

# B. Ingrid Olson

**Fragmented narratives, loose associations,  
language as a structure, one thing leading  
to the next<sup>1</sup>**

BY TOM MCDONOUGH

Rosalind Krauss opens her classic essay “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” with a 1928 self-portrait by Florence Henri (1893–1982). It’s an unexpected note, since Henri was a central figure not of surrealist photography but rather of the new vision, having trained in Fernand Léger’s studio and at the Bauhaus. In it we see the artist’s reflection in a mirror, seated at the end of a table whose opposite edge abuts the wall on which the mirror hangs. Because the photograph is taken from an oblique angle—slightly higher than eye level and noticeably to the left of the sitter—Henri’s intense gaze, out from under heavily made-up eyes, is directed not at the camera lens/viewer but at her own reflection, a gaze we follow parallel to the diagonal lines of the table’s slats. Where table and mirror meet rest two metallic spheres, doubled in reflection and themselves vaguely mirroring the surrounding room. Reading this photograph, Krauss eschews its psychological or formal “contents” to instead draw our attention to what she calls its “container”: to the mirror with which the photographer so insistently frames her own image.

In Henri’s self-portrait, she writes, viewers are “treated to the capture of the photographic subject by the frame.”<sup>2</sup> Krauss describes how the margins of the image—the white wall on which the mirror hangs—threaten a kind of flatness, a draining of the photograph’s density, that is shored up only by the fullness guaranteed by the structural intervention of the mirror-as-frame: the mirror that, by drawing limits, buttresses the dissipating corporeality of the sitter. In Henri’s self-portrait, however, such framing is no mere formal device. “This capture,” Krauss warns, “has a sexual import.” The “phallic frame” acts “as both maker and captor of the sitter’s image,” with the metallic balls functioning to project that “experience of phallicism into the center of the image.”<sup>3</sup> The very conditions of Henri’s visibility, then, also are what hold her captive within their bounds: what is framed is both subject and subjected.

Lucas Blalock, in a review of B. Ingrid Olson’s 2015 exhibition of recent photographs and sculptures at Simone

Subal Gallery, in New York, echoes just these concerns with the mirror and framing, signaling a perhaps surprising affinity between this young artist’s work and the structural—rather than, strictly speaking, “stylistic”—properties addressed some thirty-five years ago by Krauss. Framing, we could say, was immediately foregrounded in the show by means of an architectural intervention: two walls that formed something like a pair of blinders preventing visual access to the entirety of the gallery space as one entered. As Blalock writes, it functioned “to establish a relationship between the framing device and the body, a problem worked and reworked throughout the pieces on view.”<sup>4</sup> Worked and reworked throughout the entirety of her oeuvre, we might add.

*the fountain containing itself, virtual fold* (2014) exemplifies several of Olson’s characteristic moves: the overlapping or inlaying of one or more images upon another, images that frequently picture the artist herself in her studio workspace—even as they resist strict categorization as self-portraits; and an emphasis on the materiality of the image, not least through a particular attention to its literal frame. In *fountain*, we see Olson’s legs, from thigh to ankle, silhouetted against the dusty, littered studio floor. Into the center of this image Olson has inserted another, smaller print that flips the perspective 90 degrees as she points the camera directly downward: we see her sweater and tights-clad legs, and can just glimpse her bare feet planted on the ground. A cool, polished aluminum frame locks them in place. The title of the show at Subal’s gallery—*double-ended arrow*—itself suggests the mirror-effect and reversal at work in such an image, but it also suggests, through its homology with “double-edged sword,” something of the paradox of the frame, namely, that the very device that allows for Olson to appear as subject might also be the one subjecting her to the gendered logic of appearance.

Olson was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1987 and completed a BFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Since graduating, she has continued to live in Chicago, where a reasonable cost of living and a restrained contemporary art scene allow her, she explains, to “have a large studio and not too many distractions” from her work.<sup>5</sup> Some of the first photos she produced after graduation, although straightforward black-and-white prints, already explored the layering that would become a leitmotif of her mature work: in *Distance Portrait* (2012), two sculptural busts are juxtaposed with the edge of a charcoal drawing that interrupts the right-hand side of the image, forming something of a frame within the frame; more tellingly, in *Figure, Flowers* (2012), a grainy print of the artist, seen nude from the rear, blocks an image of a splendid bouquet. By the time of her first solo exhibition, at Document Gallery, in Chicago, in 2013, Olson had arrived at her ongoing method, which was reached, at least in part, precisely by recycling those earlier photographs.

