‘Jemima Stehli: A writer’s notes’, John Slyce. From *Jemima Stehli*, Article Press, 2003

Jemima Stehli: A writer’s notes
John Slyce

I’ve always recognised a deep continuity that stretches across Jemima Stehli’s work beyond her relationship with photography and to her investment of the self and identity in object making. My first experience of her work was centred on those highly fetishised coloured resin pieces she used to make which stood in as markers of the everyday, intensely obsessive labour, and self-portraiture. I first wrote on that work in 1997 in conjunction with a show of then new British art put together to travel to the United States. We met in her north London studio and talked for a couple hours about the visceral effect that colour and form can wield on a body through its relationship with an object – form being located not solely in the thing itself but in consciousness. I remember too talk of Ad Reinhardt and making subjectivity more material in the work. Jemima had just finished or shown *Black Still Life* (1997) and I was intrigued by a line from Lawrence Weiner she had incorporated in the piece: “Things pushed down to the bottom and brought up again.” I read the statement then, and do still, outside the poetic context of Weiner’s work and took it to signify the way psychological content insistently rises back to the surface even when held long under the stilled waters of time and emotion. *Black Still Life* was a departure from the more obvious aesthetic investment in form and colour that had characterised Stehli’s work to that point and seemed to suggest a more complex representation of the gradations of hue that colour subjectivity and sexuality. *Black Still Life* was not the black of clichéd emotional content. In fact, it was not even made up of black but deeper shades of the colours that had previously comprised her palette of everyday objects. The piece was, however, very much a representation of Jemima’s emotional landscape and feelings toward her work at the time of its making. At the end of our conversation, after the tape had already run out, Jemima told me she had a photograph she was prepared to show me. She held back not because I was recording our conversation but in order that the photo-piece be seen in the context of her wider practice. She was also perhaps taking my measure as a viewer and critic. In any event, I took her hesitancy to be an expression of seriousness.

The photo-piece was *Pink Shoes* (1996) and I saw that work as documentation of a living sculpture, or body art and relating to issues of the performative self and identity in photography. I have always appreciated Jemima Stehli’s work in a state of distraction. This doubtlessly has something to do with the discontinuity and misrecognition of the body, small in stature and always animated by her voice and thoughts, that sits opposite me in her studio and then that of the projected and expansive image of another body and self contained in her pictures. These bodies are and are not, of course, the same. The photograph is always already a magic mirror that doubles sameness and compounds relations between the seeing eye, an image and the world.

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The construction of two crossed axes is perhaps useful in mapping out Stehli’s practice. Rather than one corner of the square cancelling out another, four terms – sculpture, photography, performance, painting – rotate and are kept in states of constant tension. It’s a formation that borrows more from the square dance than a Klein Group.

Photography was a partner I felt Jemima came to reluctantly. Initially hers was an approach that foregrounded the relatively unproblematic qualities of the camera as a recording device and the photograph as a document of an action that stands outside its own space. *Pink Shoes* and *Wearing Shoes Chosen by the Curator* (1997) are works that belong to that period of exploration and understanding. *Wearing Shoes*, however, deeply underscored the fact that subjectivity takes place in a corporeal space. In this piece – equal parts performance, staged photo-documentation, and an exploration of the psychical relations expressed between a curator, an artist, and 'the work' – Stehli assumes a position of extreme abjection. The photo-piece has the feel itself of an installation shot but is a document of Stehli lying prone on the cold concrete amongst the other art works in Eindhoven. She has, so to speak, drawn a line of demarcation at which the formation of identity proceeds from degree zero. There is another pair of axes, a vertical and a horizontal, on which one could write degrees of submissiveness and the degree to which Jemima could be said to be presenting herself. But I don't feel these values are ever fixed or certain. I think it's fair to say these early works are still somewhat tentative while, at the same time, they call a number of issues into question. *Wearing Shoes* would be extended and further developed conceptually and materially in the *Strip Series* (1999/2000), but it is to this earlier work that I turn when thinking the shift in Jemima's work from object making to making herself over into the object.

