

ELIZABETH WOLFSON

Matching Bodies, Matching Souls: (re)constructing gender in Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe's *Horses* photograph



Fig. 1. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Horses*, 1975: <http://www.expatica.com/upload/paul/PattiSmithHorses.jpg>

Patti Smith's first full-length record, "Horses," was released in November 1975. The record's front cover image was a photograph of Smith, taken by her close friend Robert Mapplethorpe (fig. 1). Though created for a specific purpose—marketing an item to be sold in record stores around the world—the photograph functions in several ways: as a commercial image; as an intimate portrait of a close friend; and as an *objet d'art*, a "Robert Mapplethorpe photograph," eligible for display in museums, art galleries, and within expensive coffee table books on the artist's work. The image is iconic of both Smith as an individual and a specific moment in American cultural history, a moment characterized by deep social anxiety. This cultural milieu inspired the work of artists like Mapplethorpe and Smith, who created new ways of imaging the world in response to the challenges of their time. This essay seeks to explore this relationship between cultural production and the historical moment of creation, demonstrating how photographs are shaped by these specific moments and how they in turn push back and reshape the culture that produces them.

By tracing the story of Mapplethorpe and Smith's "Horses" photograph in its many incarnations—through its conception, creation, and reception—the image is removed from its iconic isolation and placed back into the cultural and historical context in which it was created. In doing this, I draw on the method suggested by visual culture theorist Allan Sekula, who writes of the ways photographic archives can manipulate photographs' histories, and how photographs can be understood through "the complexity and richness of use" and context.¹ As a journalist writing for *The Guardian* put it, "in the collective consciousness, Smith remains labeled

as the prototype punk-poet pictured on her 1975 debut *Horses*, as if Robert Mapplethorpe had not so much photographed her for that album cover but pinned her like a beetle to a piece of green baize.”² This idea reveals much about the way photographs are used to make the human body knowable through the surveillance technology of photography, as discussed in the work of photography historian John Tagg.³ It also speaks to both photography historian Gregory Batchen’s conception of photography’s function as memorial and to photography theorist Roland Barthes’ idea of photography as false memory.⁴ While photographs can serve all these purposes, such usage has the potential to flatten the photograph’s complex meanings and history, allowing it to tell only certain, sanctioned parts of its own story, which depend on the archive it inhabits. The “Horses” photograph exists within a variety of archives: the archive of music history, visually catalogued by album covers that designate specific recording projects; the archive of photographic works by Robert Mapplethorpe; and a personal archive of photographs taken of one friend by another. In seeking to break down the boundaries that archives utilize to create and maintain certain prescribed meanings, I make use of visual culture historian Shawn Michelle Smith’s “critically comparative interpretive visual methodology,” which she articulates in *Photography On the Color Line: W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and Visual Culture*. This methodology “reads visual archives against one another to find photographic meaning in the interstices between them, in the challenges they pose to one another, and in the competing claims they make on cultural import,” to the end of creating a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the image and its cultural and historical significance.⁵ By reading the photograph through other images produced by Mapplethorpe, statements made by Smith regarding her past and her career, the work of historian Natasha Zaretsky on the cultural crisis of the 1970s, and the theories developed by Birmingham School scholar Stuart Hall and his colleagues regarding the functionality of subcultures, I seek to merge the boundaries erected by these separate archives, allowing their distinct and disparate meanings to be reclaimed by the image in question. I additionally utilize post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler’s arguments regarding the performative nature of gender

to further explicate the resistant nature of Smith and Mapplethorpe's cultural production. Despite the fact that Mapplethorpe and Smith share equal credit for the creation of the image, this essay privileges Smith's part in its history over that of Mapplethorpe. Though it was Mapplethorpe who formally created the photograph, it was Smith's vision and interpretation of her persona that lent the image its power, and her work that was the impetus for its creation. Therefore, it is Smith's role in this history that is the primary subject of this analysis.