*Distance Portrait and Figure with Flowers* (2013) gathers the two aforementioned works of the previous year, along with another granular black-and-white self-portrait of the artist, hands on head, an old print showing some piece of public statuary, and two transparencies that signal the frame as a central preoccupation of the artist. All of this material is gathered within a shallow Plexiglas box mounted on the wall. Around this time, Olson speaks of her photographic practice as being centered upon “the prefix ‘re-’ (doing something again). Re- as in rereading, rephotographing, rearranging.”<sup>6</sup> That temporality of return pulls the photograph away from a sense of immediacy, away from the indexical registration of the visual world, and toward instead something like the logic of language—each element within the frame deployed like vocabulary in an unknown linguistic system. In a statement accompanying the Chicago exhibition, such works are in fact described as “seemingly provisional arrangements” that “function like a run-on sentence; gathered together, layered and staggered, covering and revealing, building towards a fixed vantage point without reaching it.”<sup>7</sup>

A temporality of return, or perhaps we could say delay. *No eternity, only recognition of self delay* (2013) points in such a direction by its very title, and introduces the vertiginous mirrored reflections and frames-within-frames that have become staples of Olson’s image making. (The same photograph of a hand gripping an empty frame will turn up the following year as an inset in *erection of a plate of glass between* (2014), once again reminding us that she is constructing a system as much as a picture.) In a recent interview, she gets at this notion of delay through a set of linguistic metaphors; she explains that her work might function as “something like an ellipsis, or a statement that

almost turns into a question. [...] I think a lot about the ‘aside’ in writing, moments in which an author breaks the fourth wall, addressing the reader directly, or when a footnote is used to expand on a facet of an idea, as a visibly separate explication or a tangent alongside the primary text.”<sup>8</sup> Ellipses, footnotes, tangents—they interpose a gap within the text, drawing our eyes away from the center of the page or forcing us to acknowledge what is not written, what remains inaccessible. Olson creates visual equivalents in her work. Her viewers have frequently discussed these works in terms of depictions of the female body—“Grammar of the self-fragmented body (female) Lacan, Butler,” notes Quinn Latimer in a text commissioned by the artist—but what is too often passed over in the reception of Olson’s photography is the way that body is made elusive, continuously deferred.<sup>9</sup> The mirror never captures its subject perfectly, never quite manages to accomplish its narcissistic entrapment. The fragmentation it effects flirts with the fetish, it approaches the condition of gendered looking we may expect, but never entirely arrives there. In fact, we could say that the rare occasions that Olson’s images fall flat occur when she—as in *That Fucking Pink Lady* (2013)—draws too near to the fragment-as-fetish.

For Krauss, the logic that governed Florence Henri’s self-portrait was that of the supplement. The camera, which seemed merely to complete or add to human vision, in fact supplanted it, imposing its own logic on the visible world: “the camera’s frame is revealed as that which masters or dominates the subject.”<sup>10</sup> The technological supplement conjugates with the phallicism of vision to entrap its subject, locking her within the photographic frame. We could almost mistake Olson’s works as contemporary restatements of this logic; the way she “captures” herself in *tie knots not bows* (2015) would seem to impose that same dynamic of visibility and occlusion. Indeed, I want to say that she, like other artists of her generation, does mobilize supplementarity, but in a very different mode than that analyzed by Krauss. Mirrors and frames multiply Olson’s image while never managing to make her fully present. The effect is closer to that suggested by Jacques Derrida when he wrote “there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’ supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity ...”<sup>11</sup> In these photographs, she is never anything other than slippage and displacement, and therein, we might add, lies their peculiar erotic charge for the male viewer who finds with surprise, perhaps, that it is now he who is trapped by the supplement.