

Silenced Womb



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Petra Kroon Silenced Womb

















“To describe a passage of life, even a painful one,
can itself be a form of empowerment”

Liza Mundy

Preface

It's The Hormones...
Or Is It?

It's The Hormones... Or Is It?

13 November 2017. I put a small x into my diary, like I have been doing for years. I always mark the first day of my menstruation, it's just a habit. I always want to know if I have to take tampons with me.

9 November 2020. I've been in therapy for almost three years now. I started going there because I felt down, very down. Depressed. Low self-esteem, crying, feeling like falling into a large hole, with black walls and nothing to hang on to. Just falling. And falling again. Falling and feeling like a complete failure. First, it was my father's fault, so we ploughed through my childhood. Then, it was my mother's fault, so we ploughed through my childhood again. It was my school's fault; it was my friends' fault for abandoning me; it was everyone else's fault but mine. I ploughed through my entire life.

I get off the train at Amsterdam Zuid and cross from one platform to the other. It's the end of the day, cold, but sunny. I listen to the podcast *Opvliegers* (Hot Flushes) and sink a little deeper into my winter coat. The episode is about menopause and the brain. According to psychiatrist Irene van Vliet of the LUMC, a lot happens in the brain due to a decrease in hormone production. Actually, the brain is undergoing a kind of renovation, a process that entails all sorts of consequences. Van Vliet says: "We see that changes are always difficult, whether it's puberty or pregnancy. Menopause is also a difficult phase."¹

I listen to the stories of the women. About depression and how science has failed to recognize the psychic connections with menopause. And suddenly, I feel like I'm struck by lightning. I open my diary to check the date of my last menstruation and when I went in therapy. Because maybe, just maybe it's only hormones that are to blame.

¹ <https://www.maxvandaag.nl/sessies/themas/me-dia-cultuur/podcast-opvliegers-3-het-brein-tijdens-de-overgang/> accessed Sept 23, 2021

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Chapter 1

Introduction



Visiting my good friend E. Engaged in a rather interesting conversation about bullying in primary schools. I was referring to a pupil from my workshop class at a school, who was bullied for being too white. And to make my point a little more witty, I made a sidestep to another subject. When I wanted to pick it up again, poof..., my thread was suddenly gone. Just blank, just completely blank. Just gone.

Introduction

I thought I knew everything about menopause:² The hot flushes? I flaunt my fan for years already. Dryness of certain membranes? I only suffer from dry crusts in my nose. Annoying I must say. But vaginal dryness, the most commonly known menopausal dehydrated membrane? Thanks for asking, but no, as moist as ever. Osteoporosis? That's why I've been doing power training for years, a great remedy. Then there's weight gain. Yes, I also suffer from it despite my power training (luckily partner P just likes a little more Petra). And the mood swings: crying, laughter, anger all within let's say five minutes. Sounds pretty familiar.

By the way, did I miss anything?

Well, there's night sweating, restless legs, difficulty sleeping, thinning hair. But luckily I don't suffer from those.

Oh, and of course, how could I forget: hormonal amnesia.

In short, don't tell me anything about menopause. That was pretty much my attitude. Until I realized that my so called 'depression' was also menopausal. That the sensitivity I had developed over the years towards any kind of 'disapproval' – whether it was about my work as a photographer, my attitude, my way of communicating – was due to the hormones. Or, to be more precise, the lack of them.

And I was wondering: if I didn't already know everything about menopause, what about other women?³ And what

²Menopause is the end of the menstrual cycle and fertility of women as ovaries no longer produce the hormones estrogen and progesterone. It is just one day in a woman's life, and it is the day exactly one year after the start of her last period.

³In the context of this thesis, I use the term "Woman" in reference to biological sex, i.e. people who are born with a female reproductive system. Jason van Heesewijk, research physician at the Centre of Expertise on Gender Dysphoria at the VUmc Amsterdam, explained in my interview with him on February 4 2022 that research on menopause in the trans community is still in its early stages. Nevertheless, there are some things to consider: According to van Heesewijk: "Whether a trans person also experiences menopause depends on when that person transitioned. If one transitions to a trans man after the age of 55, either through hormone therapy

about society?⁴ Media? Photography? What do they know?

I started reading, I started looking, I started talking. And slowly but surely, I began to realize that there's much more to know. That there is a toxic combination of misinformation when it comes to the female body, science, society and media and the way they influence each other. Medical misogyny plays an important factor in oppressing women. And media and society are the henchmen.

In this thesis, I take you on a trip through medical history, society's views and media representation of menopause and menopausal women. It is also my attempt to make menopause, us menopausal, and our history and contemporary lives visible. This is what you can expect:

Chapter 2: The Archive - Part I: Stock Photography

Our first stop is the world of stock agencies and how they represent women. We come along lots of clichés, and I will tell you how they make me feel.

Chapter 3: Until Something Breaks

At this next stop we will explore the history of menopause. Considering that menopause is a common condition since the beginning of humankind, why is there a deafening silence around it?

Chapter 5: A Toxic Entanglement

Our trip continues to what I find the key chapter of my exploration: Illness is a patriarchal method of control of women's lives. Combined with visual misrepresentation or even no representation at all, one ends up in a toxic entanglement: not being heard, not being seen, being ignored, and suffering in silence deprives women of the ability to participate in society in the way they choose. It's time to break this silence.

or surgery, one goes through menopause. In all other cases, a trans person does not experience this change. Trans women do not go through menopause, regardless whether they transition early or late. Their hormone balance from the time of their transition is attuned to that of cisgender women before menopause. This is done from a medical point of view. Less estrogen leads to a higher risk of cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis." It is unclear whether trans women also suffer from mood swings or other hormonelated depressive symptoms. The extent to which trans women, in contrast to older cisgender women, show changes in their skin or other signs external ageing - because of this hormone balance - has not yet been fully researched. This question, Van Heesewijk confirms in an email, will be pursued in new research.

⁴ In the context of this thesis, I refer to Western society's written and unwritten ideals, norms and values; how we live, behave and interact with each other.

Chapter 7: The Archive – Part II: Art/Photography

Next we stop at the art/photography archive on menopause to find out how this phase in a woman's life has previously been visualised. Guess what I found? A staggering lack of bodies of work on menopause. My conclusion: it is a silenced topic in art/photography as well.