In *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, Stuart Hall and his co-authors theorize the role of culture in Western, industrialized societies in a way that is useful in understanding the (sub)cultural work of Smith and Mapplethorpe as artists operating outside the mainstream of American culture. In this collection, Hall et al synthesize Marxist theory and semiotics to demonstrate the way that social groups, situated in historically specified material conditions, create and use culture.⁶ As Hall et al explain, "Culture, then, embodies the trajectory of group life through history: always under conditions and with 'raw materials' which cannot be wholly of its own making."⁷ However, in the same way that any given society is never uniform but rather made up of different classes constantly in conflict with one another, the culture of any large society is similarly multifaceted, and coexisting cultures engage in a dynamic struggle that mirror the classes' ongoing battle for political and economic domination.⁸ Thus in the same way that one speaks of dominant and subordinate social groups, one similarly speaks of dominant and subordinate cultures. Located within these "class-cultural configurations," Hall et al define subcultures as "sub-sets—smaller, more localized and differentiated structures, within one or other of the larger cultural networks."⁹ Thus in analyzing a particular subculture and its productive work, the authors argue one must first relate its function to the culture of which it is a subset (the "parent" culture), and then to the dominant culture. In the case of *Resistance Through Rituals*, Hall and his co-authors' project is to do this work via an analysis of British post-war youth subcultures, demonstrating "how youth sub-cultures are related to class relations, the division of labor and to the productive relations of the society,

without destroying what is specific to their content and position.”¹⁰ By offering an analysis of the specific material and historical location of the youth cultures with which they are concerned (i.e., the working class economy of post-war Britain), the authors are able to decode the cultural “signs” employed by these groups, and make legible the ways these signs are utilized in the ongoing process of hegemonic struggle between a subordinate social group and the dominant class.

Thus, in order to understand the expressive work of the “Horses” photograph, it is essential to understand the specific conditions of the historical moment in which it was created. Taken in 1975, this photograph was conceived at the midpoint of a decade characterized, as historian Natasha Zaretsky argues in *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980*, by a rapid succession of intense political and economic challenges that resulted in a deep sense of cultural crisis.¹¹ These challenges included the United States’ military defeat in Vietnam; the OPEC oil embargo that began in 1973; the economic recession that began in that same year; the rise of Japan and West Germany as industrial powers, perceived as capable of threatening the United States’ status as the world’s largest industrial economy; the simultaneous deindustrialization of the American economy; and the Watergate scandal in 1974, followed by the resignation of President Richard Nixon. This rapid-fire series of trials, Zaretsky argues, “not only undermined the postwar order. [It] also challenged the exceptionalism at the center of American identity—the idea that the United States did not lose wars, its natural resources were boundless, its leaders wise and secure, and its economy capable of infinite expansion.”¹² Journalists and policymakers began to speculate that Henry Luce’s much-touted “American Century” was coming to an inglorious and premature end.¹³ Though this sense of national anxiety was precipitated by material factors, both political and economic, it was simultaneously experienced within the dominant American culture as an ‘identity crisis.’ As a nation’s identity is produced (and reproduced) at the level of culture, the crisis of the 1970s thus occurred at all levels of American society—political, economic, and cultural. In their solo and collaborative artistic practices alike, this sense of crisis shaped both

Smith and Mapplethorpe's cultural production, and it is within this context of high social anxiety that the "Horses" photograph must be understood.

In the photograph, the formal title of which is *Horses, 1975*, Smith stares unflinching into the camera, her pale face framed by jet-black hair that is set out starkly from a white background. A faint triangle of light is projected on the wall directly behind her left shoulder. The verticality of her long, aquiline nose is punctuated by the stern horizontal of her mouth below it, its right corner angled upwards in the smallest suggestion of some humor or pleasure. Smith stands with her body turned slightly away from the camera, both hands covering her chest as one slings her jacket over her left shoulder, the other grasping her suspenders. Smith's face is free of make-up; her hair is cropped short and mussed; there is the slightest trace of facial hair above her upper lip. In short, there is an ambiguity contained within this image that sets it apart, visually, from any album image of a female artist that preceded it.

The photograph, taken by Mapplethorpe expressly for the album cover, was, in some ways, simply one of many that he had shot of Smith, his closest friend; upon his death in 1989, she stood as his most photographed subject besides himself. Despite this familiarity in relating to each other as photographer and subject, this portrait, as the cover for Smith's first major label release, was different. Poet Janet Hamill, a close friend of Smith's, recalls that, "Robert and Patti talked about the cover endlessly," debating what look Smith should go for, arguing "about what 'glamour' was. He had much more conventional ideas than she did, and ultimately I don't think she paid a lot of attention to him."¹⁴ Through these discussions, Smith was clearly formulating a specific self-image, and despite Mapplethorpe's role as her partner in that formulation, ultimately it was her notion of her image that was captured in the photograph. According to Mapplethorpe biographer Patricia Morrisroe, his vision of the image rotated primarily around the triangle of light he had noticed appearing every day on his studio wall; when he shot the photograph, he was careful to position Smith so that its hypotenuse extended visually from her collarbone, so that it looked, in his mind, like an angel's wing.¹⁵ However, it is not