Something still slightly submerged at this conjuncture was the scandalous knowledge that a woman might find pleasure in the controlled objectification of her body and its image. This was stated – to the confusion of many and the irritation of most – in the furniture series: each piece ambiguously part homage and critique of Allen Jones' historical works from the late 1960s. *Table 1*, *Table 2* and *Chair* are static photo-pieces that retain, at least in my mind and memory of seeing the work installed at City Racing, a significant sculptural presence. The edge is often a highly significant area in Stehli's images and more often than not it is there that I start to read after looking. The edge is where the social content and surrounding context spills into an image and its making. For Stehli, this is a site where a number of crucial formal and conceptual decisions are made and it provides, along with scale, a means to inscribe sculptural elements into the photographic object.

The response to the furniture series challenged Stehli and raised some difficult questions to be faced concerning narcissism and the use of her body. The photographic process begins, in many respects, in the consciousness of the photographer as *the* subject of the photograph. This series constituted a going-public with her wider project when it was still largely under formation. Such public exposure is an important aspect of Stehli's work and she has consistently incorporated viewer response and critical reactions in considerations of her practice and construction of individual pieces and series. The use of the body, particularly by feminist artists, has frequently been condemned – and occasionally exalted – for its narcissism. Narcissism is an endemic feature of the culture of late capitalism with its simultaneous demands for the manufacture of desire and drives toward insular self-absorption and the outward consumption of commodities. It's important to grasp that Stehli treats both the studio and the photograph as sites and spaces onto which narcissistic impulses are projected. Each is an area where the self is enacted through performative gestures – at once inward and outward – which explore connections to and implications in the other. One possible approach toward making sense of the works that referred to those of Allen Jones, and later Helmut Newton, is that Stehli created a form of use-value in her appropriation and copying of these historical works. Working within an established

frame of visual reference permitted Jemima to present her nude body in the work as not only a material fact but also a discursive construct. The culture of the copy was ground on which Stehli operated in her earlier resin works. It was in the fetishistic handling – all the sanding and polishing that lent copies of those everyday domestic items their sheen – that she reacquainted herself with the use of the original and gave shape to a psychical engagement with the object. The connection shouldn't be overstated, but there is a link between the making process the earlier work came out of and the physical and psychological intensity of the later photographic work. In each, the self turns itself, if you will, inside out and projects internal structures of identification and desire outward. It is thus that narcissism interconnects the internal and the external self as well as the self and the other. This is a principle that has structured her work, at least since 1999 and the extended experience of producing *After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come'*.

A pivotal series in the progression to that point was *Black* numbers 1-5 from 1998. This group of images is still deeply enigmatic in my mind and has, in a sense, been passed over by many who prefer to concentrate on work that came directly before or after. *Black* numbers 1-5 is more problematic for me given the narrative action that appears to develop in the sequence. This accrues due to the fact that there is suggested movement in the staging of these theatrical works that departs from the static unfolding of earlier photo-pieces. The furniture pieces provided Stehli with an escape route concerning sexuality, subjectivity and pleasure through their art historical reference. The *Black* series offered none for either maker or receiver of these images. The series was, for Stehli, about engaging with a work and working in a more rawly exposed manner. There was an urgency she felt then about the making of these images and in many ways this unguarded series allowed her to combine formalism and fetishism in a way unrealised previously. These pieces are decisively photographic and there were many adjustments in lighting in order to strike the delicate tonal variations between her gloved hand, the cable release, a pvc skirt, her legs and the black leather stilettos. That said, they have a painterly quality further explored in later work. The degree of performativity in these images is high. I remember asking Jemima if she felt in character during their making and at the time she answered, after some thought, that she did. The slippage that already exists in the phrase 'in character' is telling: to be in character is to act according to one's own self while at the same time assuming the role of an other. 'Performance' suggests a separation of self, while performative acts bring the self into being. The *Black* series offered a similar degree of compensation as that of the furniture series. In one case, a body of art historical reference that had been foreclosed was opened up and appropriated, indeed engaged with and enjoyed; with the *Black* series, a very significant part of our active though submerged sexual vocabulary was explored. The enactment of self is explicitly social and political. In an art context and also the context of life, such acts open subjectivity and self out onto otherness and the world. It is through our particular social positions and situations that we perform and project the self – unstable and intertwined as it is with the other. Jemima recognised what she was up against rather late in her art education: history was 'his' and the language of formalism and minimalism – *tout court* modernism – appeared a male construction. I suppose this is part of what produced her astonishment at the visceral reaction she had to Ad Reinhardt's big black square on the wall at the Tate. Contained within is a dialectic of alienation and identification that finds expression, if not resolution, now in her on going work and identity.