Chapter 8: The Marketing Trap

Following the path of menopause as a disease, I arrived at a posterous place: one where quackery rules. In exploring this notion of menopause, I found out that framing this inescapable phase in a woman's life as a condition is a huge market. A vast number of companies, homeopathic brands, lifestyle initiatives benefit from such a framing and willfully exploit and perpetuate its message. All kinds of food supplements, menopausal yoga, e-health sites are offering accessible psychological help and much, much more... And not to forget the vaginal rejuvenation laser treatment. I'll let you chew on that one. I sure had to.

I also had to digest the apparent enormous importance of this market: to what extent do financial interests influence how society deals with menopause?

Chapter 10 The Archive – Part III: The Archive of Women's History

Then we head to the largest Dutch archive of female history, Atria. A pretty exciting place to explore.

I mean if there is any place where I, where we, can finally find the visual history of menopause, it's at this archive, right?

Chapter 12 Epilogue: The Change

We finally arrive at our last stop: changing the narrative. Or at least I hope we are heading there. Because I find it quite hard to find the right exit that will lead us to find other ways to consider and clearly see different expressions on menopause: A quest for more positive representations, or at least ones that are more honest.

Along the way we go on some field excursions, where I share my attempts to make menopause visible through photography and video performances. And I tell you how they make me feel. I show you how I tried to be invisible according to society's norms. I share

my feelings and thoughts about how medical science is trying to keep us menopausals invisible. I depict how absolutely ordinary menopause basically is – maybe one of your traveling companions, the one just next to you, is experiencing menopause. Right now. Can you tell? Probably not. We're so used to experience these symptoms in silence. And, with some hesitations I must confess, I will let you take part in my first menopausal yoga lesson. Why the hesitation, you ask? Well, it's my first lesson. And I'm not that agile. Never have been by the way.

One last remark before we head off: those menopause symptoms can happen at any moment - sometimes expectedly, but mostly at the worst moment. Uncontrollable. In other words, you will bump into them in this thesis from time to time. And I'm not gonna apologize for them, they're part of my life at this very moment.



Do I really have a hot flush? Or is it just very hot in this train? I mean I'm wearing this face mask and all those winter clothes after all...? And if I'm just overheated, is that just as annoying as having a hot flush? Admitted: I don't get bright red and I'm not sweating bullets. But still.

Chapter 2

The Archive –

Part I:

Stock Photography

The Archive – Part I: Stock Photography

I feel like crying. It's been there for several weeks now, this feeling, this uncontrollable need to weep. It's not there all the time, not always irrepressible like this. Like Dutch rain: sometimes it just drizzles, sometimes it rains cats and dogs. But the clouds are always there, a bit greyish, sometimes inky black, and even if the forecast says it stays dry, you never know.

Why do I feel this way? No idea, honestly. There's no real reason. Not...Really. Just feeling down, no reason. I think.

I dry my eyes, pick myself up. Need to, because I want a clear view. On how menopausal women are represented. In photography. In society. And in the medical world. Let's take a closer look at visuals in mass media, because as the saying goes: one photo says more than a thousand words. Did you ever take a clear, unbiased look at how they are portrayed? It's a sad story, let me tell you.

So, let's take a look.

Of course, when I google menopause, I probably get different pictures than you. But I bet they are almost the same. Just do it. Do it now. I'll wait.

What did you see? Let me guess: a sad looking woman, staring blankly into nothing, or out of a window. With her hand under her chin or up against her forehead. Women with fans – those Spanish or semi-electric ones. You probably also found some of those drawings of female reproductive organs. I even found some with withered ovaries. Graphic. And you also might have found drawings of ageless women with arrows pointing to different parts of their bodies with a description of the symptoms related to that specific body part.

What do they tell you, those visuals? How do they speak to you? This is how they talk to me: one big loud *blargh*. These photos and drawings supposedly represent me. I am one of them. But I feel no connection. These are visuals of how society thinks menopausal women feel and thus look like: tormented, sad, sighing. Of course, menopause isn't always joyful, and one does feel sad occasionally (doesn't everyone?) and yes, menopause isn't probably the most happy time in a woman's life. But life after this phase isn't always this dark.

Wait, I hear you thinking, what about this attempt of stock agency Getty Images⁵ to freshen up these representation? Good point, I would say, because they traditionally produce these clichés, like the ones with the fans, those *blargh*-images. But the agency has this gallery called "Collections," that is "celebrating the work that challenges visual stereotypes and strives for authentic and inclusive representation."⁶ Because, as they write in the accompanying text to the menopause collections: "Inclusive images make people feel seen, included and accepted, so it has never been more important to produce and promote visuals which authentically represent women in midlife."⁷ It feels a bit uncomfortable, reading this statement. It feels like the photographic equivalent of greenwashing. Because it is stock agencies like Getty Images that created this archive of not so inclusive images in the first place. Because of patriarchal ideas and medical misogyny, we are stuck with these clichés. The images serve as self-fulfilling prophecies, as research by Dutch advocacy foundation WOMEN Inc shows:⁸ There is a real link between the possible lives of men and women and media representation. In other words, in the media we see certain scenarios and gender roles, which to some extent influence reality and determine how we shape our lives, what choices we make, and what courses of action

⁵ Getty Images, Inc. is a British-American visual media company and is a supplier of stock images, editorial photography, video and music for business and consumers, with an archive of over 200 million assets. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Getty_Images accessed Feb 15, 2022

⁶ <https://creativeinsights.gettyimages.com/en/collections/our-collections/menopause-empowering-better-representation> - click on the menu 'collections' at this page and you'll find this quote accessed Feb 15, 2022

⁷ <https://creativeinsights.gettyimages.com/en/collections/our-collections/menopause-empowering-better-representation> accessed Feb 15, 2022

⁸ WOMEN Inc is a Dutch advocacy group striving for equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of gender and sex

we develop. So there is an interaction between what we see in the media and what we do and think we can achieve in our daily lives.⁹

On the other hand, if an archive remains unchanged, representation will stay the same. So, it's a start I would say. At least, it's not the cliché way. All these images show an event: sports, and carry a message: women of a certain age do sport and do have fun and are strong.¹⁰ Don't dismiss them. Still, to me they look forced, not natural. It is almost the opposite of those pictures of the tormented Spanish fan-women. "Enjoy life," they dictate. "Be happy. You better be!" It is still how we menopausal are *supposed* to look, somehow preventing us to live our own, authentic lives. Again, women are forced into a frame.