this formal element that is most striking about the image, but Smith herself, her confrontational stare and ambiguous gender identity. On this point Mapplethorpe was not totally in step with Smith; he asked her, “Don’t you even want to use a comb?”¹⁶ Smith refused, and Mapplethorpe, trusting her vision, acquiesced. Writing about the image in 1998, Smith recollects the shoot: “Robert worked swiftly, wordlessly [...] There was a triangle of shadow he wanted. The light was changing [...] He asked me to remove my jacket because he liked the white of my shirt. I tossed the jacket over my shoulder Sinatra-style, hopefully capturing some of his casual defiance. That was the shot Robert chose.”¹⁷ Thus Smith, while needing Mapplethorpe’s photographic abilities to capture the image she envisioned, did not just use him to snap the shutter- she respected and valued his artistic vision as much as her own.

While Mapplethorpe was confident of the power of the image he had captured and trusted Smith’s vision completely, Clive Davis, the president of Arista Records, failed to share their point of view. Upon receiving the image, his impulse was to abandon it, feeling that “it was one thing to write a reggae song about suicide on a lesbian beach, [but] it was commercial suicide to place a black-and-white photo of a sexually androgynous woman on an album cover.”¹⁸ Obviously there was unsanctioned power to the “Horses” image that, while acceptable in Smith’s music, became taboo once it was made visual. Davis objected to Smith’s entire personal image in the photograph- as a female musician, she was supposed to follow “one of the unwritten rules of the record business” that women should adhere to conventional understandings of feminine beauty, or at the very least be recognizable as women.¹⁹ When it became clear that Smith would enforce the stipulation in her contract with Arista that she have full creative control of her work, Davis requested that, at minimum, she allow the hair above her lip to be airbrushed out of the picture. Smith, recalling her refusal years later, claims that she told Davis that, “‘Robert Mapplethorpe is an artist, and he doesn’t let anyone touch his pictures.’ I didn’t know that for sure—maybe he wouldn’t have minded—but *I* would have.”²⁰ This quotation is further evidence of the fact that Smith needed Mapplethorpe

to convey the image she envisioned; in this case, his role as “artist” gave Smith an excuse to defy the conventions of the record industry, ensuring that her project would succeed.

This story of the photograph’s creation conveys how essential the closeness of Smith and Mapplethorpe’s relationship and their empathy for each other’s creative vision was to the formation of this particular image. The nature of this relationship is attested to in Mapplethorpe’s telling of their meeting in 1967. According to him, he was asleep in his room at the Chelsea Hotel when Smith burst in, looking for someone else. “I woke up, and there was Patti. We recognized each other’s souls instantly. We had matching bodies. I had never met her, but I knew her.”²¹ The two immediately fed each other’s creativity and helped determine the direction of their work. For example, Smith would repeatedly credit Mapplethorpe for encouraging her to draw and incorporate her poetry into her drawings. As she told Dave Marsh in an interview for *Rolling Stone*, “...he loved my poems. I was nebulous when I came to New York, I had this total maniac energy and my *Don’t Look Back* walk. And I met Robert and he helped me take all this totally nebulous energy and put it in a form.”²² Living together at the Chelsea and working together at this vital juncture in their creative lives, Smith and Mapplethorpe forged a bond that would last until his death. She referred to him as her “soul-twin”;²³ she has been referred to as his “alter ego.”²⁴ The importance of this relationship between Mapplethorpe and Smith is the degree of closeness they shared and the nature of their relationship as co-creators, working on projects that, while often separate, frequently overlapped and intertwined. Sometimes these projects involved specific creative works, such as Mapplethorpe’s regular use of Smith as a model as he developed and refined his photographic practice, or their joint show of their artwork at the Robert Miller Gallery in 1978.²⁵ But the most important project they collaborated on, from which both their artwork grew, was their lives as professional artists and public figures.

