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‘I Don’t See Many Images of Myself Coming Back at Myself’: Representations of Women and Ageing

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10.1 Introduction

In twenty-first century Western society, there is an obsession with youthfulness (Walters, 2010): popular culture presents women’s (hetero)sexual allure as their passport to success (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993) and images of ageing, if visible at all (Zhang et al., 2006), are increasingly influenced by the discourses of the anti-ageing industry (Calasanti, 2007; Hurd Clarke, 2011). The Second World Assembly on Ageing (United Nations, 2002) recognized a need to challenge stereotyped images of ageing, particularly in relation to older women. The use of visual methods as a means of allowing older women to articulate their experiences of ageing is one way of doing this but, to date, ‘ordinary’ older women have had few opportunities to either comment on, or create, their own images of ageing and old age. This chapter gives details of one research initiative which has aimed to do precisely that. Representing Self – Representing Ageing (RSRA) brought together an interdisciplinary team united through a commitment to the use of participatory visual methods. The project has been designed to enable older women to work together to identify and critique dominant images of women in popular culture and to use creative media to make their own individual images of ageing. Resultant artwork has been displayed in an exhibition entitled Look at Me! held in a range of venues in the UK and capturing public responses to these ‘alternative’ images.
The chapter draws on findings from workshops using art-elicitation and phototherapy approaches. It is based on semi-structured interviews conducted before and after the workshops and workshop discussions, all of which were audio recorded and transcribed. All data, including visual data, were coded thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and analysed interpretively (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1987). The chapter explores questions concerning the kinds of visual images salient to women’s understanding of ageing and how those images were responded to by older women when invited to challenge dominant media images. Understood within a critical gerontological framework informed by feminist theories (Achenbaum, 1997; Ray, 1999), the findings from these two workshops confirm the centrality of the body to women’s experiences of ageing but also reveal diverse and highly nuanced responses to media positionings of older bodies. The power of the artwork produced by the women lay in its vital, creative and collective capturing of elements of women’s bodies and experiences which are often invisible or subject to erasure.

10.2 Background

Writing about images of women and ageing in the year that marks the centenary of International Women’s Day is a sharp reminder of the changing and multi-faceted context of representations. Although a relative latecomer to the field of social gerontology (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995), the study of visual images of ageing has grown substantially over the past two decades (see Faircloth, 2003a). Accounts help to show that while images of women’s ageing have often been absent from historical accounts (see Minois, 1989) and cross-nationally remain a numerical minority compared with images of men’s ageing (Zhang et al., 2006), they have a long history; from the woodcuts and engravings of Mother Shipton figures in early modern England (Botelho, 2001) to the representations devised by the Suffragettes in their campaign for political representation (Parkins, 1997). In the technological age of the twenty-first century, while there is undoubtedly a greater diversity of visual representations of middle-aged and older women, there is also a considerably increased chance of the misrepresentation of women in digitally enhanced or airbrushed images (Hurd Clark, 2011).

While it has been suggested that women de-prioritize appearance in favour of health or internal characteristics as they grow older (Liechty and Yarnal, 2010), age continues to be defined by appearance and