

## Representing Self-Representing Ageing Look at Me! Images of Women & Ageing

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Figure 1

### Key Findings

- Women in their 50s–60s felt more pressure from media and advertising imagery compared with participants in their 80–90s.
- Eighty-eight per cent of visitors to the project exhibitions wanted to see more images of older women, like those created through the project, displayed in public.
- Participants captured various experiences from continued public involvement, friendships and fun to fears of increasing limitations and invisibility. Images challenged stereotypes such as the ‘grumpy old woman’ and reflected rarely represented grief and loss.
- Participants wanted to see more images of ‘ordinary’ older women who were still ‘making a contribution’.
- Images produced by participants showed that women experience ageing at the site of the body, for example in the form of wrinkles and greying hair.
- Participatory visual methods gave women a sense of solidarity and ownership of the research process, impacting on well-being and a feeling of public validation.



Figure 2 – ‘Attitude’ – Taken by Laura Pannack (Eventus workshop)

## Background

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing identified as one of its objectives the need to ‘facilitate contributions of older women and men to the presentation by the media of their activities and concerns’. This was part of a new plan to promote positive attitudes towards older people. The importance of promoting positive images of older women was identified as of particular concern. Previous research has shown that older women, more often than men, are negatively stereotyped, the butt of humour, the target of a rapidly expanding anti-ageing industry, or otherwise absent from the media. In Western societies, women’s social status is attendant on physical attractiveness which is tied to a youthful and sexualized ideal of beauty. Older women can therefore feel harshly judged as they age and can end up buying into the stereotypes which are presented to them via the various media channels – newspapers, magazines, films and TV.

The ‘double standard’ of ageing has been further accentuated with the rise of the anti-ageing industry and the growing number of cosmetic enhancements on offer. Ubiquitous advertising for these products and procedures indicates and promotes a cultural preoccupation with ageing, and, in visual culture at least, is targeted predominantly at female consumers. In order to influence these expectations of ageing and old age, new sets of images need to be presented to the media that counteract

“I think there’s some people accept the ageing process and others try to be mutton dressed as lamb and others, you know, just go with the flow. I think you haven’t got to put limitations on yourself.”

Look at Me! participant

current ageist preoccupations and instead reflect the ‘contributions, strengths, and resourcefulness’ of older women (UN Second World Assembly on Ageing 2002).

## Aims

The aim of the *Representing Self; Representing Ageing* (RSRA) project, more commonly known as *Look at Me! Images of Women & Ageing*, was to involve older women in the creation of visual images, equipping them with a novel means of challenging persistent media stereotyping and invisibility. The study asked how media and cultural representations of older people conveyed ideas and expectations about age and gender.

The aims were to:

- i. enable older women drawn from different community settings to create their own images of ageing using a variety of participatory visual methods;
- ii. explore the relationship between cultural and creative activity and later life well-being;

- iii. reflect upon the contribution of visual methods to participatory processes;
- iv. demonstrate the contribution of arts and humanities to critical gerontology;
- v. enhance recognition, by policy makers and the wider public, of the authority, wisdom and productivity of older women.

## Approach and Methods

Researchers worked in collaboration with 41 women, using a range of qualitative visual methods to produce knowledge and understanding of older women's everyday experiences. In recruitment literature, 'older' was to be self-defined due to the multiple ways in which ageing and old age are understood.

### Project 1

Eventus, a cultural development agency in Sheffield, took a community-led approach engaging older women from priority neighbourhoods. Two groups were recruited:

- 1) 9 volunteers (aged 60–74) and the volunteer co-ordinator at the historic Manor Lodge site, managed by environmental social enterprise Green Estate;
- 2) 9 residents (aged 77–96) and 1 key worker at an Extra Care housing scheme called Guildford Grange.

Two professional photographers, Monica Fernandez and Laura Pannack, were recruited. Each photographer spent 6–10 days taking photographs with their respective group. Images were disseminated by Eventus at 2 local exhibitions.