For Smith, this public image was inextricably linked to her experiences as a child, casting about for female artists to serve as role models and finding few that

satisfied her visions. She would repeatedly articulate early feelings of alienation through her sense of gender difference. An oft-quoted statement of hers is “Ever since I felt the need to choose, I’d choose male.”²⁶ “[W]hen I was a teenager, I listened to Nina Simone, another strong female. But in terms of women I could relate to, there weren’t too many. I related to Lotte Lenya [a German singer/actress], but I related more to Bob Dylan. I loved Billie Holiday, but as a performer I related more to Mick Jagger.”²⁷ Her need not just for viable gender alternatives but for someone to experience them with is made clear in another comment about her childhood: “I was searching for someone crossing the gender boundaries, someone both to be and to be with. I never wanted to be Wendy- I was more like Peter Pan.”²⁸ By 1975, Smith had found that partner in Mapplethorpe, and with him was able to make that crossing. However, despite this sense of dissatisfaction with traditional constructs of femininity, Smith never completely rejected her female identity. While she may have felt unable to identify with the female figures in her life as she viewed them growing up in the 1950s and 1960s and as a young adult in the early 1970s, and while her record label may have described her as “beyond gender,”²⁹ for Smith this did not necessitate adopting a masculine identity. For all of her admiration for and idolization of male rock stars, within her own music she retained a conscious identification with femininity: “We’re not like a male band [...], building and building until the big spurt at the end. We’re a feminine band, we’ll go so far and peak and then we’ll start again and peak, over and over. It’s like an ocean.”³⁰ Less interested in adopting another gender, Smith’s project was to play with her own gender identity, shaping it to her will, and ultimately reshaping it within American culture.

This fluid notion of gender, exemplified by the “Horses” photograph and central to the image’s visual power, anticipated by over a decade the theories of Judith Butler as expounded in her seminal text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler’s groundbreaking work, which challenged the traditional feminist theory regarding the fixed, and thus inherently political, nature of gender identity, reads like a scholarly version of Smith’s proclamations to the

press regarding her frustration with dominant social constructions of gender based on a binary model of mutual exclusivity. For example, in describing her project in *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes, “Precisely because ‘female’ no longer appears to be a stable notion, its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as ‘woman,’ and because both terms gain their troubled significations only a relational terms, this inquiry takes as its focus gender and the relational analysis it suggests.”³¹ Butler suggests that the power differential enabled by gender is located less in one gender’s use of social power to hold the other in a subordinate position than in the binary model itself, which, through social discipline, creates gendered subjects, teaching them how to “perform” gender, and ultimately serving “the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain.”³² Smith evidently sensed this performative nature of gender at a young age, as exemplified in her early desire to play as (in essence to *perform* as) Peter Pan rather than Wendy. Similarly, Butler concludes that

acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.³³

Because gender draws its social power in large part from the invisibility of its construction, the fact that it operates within the dominant culture as a form of ‘common sense,’ Butler argues for the resistant power of drag, which “fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.”³⁴ Though in the “Horses” photograph Smith may not completely attempt to pass as male—her appearance is more ambiguous than unquestionably masculine—she nonetheless plays with gender in a manner that renders gender a question rather than a fixed and easily readable set of signs.



Fig. 2. Robert Mapplethorpe, Lisa Lyon, 1982: http://www.erlingwold.com/uploaded_images/RM_LisaLyon1982c_500-764310.jpg



Fig. 3. Robert Mapplethorpe, Self-Portrait, 1980: http://co.guggenheim-deployment.com/media/previews/93.4288_ph_web.jpg

Several of Mapplethorpe's works that followed the creation of the "Horses" image demonstrate that, regardless of whatever initial hesitation he may have expressed, he was an ideal partner for Smith in this project of challenging gender norms. In these photographs, Mapplethorpe similarly contrasts social practices of gender identification to biologically determined sex. For example, this conflict is at the forefront of Mapplethorpe's portraits of female bodybuilder Lisa Lyon, whom he photographed extensively throughout the early 1980s. In the image entitled *Lisa Lyon, 1982* (fig. 2), we see only the bared upper right quadrant of Lyon's torso; Mapplethorpe has dissected her body with mathematical precision, presenting it to the viewer like a scientific specimen. Her right arm is held at a perfect ninety-degree angle, hand clenched in a fist, bicep flexed. The firm musculature of her bicep and the hardness of her fist strongly contrast the softness of her breast. Tufts of underarm hair are visible within the shadow created by the hollow of her armpit. By presenting Lyon in this fashion, Mapplethorpe reduces her to those bodily sites where social constructs of gender collide and become ambiguous. Her identity as a biological female is indicated by her female breast, but this feminine identity is challenged by her highly developed bicep muscle, the aggressive manner in which it is presented to the viewer, and the presence of underarm hair, elements that are culturally indicative of masculinity. Yet the presence of her female breast asserts the biological fact of her sex. In this image, Lyon's breast serves the same purpose as Smith's name on the cover of "Horses," which labels her female while the mode of her representation suggests masculinity. Thus, with this photograph Mapplethorpe revisits, though with a different subject, the same territory of gender construction that he explored with Smith seven years earlier in *Horses*.

