of photography, German-born and London-based artist Melanie Manchot challenges the invisibility of old age in a series of photographs printed onto large canvases. Her model is her mother, named in the works’ titles as Mrs Manchot. In the early work, Manchot’s mother is figured before stark backdrops; she is nude and often posed in conventionally
alluring ways—hands on her hips, or arms stretched behind her head. In later images, Manchot moves into colour and her mother is posed more naturally before epic landscapes—mountain ranges and frozen lakes. For Manchot, the work is collaborative. It is about the developing relationship she as a photographer has with her mother as model; it is also, importantly, a series that confronts a widespread discomfort with ageing. What distinguishes Manchot’s work from
Coplans’s is not only that she is working in portraiture rather than self-portraiture, or with a female figure rather than a male, but that the body that she photographed is posed in ways that speak defiance (Pollock 2003: 195). Like Coplans, these photographs render an old body visible but, in that rendering, they speak back to the conventions of western art history that insist that it is only the eternally young that ought to be the subject of the female nude.

Also working with the nude, photographer Ella Dreyfus’s series Age and Consent (1999) was inspired directly by an interest in the invisibility of ageing women’s bodies and the shame that many women associated with them. Like the photographs of Manchot’s mother, these images centre on the models’ desires to collaborate with the artist to engage in acts of self-revelation. Dreyfus describes their nude posing as courageous acts through which her models were able to confront their anxieties about their bodies. Manchot’s and Dreyfus’s work resonates with a similar practice by photographer Jacqueline Hayden. Like Dreyfus, Hayden began to photograph ageing bodies in order to disturb the alignment of beauty with youth (Ingalls 2000). Hayden’s silver gelatin photographic prints in a series called Figure Model (1991–6) position her ageing male and female models in (mostly) solitary poses before dark backdrops. Like the artists discussed above, Hayden is keen to challenge the invisibility of old bodies, but her project is decidedly set in conversation with the art historical genre of the nude. Rather than using her own body, or that of a relative or friend, Hayden hired practiced ageing figure models who were familiar with the classical poses conventionally associated with youth. The idealized body produced by that pose is disrupted by the reality of lived bodies—bodies that are scarred, wrinkled, sagging, and, ultimately, marked by life. In Ancient Statuary Series (1996–2000), Hayden uses digital technologies to transform the bodies of figure models into statues, often limbless, that are placed on plinths or in statue gardens. Her artist statement explains that ‘grafting older bodies into ancient statuary forms gave me the means to critically engage the visual history of ageing as one of invisibility’ (Hayden n.d.).

These artists contribute to what Anca Cristofovici describes as the ‘the visual integration of the realities of old age into an aesthetic circuit’ (1999: 277). Certainly, for all of these artists, the key goal seems to be to put old bodies in the visual field in ways that counter the invisibility of the old and, in a general sense, position the old body as an object of aesthetic beauty. The goal of American feminist artist Suzanne Lacy is not to position women’s bodies as aesthetic objects into the field of art, but to use art to negotiate ways for the expression of unheard and undervalued voices in culture. Her Crystal Quilt project (1987) was a feminist experiment that brought together more than 400 women over the age of 60 to sit at tables set up in a Minneapolis shopping centre. Over tea and in groups of four, they talked about their experiences of ageing. Twenty-six years later, Lacy organized the similarly structured public art performance Silver Action (2013) at the Tate Modern gallery in London, bringing together ageing activists—all women over the age of 60 who had been and, in many instances, continue to be involved in political action. In Silver Action, the participants talk to one another and then record their impressions of their conversations. These works function to start up conversations, and to establish speaking positions for old women within the public sphere. Other artists, similarly alert to the invisibility of old age, have deployed visual and performance art as tools for the radical disruption of social perceptions of age and ageing.

**Resistant performances: ‘doing’ age differently**

Informed by recent critiques of the social limitations placed on the old—especially old women—the artists discussed here refuse to ‘do’ their age appropriately (Woodward 1999, 2006). Whereas most of the artists discussed above appear to position age as an inevitable bodily state
that ought to be embraced rather than ignored, others understand age as a socially constructed category. More than a constructed category, however, age is also a set of expected practices and enactments. Informed by critiques of the social limitations placed on old people—and specifically, the social regulations that surround feminine respectability in old age—these artists refuse the rules of old age, and in their refusals draw attention to the arbitrary and limiting nature of those regulations.

This refusal begins with imagining other ways to be old. Japanese photographer Miwa Yanagi’s series, My Grandmothers (1999–), speaks to young women’s desires for a different sort of old age. In preparation for the series, Yanagi interviewed young women, asking them to describe the lives they imagine for themselves 50 years in the future. Yanagi constructs intricate tableaux inspired by the women’s imagined future selves. Yuka (2000), for instance, is a portrait of an unconventional grandmother. With hair dyed bright red, Yuka shrieks gleefully in the sidecar of a motorcycle—the interviewee’s story reveals that she is on the Golden Gate Bridge accompanied by a much younger boyfriend on a tour of America. Though not all of the images in My Grandmothers are explicitly disruptive of conventional expectations of women in old age, their variety indicates a desire to rethink what it means to age.