### Project 2

Art therapist Susan Hogan ran a workshop for 2 hours a week over an 8 week period. Nine women, aged 43–75, completed the workshop. Each session was split between group discussion and image-making (fine art, sculpture, photography). Workshop participants discussed images of older women found in the media, art books and other popular sources. They then created their own images of ageing based on their personal experience of growing older.

### Project 3

Artist/photographer and therapist Rosy Martin used phototherapeutic techniques to explore women's ageing identities. Twelve women were recruited, aged 47–60. The workshop ran for 5 full days over a 4 week period, with a subsequent session held 3 months later to review the images and assess any lasting impacts. Initially, the women were invited to make their own photographic diaries about their lives as older women and share these within the group. Then the women worked in pairs to select specific scenarios to re-enact in front of the camera using a variety of clothes and props. These were scenes that *might* have occurred in the past or which *might* occur in the future. Each woman performed her stories while their partners offered support and took the photographs. The roles were then reversed.



**Figure 3 – Jude Grundy in collaboration with Sue Hale (phototherapy workshop)**

*"As a child, I was in trouble quite a lot, not keeping myself clean, making mischief with my cousin. So I wanted to try and recreate those feelings and where had they gone and where was that ability to play like child."*

**Look at Me! participant**



## Exhibitions

Large scale exhibitions were held at 3 venues in Sheffield, 2 in the city centre and one at a University exhibition venue. Participants were consulted in a 1 day 'intermediary' workshop about which images they wanted displayed and how they wanted them arranged. A professional curator was recruited to help guide the selection process and bring cohesion to the overall exhibition. Audiences included: participants and their friends and family; local politicians and policy makers; older people's organisations; and members of the public.

## Documentation and Evaluation

The project was documented and evaluated using interviews with participants, observation of workshops and questionnaires completed by visitors to the exhibitions. The images themselves also featured in the analysis. A project website – [www.representing-ageing.com](http://www.representing-ageing.com) – was developed to showcase the images and films and disseminate information about the project.



**Figure 4 – From Claudia B. Kuntze's photo-diary (phototherapy workshop)**

*"I feel like a prisoner of the numbers"*  
Look at Me! participant

## Main Findings

A diverse array of images was produced across the 3 projects. Visual media used included photography, fine art, and sculpture. The different sets of images engaged different critiques of images of old age. The 2 Eventus projects used professional photographers to work with the participants. In this way, it was the photographer's vision of old age and their interpretation of the brief which influenced the style of the images produced. Photographer Monica Fernandez produced a series of 'before' and 'after' photographs with the Guildford Grange residents (see Figures 1 and 5) which satirised the ubiquitous make-over format. The long wigs, red lipstick, Hollywood style sunglasses etc. become a parody of youthful glamour when worn by women in their 80s and 90s. Taking these humorous images challenged the stereotype of the 'grumpy older woman', and showed that the women were able to 'have a laugh' and engage in play.

Photographer Laura Pannack worked with the Green Estate volunteers to produce a series of photographs modelled on the formal portraiture of the early part of the Twentieth Century. She also took some tableau shots on the historic Manor Estate where the women volunteer (see Figure 2). These images have muted colours and were taken using natural light, giving them a more sombre and wistful tone. Whereas the tableaux shots show the women in a more humorous light, giving a sense of the fun the women have together, in the formal portrait shots the women appear more reflective. This breaks the convention of always wanting to show images of people smiling. Over half of the Green Estate participants were widowed, and mainstream images seldom give space for images which capture experiences of grief and loss.

In the 2 therapeutic workshops, participating women made their own images. In the art therapy workshop, most of the women took a personal approach to the brief by creating images which reflected some of their own feelings about ageing. There was a strong focus on the body, particularly ageing skin and hair (see Figure 6 for a representation of wrinkles). Other themes which were depicted in the art work were: dealing with pressures to conform to societal expectations; restrictions; invisibility; changing self through the lifecourse (see Figure 7); family history; and



**Figure 5 – From the ‘before and after’ series by Monica Fernandez (Eventus workshop)**

inner feeling/outside perception. In initial group discussions about media images, tensions emerged between participants who liked to see images of older women ‘looking good for their age’ and participants who argued that such statements reduced older women to the status of their looks/ physical appearance. These women preferred to see images of older women which showed their character and purpose and that they were ‘still engaged in the world’. However, all participants in this workshop took issue with media personalities who presented a ‘false image’ through surgical or digital enhancement and felt this put pressure on them to deny their own ageing.