Mapplethorpe's self-portrait entitled *Self-Portrait, 1980* (fig. 3), in which he uses various markers of femininity to make ambiguous his own gender identity, further evidences his interest in gender construction. In his self-portrait, Mapplethorpe simply flips the gender/biological sex dynamic, making feminine his biological maleness. Thus, *Self-Portrait, 1980* contains many of the culturally defined markers of femininity that Smith foregoes in the "Horses" photograph:

carefully done, flowing hair, flawless and dramatic make-up, sensually parted lips. There is also the baring of skin, a revealing of the body more associated with images of women than those of men. However, while making use of these signifiers of femininity, Mapplethorpe simultaneously makes no effort to conceal his masculinity. As Lyon's female breast serves to assert her female sex, Mapplethorpe's lack of female breasts highlights his maleness. This conceptually parallels Smith's unwillingness to fully reject her biological gender identity. As Fritscher comments, "[Mapplethorpe's] 'androgyny' was essentially pop cultural and commercial. He never gave any evidence of wanting to be a woman... Touching up himself with cosmetics associated with women, Robert experimented with putting on one of the masks women often wear to see if he could work the sex and magic of his camera to break through to the other side of gender."³⁵ It is possible that this effort towards "breaking through" that Fritscher discusses in reference to the 1980 self-portrait is a later incarnation of the same project begun five years earlier with the "Horses" photograph.

For Smith, however, this project extended outside the realm of photography; it was her life's work, part and parcel of her music and her career as a professional artist. The clothes she wears in the "Horses" photograph are not a costume; on the contrary, she refers to them as "a uniform" that she wore "on the stage and in the street."³⁶ In an interview in the *New York Times Magazine*, she explained its elements:

A black boy's suit jacket from Saks Fifth Avenue. Once, I went to Saks and watched a 13-year-old Catholic boy and his mother choose a suit, then I bought the same one. It's my Baudelaire dress suit. Then a white cotton T-shirt—either one with Keith Richard's picture or a Performance Cycles [a motorcycle company] shirt. On top of that, a black silk shirt. Black pegged pants. Sometimes a black schoolboy's tie or a black ribbon satin tie. Then white shoes, a tribute to the Rolling Stones 'High Tide and Green Grass' greatest hits album. Brian Jones always wears white sneakers. I wear either white ballet slippers or white Capezios.³⁷

Smith's "uniform" hinted at a vision of a new rock'n'roll that maintained many of its touchstone elements of outsider rebelliousness (the motorcycle being, depending on how you read it, a reference to James Dean, Bob Dylan, or the Hell's Angels) and masculinity, while inserting the avant-garde, poetic aesthetic of Baudelaire into the mix. Smith claimed all these influences for herself and her work, wearing them not only on her sleeve but her entire, female, body. It was this message that Smith conveyed by wearing her "uniform" in the "Horses" cover photograph. Combine the white cotton T-shirt and the black silk shirt in the above description, and you get the white cotton button up with the frayed sleeves of the "Horses" image; swap a pair of suspenders for the black schoolboy/ribbon tie, and you have same outfit completely.