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In many ways, the cable release is a baited element that draws me into one of Stehli's images. When it first appeared in her photos I fixated on its presence. It signified a self-reflexivity or doubling of self and produced an explicitly narcissistic link between the maker, the means of production, and an image. The cable release also always returns me to the camera and the wider context of the extended process of making images in a studio. This includes the studio as a historical site where art practices in a post-studio world were explored and defined in the late sixties and early seventies by artists who came to photography and video as a means to record actions or, perhaps as often, non-events. In such a scenario, the camera was something more than simply a recording device as it stood in for an absent audience and provided a feedback mechanism.

The some 200 takes I saw preserved in the *After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come'* (1999) Polaroids immediately called to mind the kind of exercise in bodily transformation documented in Eleanor Antin's piece *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* from 1972. Jemima's transformation was by far the more remarkable and she spent a good number of months immersed in another artist's work and, almost literally, attempting to enter the frame of another set of images. The photographs you see radically compress and erode any notion of the elongated time that stands alongside the instantaneous moment captured. Through the process, equally highly constrained and cathartic, Stehli aimed to mirror and ultimately disappear into the idealized bodily form of a targeted model and to do so while matching the technical signature of Newton's photographic original. Over an extended performative process, Stehli mimes the act of objectification in such a way that it not only disturbs its simple operation but in fact completes it. The two versions of the diptych function as documentation by articulating the past presence of a performance, but these images, at the same time, contest the notion that the live event necessarily offers privileged access to meaning or even constitutes the primary product of such a performance. These Helmut Newton pieces were the clearest early statement of Stehli's performative process of image making. They were constructed as photographs of course are, but the investment of the self – indeed the very suspension of self and attempt to identify with and in the other – carries this work onto another level of staging. These diptychs were specifically a response to the critical fall-out that surrounded the Allen Jones pieces. Stehli was trying to puzzle out if she was in control of her own image and to what degree she could be said to 'own it'. The answer is not straightforward or conclusive. The degree to which she was able to control and shape her bodily image is remarkable, but she lost her self in the process. Version 2 reminds me of this whenever I see it. In the right panel is Jemima – the one I know and speak with in her studio. The others – dressed and undressed – they belong to Newton. The identity of the maker and model is fluid in these pictures. The formal concerns, always very important to Stehli, really belong to Newton and are part of his project and making process. And yet, Jemima is saying, "Here it is, full frontal – and this is me and the way I am going to work." The Newton pictures are a response to the impossible question she was confronted with after making the Allen Jones pieces: "Would you have used your body in the work if you didn't feel it was attractive?" For me, the way Jemima conflates and collapses the positions of subject and object and enjoys doing so is perhaps answer enough. A reminder about the cable release in the Newton pictures: I remember writing that, in a very real way, it is the viewer and not the camera that is on the other end of her cable release. That still seems very true. But with the perspective of time, it's the blank space in the images where the other models would be that seems even more significant now.