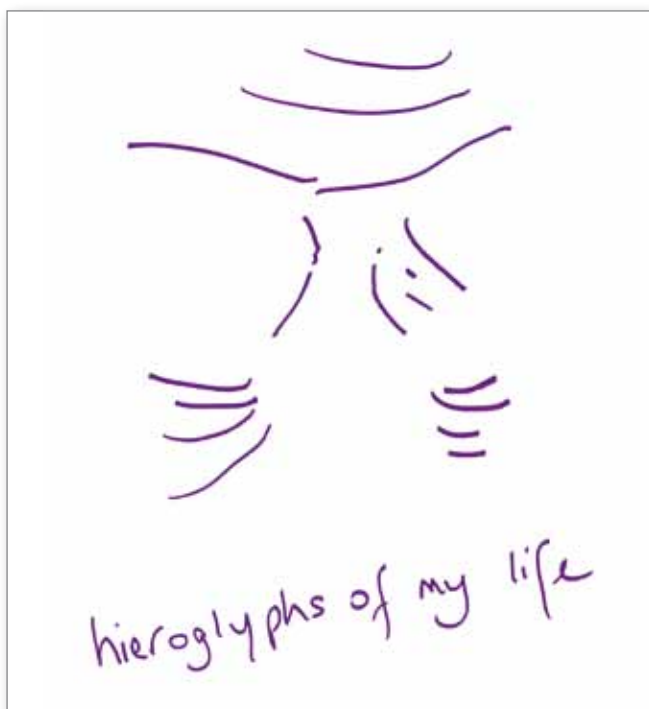
Women in the phototherapy workshop also made their own images, using the drama of the phototherapeutic process to express their later life creativity. The women began with a photo-diary exercise in order to think about their lives in a visual way. Some women used this exercise to take self-portraits (see Figure 4 as an example) while others photographed objects used or scenes observed in their daily life. Working with their photography partner in the re-enactment sessions, some women recreated childhood images or poses (see Figure 3) in order to prompt reflections on how their early life experiences had influenced their experiences and expectations of growing older. As one woman commented: “The older you get the more you remember the beginning”. Other women chose to adopt personas (Lady Gaga, Brassai’s ‘Madame Bijou’) as inspiration for their role playing. Many of the images captured the women in flamboyant, colourful attire appearing energised, playful and

*“There’s life in the old girl yet!”*  
**Look at Me! participant**

uninhibited. After the re-enactment, each woman laid out a selection of her images for the others to see and to reflect on shared themes. One woman said of this experience of sharing and talking about the images: “it just felt like a joyful, celebratory kind of day (...) fantastic images and very strong, very vivid colours.” The women bonded through the “positive reinforcement” they received from one another, and an atmosphere of solidarity was evoked.

The project shows that using participatory visual methods engages research participants more fully in the aims of the project as they feel they have ownership of the research process. Participation also has to be well facilitated and enabled, it cannot just be assumed. Sustaining participants’ involvement throughout the duration of the research required ongoing communication and constant checking with participants that they were happy with the project methods and use of the art work. However, feeling personally invested in research which had demonstrable visible outcomes (multiple public exhibitions, city-wide advertising, press coverage etc) increased the impact on the women’s well-being and sense of public validation. One participant, who was involved in considerable press activity around the opening of the exhibition, commented “this has been the highlight of my bloody life!”