The conception of this outfit as "a uniform" is critical, as it conveys a sense of obligation and a lack of choice: one wears a uniform because one is forced to by an authority, in order to erase individuality and make a group of people indistinguishable from each other. The use of this term reveals a particular self-identification on Smith's part as either an industrial factory worker, actively engaged in a methodical process of constructing her identity, or perhaps as a soldier, fighting against the constructs forced on her by society. In either use there is a dual sense of compulsion and professionalism. This was not merely a hobby or creative whim; this was her life's work. Additionally, both associations locate Smith in relation to a specific (working) class, marking her artistic production as an expression of that class position. By appropriating and recombining particular items of clothing into her "uniform," Smith connected herself to a subcultural history in which, as Hall et al point out in *Resistance Through Rituals*, "working class culture has consistently 'won space' from the dominant culture" in which subordinate groups can "exert[...] 'informal social controls'" that speak to the lived experience of the class and resist the disciplinary power of the dominant culture.³⁸ Thus, one of the central empowering aspects of the appropriation of space is the visibility it allows subcultural groups. In addition, Smith's appropriation of clothing achieved what

Hall et al call the “resignification of commodities,” a strategy commonly utilized by subcultural groups in their expressive work.³⁹ Because commodities’ meanings are socially constructed, subcultural groups gain power when they “change or inflect [the commodities’] meaning.”⁴⁰ By choosing to don her rock’n’roll uniform in the photograph that would serve as the cover of her first record, Smith claimed a literal subcultural space within the record racks of the music industry. Such resistant moves demonstrate that Smith was not only pushing back against dominant American culture; she was attacking the rock music industry itself.

This fact is evident not only in Smith’s visual style, but her musical style as well. While Smith was not the first rock musician to utilize a highly poetic lyrical style, by fusing her poetic idealization of avant-garde French poets such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud with a sonic harshness based on unabashedly “limited technique and intense feeling,”⁴¹ she pioneered a sound that would come to be one of the defining characteristics of punk rock. Sheila Whitely identifies Smith’s impulse to create this new sound as an attempted “radical feminization of rock,” taking a traditionally male idiom and inserting what Smith herself saw as “female” musical concepts, demonstrated by her characterization of her band as a “feminine band.” However, Smith was reacting to more than just restrictive gender constructions within both rock’n’roll and society. At this time, Smith saw rock music, which she loved so dearly, as being embroiled in crisis, bloated with its own successes and in danger of destroying itself. Reflecting later on her early years in New York, Smith says, “I took to studying Hank Williams, got me a Bob Dylan songbook, banged away on an old thirties Gibson. I worked in a bookstore. I drew. I modeled for Robert[...] I wandered through the debris of the sixties. So much joy yet malcontent. So many voices raised, then snuffed. My generation’s heritage seemed to be in jeopardy.”⁴² She further elaborates this point in an interview for *Rolling Stone*: “I seriously worried that I was seeing the decline of rock and roll. It was stadium rock and glitter bands. It was getting square from Peter Frampton on up. So I started aggressively pursuing what we were doing[...]”⁴³ Smith saw that, despite the artistic achievements of musicians she so admired—Dylan, the Rolling

Stones, Jimi Hendrix—rock was destroying its brightest stars, and its commercial success was distancing it from its gritty roots. Rock needed to change, reinvent itself, not just to make it more inclusive, but also to ensure its survival. “I just feel like a whole new thing’s happening,” she said in a 1976 *Rolling Stone* interview. “It’s time to figure out what happened in the Sixties. What we can get from the Sixties is that people got so far out that old concepts were really dead[...] People don’t know it yet, but future generations will. That’s why I’m working on a link—to keep it going.”⁴⁴

Given Smith’s subcultural relation to a dominant culture beset by a cultural crisis, it is not surprising that, as a rock musician, Smith experienced this crisis in the context of her immediate sub-cultural milieu. As Hall et al comment, “Subcultures, then, must first be related to the ‘parent cultures’ of which they are a subset. But, subcultures must also be analyzed in terms of their relation to the dominant culture—the overall disposition of cultural power in the society as a whole.”⁴⁵ As American society attempted to cope with the implications of the defeat in Vietnam, its rapidly deindustrializing economy, and myriad other political and economic troubles, a narrative emerged at the national level that revolved around a sense of premature decline. Because of Smith’s remove from the dominant culture, she read this crisis into her own subcultural location, attributing her problems with rock music not to the music itself, but rather locating them within the *culture* of rock musicianship, blaming rampant drug use, pandering to audiences, and blatant commercialization for the music’s decline. Seeing herself as the one destined to “keep it going,” Smith had to construct a personal narrative worthy of those whose shoes she sought to fill. Thus, her early interviews are full of wild and often conflicting stories about her past, portraying her background with the broad strokes of rock folklore. Tales of a father equally obsessed with “the Bible and UFO magazines,” a mother who was “a real hip Scheherazade,” a hometown in a “swamp area” so polluted by industrial waste that schoolchildren carried popsicle sticks in their pockets due to the high rate of epilepsy, and a childhood full of hallucinations from a bout of scarlet fever that lasted into her adulthood, were clear impersonations of Bob Dylan’s similarly constructed past.⁴⁶ Reporters were undoubtedly aware of