Yanagi’s futures have been imagined by young women who have not yet directly encountered ageism; other artists—and more specifically, older artists—address the struggle that many women have with their ageing selves. Celebrated American artist Cindy Sherman, for instance, began to explore the matter of age in a series of photographs made in 2000 and then again around 2009. The portraits—all untitled, all Sherman in disguise—embody the ongoing struggle of many women to (fail to) live up to the impossible standards of a youth-obsessed culture (Respini 2012, see also Meagher 2002, 2014). If Sherman’s work explores the frustrations and failures associated with growing old in a culture that valorizes, celebrates, and fetishizes youth, British artists Rosy Martin and Kay Goodridge produce photographic and video work that embraces the unruliness of a body that will not, and indeed cannot, live up to those expectations. Sherman’s women characters might be described as outrageous, but not in the unruly sense of Martin and Goodridge’s—Sherman’s women want desperately to pass as younger than they are, to cling for a few more years to the pleasures and privileges of youth. Martin and Goodridge instead revel in the discord between their middle-aged bodies and conventional fantasies of feminine respectability.

Working collaboratively, Martin and Goodridge produced several series of work under the title Outrageous Agers. Deliberately positioned to ‘peel off the stigma of old age’ (Gear 2000), the films, photographs, and visual collages that comprise this work depict the artists—both middle-aged white women—in unconventional and unexpected situations. Trying It On (1999), for instance, documents their experimentation with what would conventionally been deemed age-inappropriate clothing in the cramped changing room of a high street shop aimed at a young clientele. They try on short skirts, tight animal print dresses, and strapless tops. What really stands out is not just the anachronism of playing at being young, but the aggressive demonstration of sexuality in bodies that are post-menopausal, and imagined as post-sexual. Covey points out that sexual desires of old people have been treated with ridicule and distaste—for the aged, he writes, ‘sexual activity is taboo’ (Covey 1991: 169, see also Kauppinen 1991). Indeed, the desire to maintain a sexual identity is part of what makes the artists discussed above both unseemly and radically disruptive.

Fuelled by a similar interest in the disruptive capacities of the female grotesque, in her Cougar for a Year (2012–13) Canadian artist Dayna MacLeod challenged herself to a durational performance project that involved wearing animal print clothing every day for a year. Interested in the ways that sexual mores shift with the slide into peri- or post-menopausal middle age,
MacLeod embodies and intends to normalize the stereotype of the cougar, that disparaging category used to describe a woman over the age of 40 who, as MacLeod puts it, ‘aggressively demonstrates her (hetero)sexuality’ (MacLeod n.d.). Similar work is Canadian photographer Suzy Lake’s. In the mid-1990s, Lake imagined an alter-ego, Suzy Spice, a post-menopausal Spice Girls wannabe who dressed in platform shoes, spandex leggings, and plenty of animal print. Like the work of Martin and Goodridge, these performances highlight the impossibilities of measuring up to narrowly age-defined ideals of desirability. The work suggests the presence of social penalties that may be incurred from doing one’s age incorrectly. They also explore the potential freedoms associated with refusing to act one’s age.

Intimate reflections: representing the experience of ageing

Rather than integrating the old into visual culture, or attempting to disrupt the conventions by which older people are imagined, many artists have engaged in intimate explorations of the experience of ageing. Some have done this through intergenerational comparisons that highlight what Cristofovici describes as the ‘permanently fluctuating relationship between a younger and an older self’ (1999: 286). Terry Pollock’s Death Mask (1987) superimposes the artist’s face over a portrait of her grandmother; Hannah Wilke’s Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother (1978–81) positions Wilke’s young and vibrant body in contrast to her mother’s scarred and gaunt aged body; Speed-Split (1998) is a set of photographs of Consuelo Castaneda nestled naked into her mother’s body. American performance artist Martha Wilson’s Beauty Beastly (1974/2009) positions two nude images of the artist, one taken in 1974, and the other in 2009. The title of this work speaks to the lived experience of the old body as one marked by disgust, but the broader effect of the work is to reflect on the ways in which these bodies coexist in, to use Cristofovici’s terms, a ‘permanently fluctuating relationship’ (1999: 286). Though it is only in Wilson’s work that the two bodies are in fact the same body, all of these artists compel their viewers to reflect on the relationship between bodies that are young but will soon be old, and bodies that are old but were once young. Age emerges here as relational, as unfixed, and as an ongoing and fundamentally shared experience of embodiment.

In Martha Wilson’s Chrysanthemum (2008), the artist photographs her profile and the crown of her head over several months, documenting the growing out of her signature red dye job and the slow emergence of white hair. Age here is represented as a process unfolding over a span of time; it is also represented as an experience that can be concealed (dyed) or that can be accepted (letting colour grow out). Wilson’s pared-down performance of her own ageing here and in her Beauty Beastly period enables viewers to think about what the transformations of age look and feel like.

Conclusion

Contemporary artists, many of them moving into middle age, have taken up age and ageing as themes worthy of aesthetic interrogation and exploration. The work discussed here under three broad themes contributes to art by making a case for the inclusion of old bodies in the aesthetic field. This work draws attention to the impact that limiting expectations and ageist stereotypes have on the shared experience of age and, in some cases, models strategies for ‘doing’ age in vibrant and resistant fashion. Finally, the most intriguing and perhaps important work on the matter of age changes the conversation both within and without the field of art by insisting that age and ageing are not simply the concerns of those who have moved into the (always shifting) category of old age. From this perspective, ageing is a shared experience of all bodies. What
emerges from the most exciting contemporary work is the realization that art has the capacity to reflect not only on age, but on the very idea of ageing, understood as something that we all, from the very beginning of our lives to their very ends, are experiencing. As the work described here indicates, age is now a viable and indeed important theme in art; it is a site of interrogation, challenge, reflection. But representations of age and ageing also have the capacity to dramatically alter the ways that ageing as a shared lived process has been relegated to the study of the old, to dramatically alter, in other words, the very ways in which ageing has been thought.

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