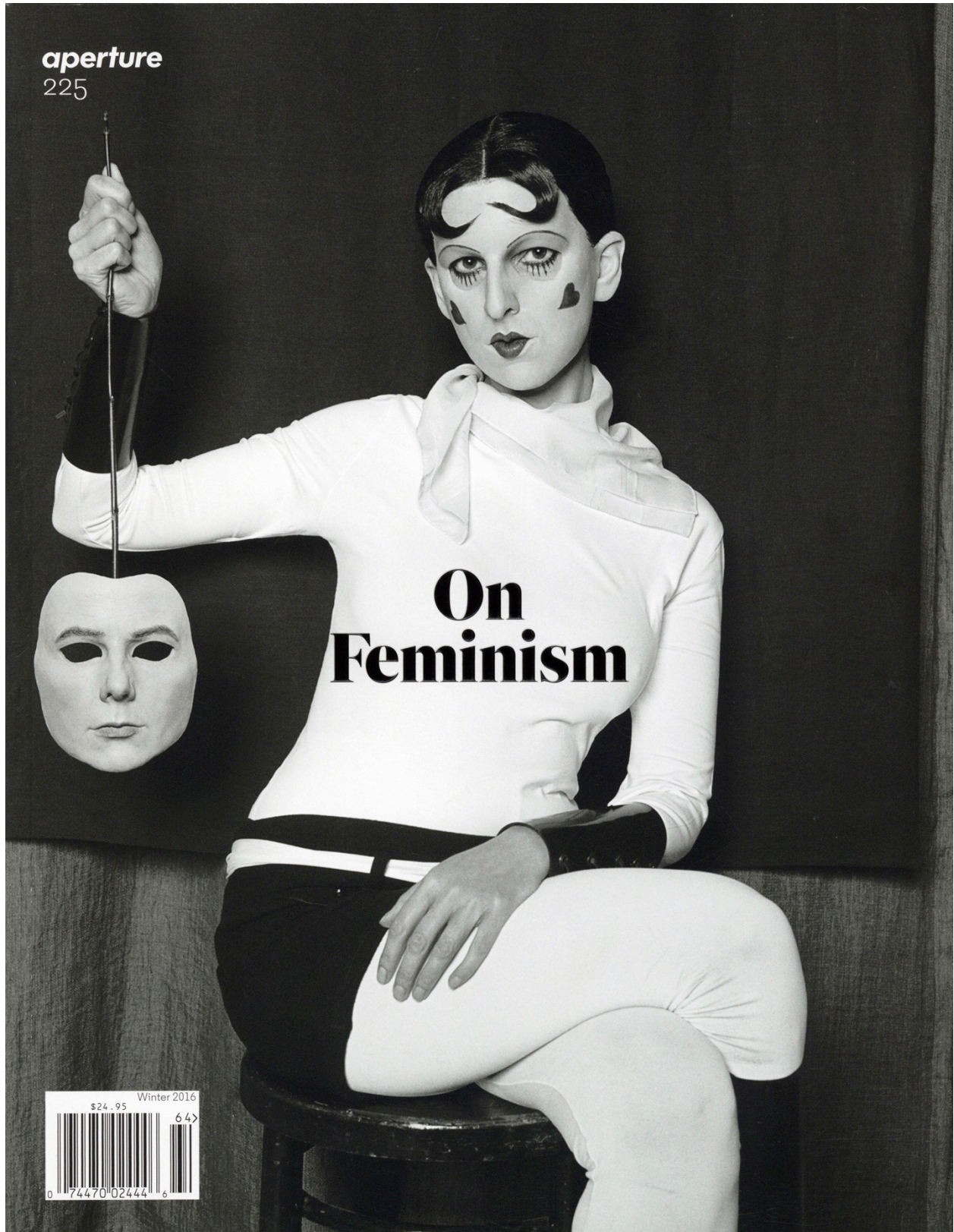


REGEN PROJECTS

Blessing, Jennifer. "Gillian Wearing." *Aperture* (Winter 2016) pp. 60 – 63 [ill., cover]



REGEN PROJECTS

Gillian Wearing

Jennifer Blessing

As a young woman, the conceptual artist Gillian Wearing posed and vamped in photo booths. In the footsteps of Andy Warhol and the rest of the world, she subsequently transitioned to Polaroids. Like today's selfies, Wearing's Polaroids often capture her outstretched arm in the act of triggering the shot. Her long-term series *My Polaroid Years* consists of instant self-portraits dating from 1988 to 2005—from age twenty-four, shortly after Wearing entered the graduate art program at Goldsmiths College in London, until forty-two, in the midst of producing her seminal self-portrait series *Album* (2003–6). The Polaroids reproduced here for the first time are selected from almost 150 that were recently exhibited by her New York gallery in a wooden vitrine, like museum artifacts, thus indicating their relationship to her career-long fascination with self-documentation.

In roughly chronological order, a pageant of images reveals the artist's experiments with wigs and hairstyles, makeup, lighting, and pose. The images recall the Polaroid's professional use as a test medium for more expensive color film. But when Wearing made these shots she had no other project in mind. She used the Polaroid camera as an existential recording device—to fix her self-reflection or to try out a new look. Consequently, the domestic settings of the pictures seem insignificant in comparison to the artist's visage, which is often rendered luminous and masklike by a blast of flash reflected off pancake makeup.

Wearing pairs these eighteen Polaroids with a previously unpublished self-portrait from 1991 entitled *Me:Me*, which literalizes self-reflection through its mirror image and collapses the male/female binary into a multiple representation of self, a move that seems to herald the series *Me as ...* (2008–13), where she recreates iconic photographic portraits of members of her "spiritual family"—artists like Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe—in the process suggesting that identity is not only transtemporal but also transgender. This theme extends to *Me as Cahun Holding a Mask of My Face* (2012), pictured on the cover of this issue, in which Wearing inhabits the guise of Claude Cahun, the lesbian Surrealist writer and artist. Rediscovered in the 1990s, Cahun was known for her gender-bending, theatrical self-portraits. Wearing, like Cahun, conceives of gender as multivalent.

Across these private instant prints, Wearing seems to be wrestling with the public masquerade of femininity, documenting a conversation with herself. The photographs reproduced here date from the first ten years of *My Polaroid Years*. The last image presented was shot several months after she catapulted to fame as the winner of the Turner Prize in 1997. Wearing stopped taking Polaroids at the moment when digital was replacing analog, and yet she remained faithful to the indexical mark by creating real masks to wear. In 2000, she made her first bona fide self-portrait, in which she wore a rudimentary mask of her own face with only her eyes exposed: a portrait of the artist playing the role of herself.

Opposite: *Me:Me*, 1991

Overleaf: *My Polaroid Years*, 1988–2005
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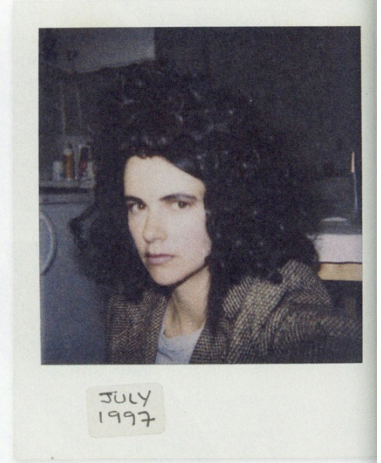
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APERTURE 60

REGEN PROJECTS



REGEN PROJECTS



APERTURE 62

REGEN PROJECTS



1989



1990



MARCH
1991



JULY
1991 91



DEC
1992



JULY 1993



1997



1997



August 1998

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