this; Dave Marsh, who interviewed her for an article published in *Rolling Stone* in January 1976, two months after “Horses” came out, wrote “Like Dylan’s, the myth of Patti Smith’s origins is intricately constructed and endlessly fascinating[...]. No one knows how much is invented, how much flat fact. Maybe it all happened, maybe none of it. I’d rather not know—either way.”⁴⁷ Regardless of its truthfulness, Smith’s ability to weave an engaging narrative, to make it stand out to others, made it worth retelling in the press, bringing her work to the attention of increasing numbers of potential fans. Thus Smith successfully presented to the world an image consciously constructed to convey her *raison d’être*: to save rock music, and to usher it into a more artistically grounded era.

Despite journalists’ interest in and awareness of the constructed nature of Smith’s persona, there was little connection made, at least in the press, between Smith’s public image and the photograph on the cover of “Horses.” Only a few articles even mention the image; when they do, it is a brief reference made in passing. Instead, the press focused their praise on the music. The introductory paragraph of the 1975 *New York Times Magazine* article is typical of this trend:

[Critic John] Rockwell called [“Horses’] ‘an extraordinary disk every minute of which is worth repeated hearings.’ The cover of “Horses” shows Patti posed à la Frank Sinatra, standing with a suit jacket thrown over her shoulder—Frank’s a Jersey kid like Patti. This is a conscious allusion and typical of Patti’s humor: she doesn’t see any reason why she shouldn’t be as big a star as Frank, but she finds the whole business of stardom worthy of parody. So far, both *Rolling Stone* and Earl Wilson are calling her a rock’n’roll queen, and her album is selling briskly [...].⁴⁸

The article goes on to discuss Smith’s music, her success, and her persona; it does not return to the issue of the cover image. Buoyed by its wildly enthusiastic critical response, “Horses” went on to sell out its first pressing, eventually selling 200,000 copies.⁴⁹ It is frequently included in lists of the most important records in rock history, and Smith is generally regarded as “the godmother of punk.”⁵⁰

Why, with Smith's astounding level of success, did Mapplethorpe's photograph register so faintly with those paying such close attention to Smith's career? Why only recently has the cover image been dubbed iconic, having, as Joe Tarr writes in *The Words and Music of Patti Smith*, "been written about as much as the music [... and] regarded as one of the greatest rock album covers ever"?⁵¹ I believe that this statement, aside from testifying to the image's iconic status, also contains the explanation for its limited potential to effect cultural change within the historical moment of its creation. While *Horses*, as an image, may have a place in a multitude of archives, it is first and foremost what it was intended as in 1975: an album cover. In choosing this space as her site of cultural resistance, Smith from the start limited her work's potential to resonate more deeply with the receiving audience. Hall et al comment on the inherent limitations of subcultural forms of resistance, pointing out that because they are enacted "largely at the symbolic level," they are "fated to fail."⁵² A subordinate group's attempts to contest its disadvantaged societal position through cultural production do not guarantee a resolution of unequal social relations; rather, they replace "real negotiation" with "symbolically displaced 'resolutions.'"⁵³ Because her protest against dominant cultural norms was limited to the subcultural strategies of commodity production (a record may be an archival document of artistic work, but it is also an object bought and sold in a capitalist marketplace) and appropriation, Smith may have ultimately limited her image's ability to evoke meaningful reaction.

In writing about the performative nature of gender and the resistant power of drag, Butler similarly points out the limitations of this form of resistance. Butler comments that, "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony."⁵⁴ While there is no evidence to suggest that in the moment of the "Horses" photograph production, Smith's gender-ambiguous performance had been "domesticated" by the dominant culture, perhaps the image's service as the cover of a record released on a major label was in fact a domestication

in and of itself. Here again, the limiting factor seems to be the image's incarnation as a mass-produced object, the sheer over-availability of Smith's parodic image muting its potential to be radicalizing, or even worthy of comment.