⁹ Literatuurstudie beeldvorming, uitgevoerd door onderzoeksgroep Gender Studies Universiteit Utrecht in opdracht van WOMEN Inc, september 2016, 6

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, *Representation Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 229



Memory

To keep your brain fresh and handle brain fog good old Memory is a great way to do so. These 4 visuals form the basis to make your own Memory.

What you need

Sharp cutting knife

Cutting mat

Iron ruler

Cardboard or foam board

Glue

Hard roll

User manual:

1. Tear or cut out these 4 visuals
2. Take a piece of cardboard or better even foam board, a little bit bigger than the visuals
3. Put some glue evenly on the visuals, not too thick, it'll stick also with a thin layer
4. Attach the visual with the small cubes with eggs on one side of the board, the other one with the mountain of broken eggs on the other side
5. Roll over the visuals with a small, hard roll
6. Repeat action 4 and 5 with the other visuals
7. Cut the foam board with the visuals to size along the iron ruler
8. Cut the cubes along the iron ruler
9. Have fun







Chapter 3

Until Something Breaks

Until Something Breaks

Menopause isn't a phase in a woman's life that only started occurring since, let's say the last 100-150 years, because people grew older due to better living conditions. Though you might think so, like lots of others do.

Menopausal symptoms have been described from a very early age on, and I mean really early as in early ancient Greek times. Like Greek philosopher Aristotle (living in the 4th century BC), who "mentioned that women stopped having babies around the age of 40-50, so apparently the age of menopause hasn't changed for millennia."¹¹ However, the Ancient Greeks were not so much interested in other symptoms, other than the end of fertility: "Missed menstrual periods in ancient Greek medicine [...] were considered concerning as they were a sign of a potential fertility problem as well as a dangerous build-up of fluid." They described this period quite thoroughly because to Greek physicians "the loss of fertility was a sentinel event."¹² As gynaecologist, bestselling author and "internet's most fearless advocate for women's health" (dixit publisher Penguin Random House Canada¹³) Dr Jennifer Gunter writes in her book *The Menopause Manifesto: own your health with fact and feminism*.

The first mention of symptoms in Western medical literature dates back to 1582, when French physician Jean Liébault described what we nowadays call hot flushes as *petit rouges*¹⁴. Some 130 years later, in 1710, "the first formal dissertation on what we now call menopause was written - Latin title translated as *Final menstruation, beginning of disease*, an accurate summary of the thinking of that time."¹⁵ And nothing has changed much since

¹¹ Jackson, Pain and Prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies, 64

¹² Gunter, *The Menopause Manifesto: Own Your Health With Facts and Feminism*, 14

¹³ <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/652048/the-menopause-manifesto-by-dr-jen-gunter/9780735280786> accessed Feb 15, 2022

¹⁴ Gunter, *The Menopause Manifesto: Own Your Health With Facts and Feminism*, 14

¹⁵ *ibid*, 15



I've got Robert's Death in my ears. A podcast about a parents' quest for answers in the death of their psychotic son. And suddenly tears well up in my eyes. I have to get off my bike. Deep sigh and off again. I also have a son. Mentally healthy. Fortunately.

then, because menopause is still seen as a disease – more on that later. It would take another 100 years before the name menopause was coined by, again a French physician, Dr Charles De Gardanne. He initially referred to the symptoms with the term “ménépausie,” *méné* from the Greek word *menes* that means “month,” and the Greek word *pausie* meaning cessation. In 1821 he renamed it in *ménopause*. And the rest is history, I would say.

So we are familiar with menopause. We as in women, men, society¹⁶ and science. For a long time already. And yet, there seems to be silence. A deafening silence. It’s a taboo, some people would say. A taboo. But for whom? It seems to contradict the plethora of publications on the topic, varying from magazine articles and news articles to books to podcasts to all kind of websites and social media platforms. It is also contrary to the fact that women talk about the change more and more openly. In other words: Who is tabooing menopause? Could it be society? Where men have still more power than women? As Mary Beard, Professor of Classics, Professor of Ancient Literature, writer and broadcaster aptly describes in *Women & Power A Manifesto*: “This ‘muteness’ is not just a reflection of women’s general disempowerment throughout the classical world: no voting rights, limited legal and economic independence and so on [...] public speaking and oratory were not merely things that ancient women didn’t do: they were exclusive practices and skills that defined masculinity as a gender. [...] speech was a – if not the – defining attribute of maleness.”¹⁷

To put it bluntly: women were not allowed to speak. And if they dared to – Beard describes some cases with horrific consequences for those women who had the courage to speak up - they were silenced in various ways. Like Philomela, who was raped by her brother-in-law, King Tereus of Thrace. Once she challenged his order to stay silent, he cut out her tongue.¹⁸

This silence needs to be broken. Because silence means not only to be unheard but more important to be unknown, as writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit states in her book *The Mother of all Questions - Further Feminism*: “In the landscape of silence, the

three realms might be silence imposed from within; silence imposed from without; and silence that exists around what has not yet been

¹⁶ For my definition of society see footnote 4

¹⁷ Beard, *Women & Power A Manifesto* , 26

¹⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI.412-502,

named, recognized, described, or admitted. But they are not distinct; they feed each other; and what is unsayable becomes unknowable and vice versa, until something breaks.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Solnit, *The Mother of all Questions - Further Feminism*, 28

Chapter 4

Find the Cougar* - Attempt I

Find the Cougar* - Attempt I

When I was young, I didn't like cougar designs much. But the older I got the more I became this cougar design-hoarder. I collected everything: from socks to lingerie to shirts, blouses, leggings, shoes – and much more. They're all sitting in my closet. Why do I collect all this stuff? I don't know. I really don't. But these items turned out to be very useful when I tried to visualize how society looks at women of an older age, or at menopausal women, to be more precise. I hate that word by the way. Menopausal. I hate the way it makes me feel and it tells me something about the way society looks at me - as a woman of a certain age.

One September morning, I gathered every cougar item I owned, to experiment how I would feel being in/visible and what it would look like. Initially I had the idea to 'peel' myself away: starting as barely visible, trying to become one with my surroundings, covered completely in cougar motifs, placing myself in front of my cougar bedspread that I attached to two stands and a rail. Slowly undressing myself to only wearing a cougar bra, a cougar thong and cougar socks. Of course, I knew I wouldn't completely cease to exist in this array of cougar stuff. Duh-huh. It was meant as a way of saying...uhm...saying what actually?