Comparing findings across the 3 projects shows that baby boomers in the Third Age of life were far more conscious of older women being stereotyped, misrepresented, or absent from media images and the attendant pressures on them to look a certain way than were women in the Fourth Age, who discussed ageing predominantly in the context of illness and frailty. Across the projects, women collectively wanted to see more images of “ordinary,” “real” or “natural” older women in the media who had not been surgically or digitally enhanced. They also wanted to see different body shapes represented, older women looking powerful, independent and being heard, and older women still “making a contribution,” volunteering or “being as active as they can” so that “younger people won’t feel that fear of getting old.” Findings from the exhibition questionnaires show that 87% of visitors found the exhibition either ‘good’ or ‘very good’; 83% found it ‘thought-provoking’ and 88% of visitors said they would like to see more images of older women displayed in public. Comments from visitors express both an appreciation and a desire to see more: “I’ve thoroughly loved this exhibition. Some of the pieces brought tears to my eyes. I only wish my mum could see these images and have them speak to her as they have to me” and “excellent piece of work on a subject that needs a lot more publicity.”



**Figure 6 – ‘Hieroglyphs of my life’ by Jill Angood (art therapy workshop)**

*“It’s terrible when people like Moira Stewart are taken off the television because they’re a bit older and they don’t look right any more. So long as we keep doing that then it’s never going to get any better, if they keep on replacing them with younger models.”*

**Look at Me! participant**

## Impacts

During the life of this project, the campaign to ban heavily airbrushed and distorted images from the media has found a political voice in the form of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image and an international platform in the form of the Endangered Bodies campaign. However, the focus of both these initiatives is the effects of distorted imagery on younger women’s attitudes to their bodies. The Look at Me! project, on the other hand, draws attention to the effects of misrepresentative media images on older women. We therefore intend to promote this project and its findings to these new lobbying groups in order to raise the profile of older women in their campaigning efforts.

The images produced during the project have found many audiences. The 3 exhibitions held in Sheffield city centre attracted over 400 people (at the 2 venues where visitors could be counted). A permanent display of images is now on show at the Age UK Sheffield offices. A selection of images have also been exhibited at the Royal College of Art’s Inclusive Design conference; the British Society of Gerontology’s 40th Annual Conference; Derby University campus; and will soon be on permanent display at Swansea University’s Centre for Innovative Ageing. Images will also appear on the cover of forthcoming academic books on representations of older age. The 5 project films, available on the website ([www.representing-ageing.com](http://www.representing-ageing.com)), have been shown at the Showroom arts cinema in Sheffield to hundreds of cinema-goers.



The project has also had a lasting impact on participants' quality of life. For some who were directed towards a therapeutic approach, their attitude towards their own ageing was significantly altered as a result of taking part in the research and this effect extended beyond the duration of the workshop. For others who worked with a professional photographer in a community setting, their quality of life improved in the short-term through fun creative activities which brought attention to them as individuals as well as the wider activities of the group of volunteers/residents. Participants found that having a camera turned on them and becoming the focus of an attentive gaze for a number of hours made them feel celebrated. Lasting friendships also developed among participants, for example, some Phototherapy participants continue to meet to engage in arts activities and two Green Estate volunteers set up a new lunch club for over 55s as a result of seeing the benefits of being involved in a group.



**Figure 7 – Collage by Colleen Penny (art therapy workshop)**

*"I've had loads of pictures taken of me as I am, as a 60 year old woman which I'm ecstatic about ... I think they're fantastic."*

**Look at Me! participant**



**Figure 8 – Jill Angood (art therapy workshop)**

## Conclusion

Visual representations of ageing play a complex and subtle role in shaping and communicating the experience of older age in everyday life. The Look at Me! project involved older women themselves in the creation of new imagery designed to challenge existing stereotypes and invisibility and to foreground older women's 'contributions, strengths and resourcefulness' (United Nations 2002). Participants captured a range of experiences, most powerfully a continued involvement in public life, whether through employment or volunteering, and a continued enjoyment of life and friendships. Other images revealed aspects of ageing which are seldom seen or discussed in mainstream media, while others dealt directly with fears of contracting horizons, increasing limitations, or a fear of fading away. Creating these various images in a group context and discussing shared experiences of ageing in many cases fostered a collective spirit amongst the women and a shared desire to challenge conventional representations. The series of public exhibitions launched to coincide with the centenary of International Women's Day enabled the images to find a wider audience. Many visitors signalled their appreciation of this "celebration of the ordinary" and called for "more truthful images of older women in the media."



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