

LOOK AT ME!

Images of Women & Ageing

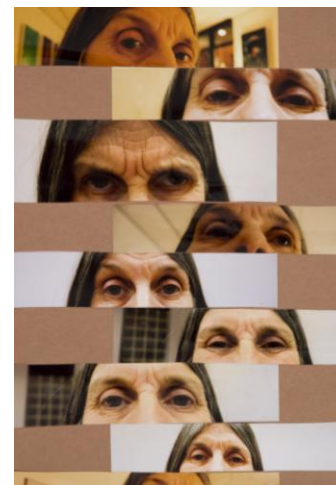
The **United Nations Second World Assembly on Ageing** identified as one of its objectives the 'need to facilitate contributions of older women and men to the presentation by the media of their activities and concerns' (2002). The importance of creating new images of ageing and counteracting preconceived biases and myths has been identified as a particular concern in relation to older women. This is because women's experience of ageing is deeply rooted in their appearance, in particular the perception of their aged bodies which, ironically, commonly renders them invisible in later life. The assigning of social value, resources and opportunities can be influenced by such negative perceptions which are perpetuated through popular media channels.

As part of the **New Dynamics of Ageing** research programme, the Look at Me! project aims to harness the power of the creative arts to challenge the way society views older women. A range of visual methods have been used to produce knowledge and gain an understanding of the impact of images on older women's experiences of ageing. Crucially, older women were directly involved, through four different workshop strands, in the production of their own new and 'alternative' images of ageing. A wide variety of photographic, fine art, and sculptural art works have been produced. Through displaying these images in a range of public venues, the project aims to generate new conversations about visual representations of older women, and of older people in general.

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Early Findings

Eventus employed professional photographers to work with two groups of older women. One group comprised 10 women aged 50-73 who volunteer at the Manor Lodge in Sheffield. They worked with photographer Laura Pannack to produce some photographs modelled on the formal portraiture of the early part of the Twentieth Century. The vast majority of the women were impressed with the quality of the images produced and some expressed pride in their appearance in the photographs. A number of the women were also self-critical of how they appeared e.g. "I'm still going to get the bottle out, the hair dye"; "I thought, you *do* look as rough as you thought you did, all sagged and bagged!" and "the wrinkles are more obvious than you think they are." Such comments highlight that the stigmatised markers of age (wrinkles, sagging and dull skin, etc) affect women's confidence in their bodies as they grow older. Nevertheless, when asked about the prospect of displaying their images in an exhibition, the women expressed their excitement about

the possibility of communicating to others "how ageing is".

Eventus worked with a second group of older women based at the Guildford Grange Extra Care Scheme. Ten women, aged 77-96, worked with photographer Monica Fernandez on a series of 'before' and 'after' images satirising magazine make-overs. The experience of taking these humorous photographs was a source of much joy for the women: "we had a whale of a time!" Many of the women were surprised by the images taken: "I never had photographs like that before of me!" This group of women were not particularly influenced by media images. They mentioned their bodies in the context of illness and frailty rather than a focus on the 'stigmatised markers of age'. This indicates the difference between older women in this age bracket and baby boomers of the 'third age' who are more conscious of a misrepresentations and a lack of representations in the media of older women.

Art Therapist Susan Hogan's workshop involved a core group of 9 self-selected older women aged 43-70. These women discussed images of older women in the media which they liked and those which made them uncomfortable. An interesting tension emerged between images which were selected because the woman 'looked good for her age' and those which were selected because the woman was shown to have character. There was also an appreciation among some participants for images which were less conventional or less easily found in mainstream media. While some of the women identified "images of old women with Alzheimer's" as something they did not want to see, most conceded that it was because they did not want to be reminded of their own ageing process: "It's dreadful for younger people to see images of older women in homes, but of course they've got to because that's the reality! But it's dreadful that they think "I don't want to get like that", "I don't want to be old." When the women turned their hand to creating art works themselves, there was a strong focus on the body and, again, on the stigmatised markers of age, particularly skin. Some women were keen to explore their own personal response to growing older, whereas others treated the issue more generally. Those women who took a more personal approach were more likely to find the experience 'affirming' and to adopt a new 'positive attitude' to ageing.

Photo Therapist Rosy Martin worked with a group of 12 self-selected older women aged 47-60 in six day-long workshops. First the women took individual 'photo diaries' for one week to show their daily life and the things that they did. They then examined photos from their own family archive, discussing family dynamics not evident in the formal family portraits. The women then worked in pairs to 're-enact' scenarios in front of the camera, either of scenes that *might* have occurred in the past, or scenes which *might* occur in the future. They were advised to consider performing a 'transformation' of some kind. Many of the women spoke about the good rapport there was in the group and the "positive reinforcement" they received from each other. They used the drama inherent in the 're-enactment' process to express their creativity. Two women in particular found more confidence in their own bodies as a result of the process: "I found I was quite happy with the way I looked". Other women saw themes emerging from the images which had relevance both to their own childhood experiences and to how these experiences were influencing their thoughts about growing older. As one woman said: "The older you get the more you remember the beginning."