I guess I wanted to say: You, world, you don't want to see us. You try to make us invisible, but we are not. We are here. And we will make you see us.

Here we are, proud to be... a cougar.

How my
periods
have stopped
what am I?



Or something like that.

- Just experiment.

Pushed the automatic release shutter.

- Zzzzzzzzz...click. Flash.

- I felt stupid. I even didn't know how to pose, completely covered in cougars, let alone if I would undress myself more and more. I felt misplaced, didn't know where to put my arms, how to fold my hands, how to place my feet, how to look and what to look at.

- I decided to use my scarf as a prop. To play with it. I learned to listen to that moment when the shutter would release so I could throw my scarf in the air and freeze it in un/covering me. Lying on the ground, raising my legs and covering myself with the scarf was the hardest part. At fifty-six you're not that agile anymore. But somehow I managed.

The shoot gave me a good feeling - a funny feeling, to perform like this.

- But more importantly I asked myself if it served its purpose. Because I am everything except invisible. And since us menopause count more than 1 billion women worldwide, society can't deny us. We are here and we are visible. Just look.

- On the other hand, this all might just be too quirky, too experimental or just too private, too personal. People might just shrug and carry on with their day.

I just don't know.

Maybe I should do another shoot? One where I undress myself. Not playing with a prop. Just looking in the camera. With this deadpan look. No distraction, no frills. And it would be okay when I would look rather uncomfortable. Because this change in age does make you feel uncomfortable sometimes. Uncertain.

What would society see then posing this way? Would I be objectified like: she's sexy? Or: too sexy? Or would they think: "Please don't do this you have so many dimples in your buttocks." And how would my peer group, women of my age, react? And what about women who are much younger, like my daughter - how would they react? Most importantly: would it help to make us women going through the change, more visible? I don't know, I just don't. I'm afraid that the discussion will go either to the 'sexy' side or to the 'dimples in your buttocks' side. And neither would serve my purpose.

Let's try something different.

*cougar - noun

/ˈkuːgə/

1. a large American wild cat with a plain tawny to greyish coat, found from Canada to Patagonia.

2 INFORMAL

an older woman seeking a sexual relationship with a younger man.

Chapter 5

A Toxic Entanglement

A Toxic Entanglement

How did we end up in this desert of ignorance anyway? It is the ancient Greeks – yet again - who are at the cradle of the way we look at menopause, and the resulting taboo around it. As Gabrielle Jackson writes: “From the earliest days of medicine, women have been considered inferior versions of men. In *On the Generation of Animals*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle characterized a female as a mutilated male, and this belief has persisted in Western medical culture.”²⁰

In the past few years, there has been a flood of books, documentaries and podcasts describing and explaining the medical history of women up until now. It all boils down to the fact that, long story short, women are considered to be inferior to men. And the uterus is the culprit, the mother of all malady. Starting with Plato who defined women medically by their womb, describing the uterus as “voracious, predatory, appetitive, unstable” in his most famous dialogue *Timaeus* (360 BC). Passing into “the weak nervous system” in the 17th century as the source of all evil, shifting back to the reproductive organs. This time with the ovaries and clitoris to blame. And, somewhere in the roaring 20’s of last century, shifting blame onto those damned hormones as the catalyst of the malaise.²¹

Writer and award-winning feminist campaigner Caroline Criado Perez touched a raw nerve in her book *Invisible Women, Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*: “The evidence that women are being let down by the medical establishment is overwhelming. The bodies, symptoms and diseases that affect half the world’s population are being dismissed, disbelieved and ignored. [...] We need to train doctors to listen to women, and to recognize that their inability to diagnose a woman may not be because she is lying or being hysterical: the problem may be the gender data gaps in their knowledge.”²² This “being dismissed, disbelieved and ignored” is the medical equivalent of Solnit’s

²⁰ Jackson, *Pain and Prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies*, 292

²¹ Gunter, *The Menopause Manifesto: Own Your Health with Facts and Feminism* & Jackson, *Pain and prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies*

²² Criado Perez, *Invisible Women, Exposing Data Bias In A World Designed For Men*, 234



notion of silencing women from without, and silencing because of what has not yet been named, recognized, described, or admitted. Also known as medical misogyny: diseases in women are missed or misdiagnosed; diseases affecting primarily women are understudied, under-treated, misdiagnosed or undiagnosed. In other words: illness is a patriarchal method of control.²³

If you're silenced and ignored, you are forced to swallow pain without a whimper. Combined with visual misrepresentation or even no representation, you end up in a toxic entanglement: not being heard, not being seen, being ignored, and suffering in silence deprives women of the ability to participate in society in the way they choose.

Forever Feminine?

There are numerous examples demonstrating that menopause is considered the end of a women's "attractive" period, rendering her societal status as invisible or obsolete. In sketches like the one in Amy Schumer's comedy series *Inside Amy Schumer* in which three 'older' actresses celebrate "the last fuckable day."²⁴ Or in essays like the one by Danish writer Dorthe Nors: "[...] women who are no longer young, no longer the sexy one, no longer worth helping out in the subway, no longer worth stopping your car for when she stands there with her grocery bags and her saggy breasts, no longer worth the intellectual conversation, no longer on screen, no longer in the movies, no longer counted, no longer... somebody."²⁵ Or podcasts in which women talk about their experiences of this phase life. Like in the Dutch podcast *Vroeger waren mannen aardiger* (Men used to be nicer),²⁶ in which a woman explains what she felt, once she realised that no one whistles at her anymore: "One day it happened again, somebody whistled at me. Or at least, I turned around and I found out they were whistling at my daughter. That was a surprise:

'oh my, she's beautiful, that's what they think, not me.' Yes, I was a bit jealous. It also felt like a kind of farewell: that time is over, it won't happen again."

Shock and awe. Did I hear that correctly? (I mean, bad hearing isn't a menopausal symptom, is it?) Were they really looking at themselves like that? Unattractive and unworthy?