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I was just listening to a tape where Jemima and I first discuss the work of Hannah Wilke. I missed Wilke's work in New York until the point at which she was ravaged by cancer and almost gone. Someone who did know it very well introduced me to the earlier work and I still remember the excitement felt. Wilke put her body, its pleasures and desires into her work at a time when the stakes were high. I've always respected Jemima's similar investment, her seriousness and considered exposure to risk in her work. Her manner of thinking and working is very controlled and conceptual, yet ultimately very human and humane. Reference has a crucial and critical function in Stehli's practice but her focus and interest is really her reactions to work either contemporary, historical or her own. This is mirrored in the relationship she aims to build into her work vis-à-vis a viewer: a considered reaction that takes in to account how an image means and works on them. In a way, all of Jemima's work is a description of her experience of being in the world and existing in a world of images. It was shortly after the Newton work was completed that Jemima asked me if I would take an active part in the making of a piece. She explained her conceptualisation of the piece and I agreed to without hesitation. The *Strip Series* (1999/2000) challenged a notion of critical distance and in this had meaning in my own practice of art writing. By that time I was already implicated in her work beyond a point at which I could still lay claim to the always slightly spurious notion of objectivity and propriety in art criticism. The mordant hilarity of Greenberg daubing some paint from a pot onto a canvas during a studio visit did enter my mind. But I didn't think through, nor could I perhaps foresee, the full psychical implications of the experience. I did grasp that the *Strip Series* seemed to interrupt the mechanistic flow of the art process expressed in the equation: *make-show-sell*. Jemima's intentions for this piece were laudable and by intentions I mean a relation between a work and its circumstances of existence and circulation. To me, the *Strip Series* exposed the imaginary relations of writer, critic, curator, and dealer in the workings of art and made material the real relations those roles play in the cash nexus that links museum, magazine, and gallery. Critical distance is here a fiction, just as the actual involvement of any bureaucratic administrator in a work is ultimately ephemeral. The moment of clarity the best art delivers is fleeting. As art reveals the truth about our world and its make up, it snatches it away again by turning the revelation into an artistic event.

The *Strip Series* made the connections in Stehli's work and the work's connections in the world explicit. I haven't really done it justice but then the series really isn't about those final images where we each enact, more or less, our public self. In a sense, the *Strip Series* stands alone and doesn't fit so easily into the narrative of Jemima's other work. Still, the later work is impossible without this series having happened. A freedom opened up for Jemima after the making of *Strip Series* and a noticeable shift took place in her working persona. She became an artist who worked in and with photography to a degree she had not been before and more fully appreciated the problems and complexities of photographic representations. It's interesting to note that in the two series before this threshold, in one she worked entirely in the idiom of another photographer (Newton) and in the later series had someone else take the picture. In the work that follows Strip it is significant that Jemima frames herself at work in the studio with a camera in her hands. Just as Jemima's body was, in a way, a mirror for each sitter in the *Strip Series*, her body was the threshold, or as Luce Irigaray would have it "the porch" in the construction of her identity and artistic universe.

Self-Portrait with Karen and then *Self-Portrait with Grace* (each 2000) employ an actually existing mirror in their construction. A mirror entered Stehli's studio out of necessity during the production of the Newton works and has remained since, galvanizing the narcissistic relationship to the image established earlier by the cable release. The work, however, that immediately followed the *Strip Series* was a group of searchingly expressive movements against a red backdrop – the same backdrop that was used in the strip with the critic Adrian Searle. *Red Turning* (2000) was made on that same day, later in the afternoon, and contains a look that appears to respond to the experience and exposure of the strip but in effect was an action that Jemima had been working over in her mind for about a year. She had the red shoes for that period and wanted to do something with those objects that was expressive and not simply "in her head". Jemima was also keen to make a work that was still sculptural and yet not limited to the confines of her body.

The colour backdrops in the *Strip Series* had a specific function in that Stehli wanted to utilise their qualities to create an object, as much as a space, that could house an infusion of personal and professional relationships and tensions within a picture. It's an approach that positions an image between a performance and an object, between a still-life and an action painting in one. There is a distinct feeling of simultaneity in her work, as if an image emerges from exactly that moment and space of suspense that hangs between a thought and its expression. The series of images against the red background began to explore anger and acts of looking. The orange series, while initially concerned with colour and the artist engaged in an expressive moment of production, turned to a more precise historical reference once again, this time the paintings of Francis Bacon. Jemima felt that these works created the possibility to turn away from an anecdotal and what she terms "pseudo-feminist" line her work had come up against. The aim, for Stehli, is to make work that produces readings that resist a moralising position. Her approach is that of a realist who wants to picture the world as it is while challenging its given understandings. In a manner similar to her relationship with Reinhardt's black monochrome, Stehli drew on Bacon's already sentimental and expressive relationship with modernism and the monochrome and made the formal image even more messy by injecting it with a raw figure and further emotional material.