Thirty years later, Mapplethorpe's photograph *Horses*, 1975 occupies the archives of both rock history and fine art. By tracing the photograph's roots in its inception, moment of creation, and reception, within the context of Mapplethorpe and Smith's relationship and the historical moment that they occupied, I have explored the meanings located at the intersection of a historical moment and the act of artistic creation, meanings that become lost to photographs during the archival process. Smith, reacting to the gender constraints of her childhood and the atmosphere of crisis in the 1970s, made use of her close relationship with Robert Mapplethorpe to create an image that would carve out a new space for women and suggest a new direction for rock music. Though the image did not garner a great amount of attention at the time of its release, it is now understood as the ultimate articulation of Smith's revolutionary project in regards to both gender and rock'n'roll, whose success has only been recognized in retrospect. By understanding *Horses*, 1975 as intimate portrait, high art photograph, and rock album cover, the causes of this success are more clearly understood, even in light of its inherent limitations.

ELIZABETH WOLFSON is a second year Master's student in the American Studies department at Saint Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri. Her work is focused in the fields of visual culture and digital studies.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Allen Sekula, "Reading an archive: photography between labour and capital," in *Visual Culture: the reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1999), 183.
- 2 Laura Barton, "G2: 'I had a lot of guts back then': In the 70s, Patti Smith was the high priestess of punk. Then she traded in fame for a quiet life at home with her children. Now, aged 60, she talks to Laura Barton about her new collection of poetry, the loss of her husband and how she still hopes to write a literary masterpiece," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2007, Guardian Features pages.
- 3 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
- 4 Gregory Batchen, "Guilty Pleasures," in *Ctrl [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
- 5 Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography On the Color Line: W.E.B. DuBois, Race and Visual Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.
- 6 Stuart Hall et al, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A theoretical overview," in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchison and Co., 1977), 11.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Hall et al, 12-13.
- 9 Ibid., 13.
- 10 Ibid., 16.
- 11 Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2. While Zaretsky's work is original in its focus on the role of the family

in relation to the crisis of the 1970s, several other historians, writing from a variety of perspectives, have similarly described the decade as being particularly fraught. See, for example, Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: race and nation in the twentieth century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Allen Matusaw, *Nixon's economy: booms, busts, dollars and votes* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998); and Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: the great shift in American culture, society and politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

12 Ibid.

13 Zaretsky, 1.

14 Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography*, (New York: Random House, 1995), 158.

15 Morrisroe, 159.

16 Ibid.

17 Patti Smith, *Patti Smith: Complete Lyrics, Reflections, and Notes for the Future*, (New York, Doubleday, 1998), 5.

18 Morrisroe, 159.

19 Ibid.

20 Morrisroe, 160.

21 Jack Fritscher, *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera: A Pop Culture Memoir, An Outlaw Reminiscence*, (New York: Hastings House, 1994), 68.

22 Dave Marsh, "Her Horses Got Wings, They Can Fly," *Rolling Stone*, January 1, 1976.

23 Shelia Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 100.

24 Fritscher, 9.

25 Morrisroe, 195.

26 Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock'n'Roll* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 236.

- 27 David Fricke, "Patti Smith," *The Rolling Stone Interviews*, ed. Jann Wenner and Joe Levy, (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2007), 381.
- 28 Reynolds and Press, 237.
- 29 Cliff Jahr, "Patti," *New York Times*, December 26, 1975, *Magazine* section.
- 30 Whiteley, 357.
- 31 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xi.
- 32 Butler, 135.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 136
- 34 *Ibid.*, 137
- 35 Fritscher, 130.
- 36 Smith, 5.
- 37 Tony Hiss and David McClelland, "Gonna Be So Big, Gonna Be a Big Star, Watch Me Now!," *New York Times*, December 21, 1975, *Magazine* section.
- 38 Hall et al, 42-43.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 Whiteley, 100.
- 42 Smith, xxi.
- 43 Fricke, 383.
- 44 Marsh 1976.
- 45 Hall et al, 13.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 Jahr, 1975.
- 49 Robert Christgau, *Grown Up All Wrong: 75 Great Rock and Pop Artists from Vaudeville to Techno*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 202.

- 50 David Chiu, "Critics Top Ten Lists: from Ambulance to the Zutons, Our Favorite Albums of 2004," *Rolling Stone*, December 29, 2004, http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/6795933/critics_top_ten_lists (accessed December 11, 2008).
- 51 Tarr, 27.
- 52 Hall et al, 47.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Butler, 139.

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