²³ Jackson, *Pain and Prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies* 146

²⁴ *Inside Amy Schumer*, season three, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPpsl8mWKmg&t=8s>

²⁵ Nors, *On the Invisibility of Middle-Aged Women*, essay June 2016, essay <https://lithub.com/on-the-invisibility-of-middle-aged-women/> accessed April 10, 2022

²⁶ *Vroeger waren mannen aardiger*, #30 Docs, Juli 28, 2021, podcast NPO Radio1

My female allies, also poisoned by John Berger's male gaze: women are sexually objectified, viewed as subjects by men who watch. And, equally important, women seem to look at themselves in the same way, objectifying themselves and becoming commodities in their own eyes.²⁷ And once they have passed the status of being sexualized, they become invisible.

My gloomy conclusion: Women would rather be seen as objects of desire than not be seen at all.

But how can I blame them? After all, once an idea has been accepted to be true for so long, it has, as it were, fused with society's DNA. It becomes, even is, simply a given.²⁸ And this is precisely what is happening with menopause: This image of menopause, this change in their lives as the end of themselves as attractive, sexual beings, has been marketed and sold by doctors, scientists and the media for ages²⁹.

In the decade of "Peace and Love," the swinging 60s, two books appeared that mark the beginnings of this concept. One of them is *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (*But Were Afraid to Ask)*, by psychiatrist Dr. David Reuben, one of the best-selling books on sex of all time. It contained gems about menopausal women, such as: "Now that they have outlived their ovaries, perhaps they have also outlived their usefulness as human beings. The remaining years may be just a marker of time until they follow their glands into oblivion."³⁰

The most influential book was written by gynaecologist Dr. Robert Wilson, who invented a cure for this "disease of forgetfulness". In his 1966 bestseller *Feminine Forever* he stated that "menopause was particularly horrific as not only was it bad for women medically speaking, it was also a desexed state, so it made women undesirable to men. A double horror."³¹

But no need not to worry, because luckily Wilson had a cure: "[...] if women took HRT (hormone replacement therapy PK), they could be "feminine forever", Jackson quotes Wilson. She continues: "He claimed that the benefits of HRT extended far

²⁷ Berger, *Ways of seeing*, 1990

²⁸ Onderzoeksgroep Gender Studies Universiteit Utrecht, *Literatuurstudie beeldvorming*, 9

²⁹ Jackson, *Pain and Prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies*, 59

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ Gunter, *The Menopause Manifesto: Own Your Health with Facts and Feminism*, 219



beyond symptom relief, writing that a woman's 'breasts and genital organs will not shrivel' on therapy: 'She will be much more pleasant to live with and will not become dull and unattractive.'"³²

So women don't need "to witness the 'death of their own womanhood,' [...] with estrogen they could have an 'age defying youthfulness' and at fifty 'still look attractive in tennis shorts or sleeveless dresses, and of course regain 'supple breasts', "³³ as writer and gynaecologist Jen Gunter quite sarcastically quotes Wilson.

Wilson's book was picked up by many media outlets including Time, Newsweek, Ladies' Home Journal and Cosmopolitan. Vogue did an entire series about it. It became a bestseller in no time: within seven months more than 100 thousand copies had been sold.

It is not entirely clear whether Wilson's story was cooked up by Big Pharma, because the industry was looking for a cash cow to sell patent-free pills to millions of women (patent-free medicines hardly make any money anymore: they are cheap because the patent has been lifted), or whether Big Pharma warmly embraced his story because it offered the option of a cash cow. In the end, it doesn't matter because "Wilson's incorrect theories of menopause being a disease, and estrogen the cure, clearly struck a chord with the medical community and the public, and it was quickly accepted as canon."³⁴ Only in 2002 it became public that the pharmaceutical company Wyeth-Ayerst paid for all the expenses Wilson made.³⁵

In her podcast *Body Stuff with Dr. Jen Gunter*³⁶ the famous gynaecologist refers to this toxic entanglement of medical science, society and image.

³² Jackson, *Pain and Prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies*, 60

³³ Gunter, 'The Menopause Manifesto: Own Your Health with Facts and Feminism', 219

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Hormone Replacement Study A Shock to the Medical System <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/10/us/hormone-replacement-study-a-shock-to-the-medical-system.html> accessed Feb 25, 2022

Dr. Jen Gunter:

For a long time the male dominated medical field framed it as being all about maintaining femininity. They said that menopausal hormone therapy would keep you looking younger and hotter. It would keep your husband interested and make you look cute in your tennis skirt. It's the 'feminine forever concept.'

Brought to you by Big Pharma and the patriarchy!

Dr. Lubna Pal:

The feminine forever concept that your feminine identity is tied to your ovaries, which is tied to your hormones. And therefore, let's go give you back what you have lost for whose benefit? For men's benefit?

Dr. Jen Gunter:

To say the absolute least, I'm suspicious of this feminine forever framing. Our goal is not trying to fit into one demographics' definition of sexy. It's to make people's lives better.

By the way, if you think: "'Nah, those were the 60's, more than 60 years and four feminist waves ago, things must be different now'", then you're wrong. In their never-ending search to "cure menopause" scientists and Big Pharma are now looking into ovarian tissue cryopreservation: Removing and freezing ovarian tissue when women are in their early 30's and still fertile. The frozen tissue will be transplanted back when women enter menopause to restore falling hormone levels and allow for older women to have children. "Menopause will no longer be a barrier for women building their careers, because this breakthrough will allow for older women to have children", fertility expert Simon Fishel jubilated in English newspaper *The Telegraph*.³⁷ The tasteless prove of the pudding is in the eating: "Medicine has always seen women first and foremost as reproductive bodies."³⁸ And it still does.

³⁶ Dr. Jen Gunther, "Body Stuff with Dr. Jen Gunter", TED, accessed June 8 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/is-menopause-the-beginning-of-the-end/id1566425638?i=1000523874039>
³⁷ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/08/04/menopause-breakthrough-will-allow-older-women-have-children/> accessed Jan 13, 2022

³⁸ Jackson, Pain and prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies, 294

Chapter 6

What If? – Attempt II

What If? – Attempt II

“You look far too young,” my best friend told me when I showed her the images of me posing as a menopausal woman carrying my newly born baby.” I love her, she is always so honest and it is such a great compliment. Yet, I felt disappointed. Of all the moments I wanted to look younger, this wasn’t one of them. I was supposed to look awkwardly unrealistic. Uncanny. At least that was my intention.

Let me tell you why.