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Following the Newton works and then the *Strip Series*, this body of monochromatic images liberated Jemima from the physical and psychical constraints and pressures of those earlier series. Subjectivity was once again employed to interrupt inherited languages and the formal was made impure by the insertion of emotion and mood. The triptych *Headless Orange* (2000) is the final piece in a long series of body paintings that began by closely following the compositions in Bacon's paintings but then veered to a more immediate realm of expression and bodily form. Amongst those expressive performative movements against an orange ground are works that suggest Edward Weston's equation of the body with underlying natural form and Platonic unities, and then more raucous uninhibited movements that touch on slapstick. There are also images from this series that have a pathetic broken feel, as if form and consciousness had given up the ghost. The doubled bodily volume of *Grey Green Painting* (2000) places this unstable piece in the vein of physical comedy – something perhaps overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of these painterly images. I look at the monochrome images as covering a range of mood and emotion that encompasses high comedy and the low drama of enactment, as in *Flesh (*2000) with its collapsed form sinking into the

fleshy ground. Even given the raw expression, my thoughts stray to the detailed markers of the studio in these images: the tape on the floor, the reference images and sketchbooks, proof sheets, Polaroids, the cable release, and ultimately the studio as the site where it all takes place and yet nothing really happens.

The self-portraits with Karen and Grace initiated a period of intense exploration of a dynamic of identification and objectification shared between women in a studio. The studio is a place of work, a site of production and yet one infused with subjectivity, ego and narcissistic drives. Stehli's images are articulated through signifiers of repetition: the grey floor, a referring image, lighting cables, and photographic paraphernalia. Jemima has recently come to an understanding of the way colour operates in her work concerning the formats black/white and colour. The work she does in b/w feels closer to her actual experience of a chaotic struggle to make something from desires in her studio. The colour images are less immediately self-referential and relate more closely to the figure and its representation in fashion and advertising. The self-portraits with Karen and Grace exist as both colour and b/w images. The point at which they were made is when Jemima's work becomes more boldly narcissistic and in this, elusive and complex. Both works share a structural referent in a photograph made by Newton in 1981 in the *Vogue* studio, Paris with the title *Self-portrait with wife June and models*. The Karen images are classical – self-reflexive yet still relatively straightforward. *Self-portrait with Grace* has more latent potential and it hung as a backdrop to Jemima's ongoing work in the studio for nearly a year. Grace has really come into its own as an image through the works in colour that have grown out of it. Remember the Burgin line: there is no objectification without identification. The juxtaposition of the horizontal Venus like *Standing Nude* and the collapsed figure in *Studio Nude* (both 2001) completes a dynamic of objectification and identification that was initiated in the pair of self-portraits above. Coupled conceptually with *Standing Nude*, the figure in *Studio Nude* is a body combined and doubled. In a dance of figural identities doomed to fall, Stehli attempts to simultaneously mirror and occupy the positions of the artist and her model stated in the self-portaits to which it refers. *Mirror nos. 1-3* (2001) is a deceptively simple set-up that manages to represent a body unified in triplicate with blurred limbs partially revealing a working Jemima in shoes that seem to indicate the presence of another. The wandering centre in the suite of mirror images and *Studio Nude* (2001) posits the studio as a place of production but also a perverse space – one where ritual narcissism and egotism reign alongside the vacated means of representation. My attention is drawn beyond the visual cliché of the nude again to the mundane facts of Jemima's studio and other new work in b/w.

There are no neutral positions offered in Stehli's work. We are all caught looking into the equally perverse space of a photograph – at once consciously and unconsciously aware that we are always already equal parts fetishist and voyeur, exhibitionist and flasher. Just as these reversible positions are in turn mirrored in the figures of the artist and her model as they stare into a ground glass lens and their reflection in a looking glass – subject and object come unfixed and collide as each is driven to look over and again at the other. In thinking about Jemima's work I come back to a line in *Camera Lucida* where Barthes writes: "I want a history of looking. For the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity." Jemima's work is part of such a project just as her identity is product of acts of language and looking which would comprise, when gathered together, a history of the kind Barthes longed for. But that's the beginning of another essay – one I imagined earlier and will finish, if at all, even later.