“A company in the United Kingdom is offering women a procedure it says can delay menopause up to 20 years and allow women to delay having babies,” The Conversation³⁹ wrote in august 2019. Long story short: a doctor collects ovarian tissue, slices it in tiny bits, freezes and stores it until it can be transplanted back around menopausal time. With the idea, or at least the hope, that these slices will start to produce hormones and release eggs. Kind of back to the future on estrogen.

Reading this article, many thoughts came over me at the same time. The most persistent one was about how the medical world benefits from framing menopause as a health problem. That benefits from maintaining the imposed paradigm that women ought to be young, beautiful, fertile and sexy. That benefits from the fact that there is no place for older women in society. That benefits, in short, from women becoming silenced and unseen during and after menopause.

I was wondering: How would I feel if I were to be a mom again at



I really feel like shit. No idea why. But it's there. I could cry,
just cry, for no reason. But that doesn't matter, does it?
Especially when you feel like shit. I just want to leave,
I feel so out of place, I'm such a loser. I want to disappear.
You have achieved nothing. I've achieved nothing.
And won't achieve anything. Ever. That feeling. So shitty...

- the age of fifty-six? And what would it look like? Would it be utterly ridiculous? Pathetic? Uncanny? Would it make other people feel uncomfortable? Could it provoke a discussion on how menopause and how medical science is silencing it?

- I decided to make a pastiche on Rineke Dijkstra's *New Mothers*. I got the opportunity to use the studio of an advertising photographer. It seemed like a great idea, using this giant studio. But I felt quite uncomfortable making this triptych: it was cold, I was barefooted, I had no assistant so I had to work with the self-shutter. Pushing the shutter, rushing back to the marked place, holding a doll like a baby and trying to look like I just gave birth to this thing.

- The thing that made me most uncomfortable was the mere thought that somebody – for some reason I was sure it would be a man – could just drop in. See me in my almost 'naked lingerie,' with this highly visible sanitary napkin and a doll.

- I realized that the women Rineke Dijkstra photographed probably couldn't have felt at ease either. You only need to look at them to see how uncomfortable they must have felt. And I totally get them. I gave birth to two children, and let me assure you, being portrayed is the last you think of right after doing this job.

But me feeling uncomfortable wasn't what I wanted to show.

- I wanted to show the uncanniness of this idea. I wanted to show how this therapy would obliterate menopausal women. How it would erase the conversations about the topic. And how scientists are accomplices to this concept. And how we, silly women, only have ourselves to blame if we become infertile, old, useless and invisible. Because if you have

³⁹ The Conversation <https://theconversation.com/dont-count-on-freezing-ovarian-tissue-to-delay-menopause-or-stop-your-biological-clock-121496>
accessed Nov 24, 2021

the chance to “break free from oblivion”, what is holding you back?

I wanted to start the discussion about silencing menopause because it is not a sexy topic – by the way who ever came up with the idea that only sexy female topics should be discussed? I wanted to start the discussion about being made invisible by the medical industry.

But I failed - again. Because I looked too young. Because the pictures I took of myself fell right into the pigeon-holes of patriarchal objectification.

Chapter 7

The Archive – Part II: Art/Photography

The Archive –

Part II:

Art/Photography

As I explained to you in chapter 2, where I took you along the saddening representation of menopausal women by mass media, the way us menopausal women are depicted influences how we are treated, seen, valued and thus how we feel, how we assess our own self-worth. Mass media are doing a poor job when it comes to the representation of menopausal women, I concluded.

Can photography as an art form do a better job? Without going into much detail on what art/photography is - one can write a separate thesis on that topic - I use this concept as the counterpart of the Getty Images of this world, the visual mass media. In this thesis I see art/photography as the kind of photography that wants to raise questions, that wants to add to a societal discourse – think series on abortion, on rape, on body shaming.

Let's return to my exploration: would art/photography do a better job? A valid question, I would say, because art/photography have the ability to influence our perception as much as stock photography does. Would it avoid all these clichés? Would the representation, for example, be a result from conversations with women of that age, how they see themselves? A representation that also questions how society and medical science deals with menopausal women?

Of course, I know an archive is formed by those in power, I know! I know that those in power control what is preserved as an image of a certain period, as the lore of an era, as the canon of an important age, to briefly summarize Ariella Azoulay who rather elaborately describes what an archive is in *Political Concepts, a critical lexicon*.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Archive: Ariella Azoulay, *Political Concepts : A Critical Lexicon*, The New School for Social Research New York 2011







But then again: an archive on menopausal women might be the odd one out, right? The exception that proves the rule. Alas, it is hoping against hope. There's a staggering lack of series on menopause. My conclusion: it is a silenced topic in art/photography as well. When I sent an email to the curators of *Reproductive, Health, Fertility, Agency*, an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago that explore the psychological, physical and emotional realities women experience surrounding fertility, I got a short reply: they don't know any other photographer making work on menopause other than those on display at the exhibition.⁴¹ The Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington DC cannot help me much either. They sent me a list, with nine links, the majority of which I was already aware of.⁴²

I ask myself: Is this lack of representation in art/photography as problematic as that in mass media? I guess the answer is: yes. Social perceptions emerge along different paths and take on multiple perspectives that are interdependent. A different narrative, a shift in perception always finds its origin from a changing perspective from various angles. In other words: only if we from all sides urge for on this change, only then it will happen.

⁴¹ Patrick Thornton, e-mail message to author, June 10, 2021

⁴² Tricia Glaser, e-mail message to author, Oct 4, 2021

Chapter 8

The Marketing Trap

The Marketing Trap

Many producers of “natural products” and other so-called “therapies” that claim to relieve menopausal symptoms, benefit from the medical framing of menopause as a disease or as a deficiency of certain hormones. After all, what would be the *raison d’être* of homeopathic brands like Dr. A Vogel or Ymea⁴³ if menopause was not a condition that needs to be remedied? Because how else can they sell their products? They all exist by the grace of problematizing menopause. That frame is fed by both image and language. And by economics: according to a new report by venture capital firm Female Founders Fund menopause is a \$600 billion opportunity.⁴⁴

Millions of herbal remedies, natural “medicines,” bio-identical hormones and “therapies”, freely available at your local grocery store, are supposed to ease the symptoms and get rid of any menopausal complaints, ranging from poor sleep to bad figure to hot flushes to a dry vagina to a bad mood and everything in between.

Just one tiny problem: the drugs have only been tested on a limited number of women – if tested at all⁴⁵. Another hurdle: the disclaimer. “Health claims pending European approval”, it says in reading glasses-sized letters. In other words, the European Commission has yet to assess whether the claim of the drug is correct. Whether those plants or herbs in question do what the producers of those pills and powders promise. But this “medical waiting room” is no problem to sell those ‘natural products [...] that are specially formulated for the unique needs of menopausal women.’⁴⁶

⁴³ Dr A Vogel and Ymea are Dutch brands for OTC medicine for women in menopause

⁴⁴ <https://fortune.com/2020/10/26/menopause-startups-female-founders-fund-report/> accessed Feb 10, 2022

⁴⁵ When you buy a single product like maca or other products that are recommended as a cure against some symptoms, there’s no disclaimer at all. Because these products can also be used for completely different reason then menopausal symptoms.

⁴⁶ <https://ymea.nl/> accessed Nov 8, 2021

In a conversation I had with Dutch menopause expert Dorinda van Dijken, a gynaecologist specialized in hormone replacement therapy, Van Dijken says that these remedies do not help, and that some of these natural products, for example Black Cohosh, can even be dangerous. Says Van Dijken: “it’s a big marketing trap, don’t fall for it”.⁴⁷

The Gap in the Market

In my search for alternative therapies I also came across a lot of... uhhh...well, how shall I put this nicely...a lot of not so reliable treatments. I wouldn't call them charlatans...but then again. Let's take a closer look at some of these "meno help suppliers." For example, a Dutch woman called Vivian Reijs, who used to be a tv show presenter for commercial broadcasters and is a self-proclaimed bestselling author, now reborn as amongst other callings a hormone expert. Tried to find out if that was a real job. But, nope, nothing on that. On her platform she offers this online program for (peri) menopausal women. From the screen she's looking at you with her brightest smile, long blond hair, grey jeans, woollen pink sweater but barefoot. The embodiment of her sales-pitch: "Radiant and happy through (the onset of) menopause". Sure! This is how I feel and look when I talk about my menopause. Especially the barefoot part...my feet are always frozen, even if I wear 2 pair of socks.

"The online program especially for women (40-60 years) who feel that their hormonal balance is changing and need help with that. So that mood swings disappear, you get stress under control, lose weight, sleep improves, you feel better physically and mentally. You simply regain your strength and can be the happy and energetic woman you want to be. Because walking around with these complaints is not necessary."⁴⁸ Taken verbatim from Vivian Reijs' website. If only all this were true....

There are many more "Vivian Reijeses." A short google search will provide you with an abundance of so-called hormone experts, who know and sell all kinds of tips and tricks for an easy and natural menopause: Hop therapy, menopause yoga, e-health sites offering accessible psychological help, sauerkraut against hot flushes, soy milk, magnesium citrate, Female Herbal Complex, evening primrose oil, passionflower extract etc etc. And not to forget,

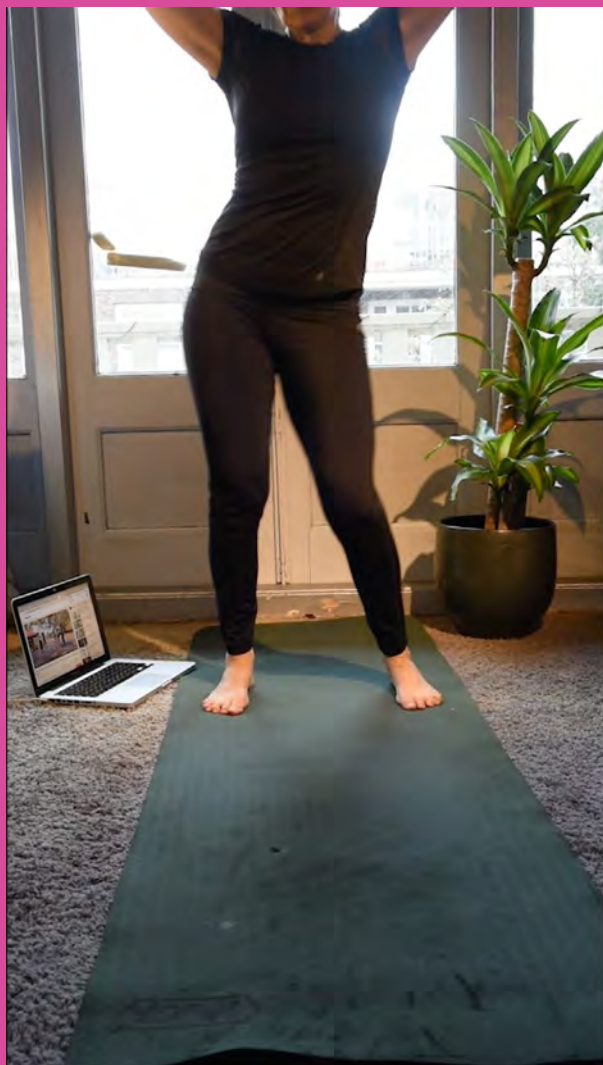
⁴⁷ Interview Dorinda van Dijken, Oct 19, 2021, Amsterdam

⁴⁸ <https://vivonline.nl/stralend-en-blij-door-de-menopauze/> accessed Jan 13, 2022

⁴⁹ Creating "micro-abrasions" to stimulate the production of collagen and boost the blood supply. In 2018, the FDA issued a statement warning about the possibility of burns and scarring as a result of it. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/jan/26/from-vaginal-laser-treatment-to-spa-breaks-its-the-great-menopause-gold-rush?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other accessed Feb 10, 2022











the groundbreaking vaginal rejuvenation laser treatment.⁴⁹ They all excitedly proclaim that this is the remedy for your menopausal problems. You would be crazy not to take advantage of them - wouldn't you?

Just to make things clear: I am not against reliable therapies that can alleviate your symptoms during menopause. And I understand very well that if you do not feel heard by mainstream medical science, by your doctor, by your ob/gyn, that you will look for other solutions. But I do object to organizations that have a whiff of money-grabbing about them. Businesses that recognize a market gap, grab such opportunities with -sometimes - dubious claims and empty promises, backed up by a professional background of their own devising, such as "hormone expert," which may sound assuring, but in reality they mean nothing. If one were to call it demagoguery, you wouldn't hear me opposing that.

It reminds me of all those methods that medical world had come up with against hysteria, as Gabrielle Jackson describes in her book *Pain and Prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies*: "Treatments for hysteria were dominated by bleeding (either by lancet, cupping or leeches), pills, nerve tonics, iron, arsenic, opiates and vomiting, as well as a change of scenery or bathing in sulphurous waters, such as at the resort town of Bath or in the many spas popping up all over Germany. And if all that failed, they could now be transferred to an asylum."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Jackson, *Pain and Prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies*, 96 *Ehende iur? Qui ipsam vendici illectae nonemodios moloris sinus eatis et essitatie plabor aligent otates et ipictat off*

Chapter 9

Presenting Your Ovaries – Attempt III

• Presenting Your Ovaries – Attempt III

- For a short moment I considered trying this vaginal rejuvenation laser treatment to experiment whether all those charlatan remedies work.

• Not!

• Fooled you.

• Of course not.

- What a ridiculous idea, boosting the blood supply in your vagina. For one, and most important: a lack of sexual arousal is not, and I repeat not, a symptom of menopause⁵¹. It's a symptom of men not taking enough time to get their partner sufficiently excited. As a thought experiment, just turn it around, and see how men react to this: "An erectile dysfunction? I have this great remedy for you. Just let me laser your weeny, it stimulates your blood supplies."
- How many men would say: Yes, please!

• Anger is slowly bubbling up inside me. How come all these remedies are put on the market to help women "solve their problems"? Dangerous treatments. Or treatments that don't work.

• Deep sigh.

- Or take this hormone yoga. Invented and coined by Brazilian Dinah Rodrigues. She has built an entire empire around it.

⁵¹ Interview Dorinda van Dijken, Oct 19, 2021

The yoga is good for pregnant women, for men who are in their menopause (yes men, you will end up there eventually...) and yes – oh really? - for women in their menopause. Breathe and move rhythmically.

But, hey wait. Am I missing something here? I mean: what on earth is the similarity between pregnant women and women in menopause?

Oh please stop.

Ayurvedic breathing and rhythmic yoga.

Stop. Please.

It calms you down, this yoga, they say.
Like I need that, calming down. Come on, no way. I am calm.

I. AM. CALM.

Boiling point.

Maybe I should give it a try, that yoga.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Grabbing my camping mat, finding this free lesson online: *Hormonal Yoga Therapy with Shakti | Complete Class | Balance your Hormones and Improve your Vitality*⁵². Precisely what I need at this moment.

Disclaimer: I had only a few yoga lessons in my whole life, some



I'm shopping. On my bike, the last stretch before Christmas.
Spotify in my ears. And then Bowie comes on. Heroes.
All time favourite. I turn up the volume all the way and sing
along. Fortunately, it is not that busy on the street. A tear
rolls down my cheek. The cold, I think. But then I suddenly
feel like crying. Just. Because. Thankfully, I realise it is raining.

- 10 years ago. Just a few. For a reason. I'm not a yoga person, I'm more of a power training-type. Nevertheless, I'm dead serious about doing this introduction lesson.
- I roll out my camping mat in my studio, trying to flatten it as much as possible. You might know those mats, if they have been rolled up in a closet for too long, flattening them is a hard thing to do.
- I put my laptop on the ground to be able to stop the video if necessary. I mean, I'm not really "yoga savvy" so I might need to check some poses.
- And off we go. It starts with a cross-legged position. Oh no. Non-onononono. Not sitting on the ground cross-legged. I can't. Because I have two very, very bad knees. Not because I'm getting older and stiffer. I had three (!) very severe knee traumas. Basically, except for my knees, I'm fit as a fiddle and super limber.
- Okay, just do it. Or at least try. Strike a pose. Poker face. You can do this. Just act like it's a piece of cake, this position.
- The voice of the yoga teacher reminds me of my maternity course teacher. Not a yoga course, by the way. I especially remembered a mantra she taught us - one that I chanted in my primal voice throughout both of my deliveries,: "It has to open from below, because it has to come out from below." With the "chanting ohm emphasis" on ooohhhpen and ouhhht.
- And back to reality.
- I try more positions. Like the one where I have to sit with one leg stretched, the other one with my feet to my knee. And I have to bounce, up and down, up and down, up and down, by using my abdominal muscles to massage my inner abdomen.

⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4uhrgUPrns> accessed Feb 10, 2022

Uhhmmm, right, actually no idea what she's talking about. Maybe she means I have to tighten and relax my abs? But where are they anyway, my abs? Probably there, hidden under, well, under you know what.

I have to swipe from left to right and back again, I have to bend over and rhythmically move up and down, up and down, up and down on the speed of my breathing, I have to hummmm while moving my stretched arms like those people who gesture air-planes to the right position. And I have to "present my ovaries on a wonderful plate."

I have to do what?

Whoohaha!

Gone my bad temper! Come on in good vibes! It works, this yoga. At least for me at this very moment. No idea if it would get me through my other moods. Well, honestly, I do have an idea: It won't. Because yoga is just not my cup of tea. But that's okay. And if this yoga-thing works for others, be my guest!

Just keep a few things in mind: Menopause will not run down the curtain and join the bleedin' choir invisible⁵³ because of hormonal yoga and all other quackery. In other words: menopause will always be there, it's part of life. And instead of keeping the frame of menopause as something that can be cured by "your special treatment," society, the medical world and the world of alternative medicine should start to really listen to women and see menopause as a phase all women go through. And acknowledge that some women suffer from it, and some don't. Some need help, some don't. But please take us seriously.

⁵³ Monty Python Dead Parrot Sketch http://montypython.50webs.com/scripts/Series_1/53.htm accessed Feb 10,2022
Series_1/53.htm accessed Feb 10,2022

Chapter 10

The Archive –

Part III: The Archive of Women's History

The Archive –

Part III: The Archive of Women's History

It's a cold and rainy Thursday morning, end of October 2021.

One of those grey, chilly autumn mornings. I'm on my bike, heading toward the centre of Amsterdam to Atria, the largest archive in the Netherlands on women's history. I want to search their visual archive for representation of menopausal women through the years. Despite the grey weather, I am pretty excited actually. Finally I will see this visual history, this realistic, authentic archive.

I take a seat behind a big screen, another two big screens to my right and left. The light is dreadful, the yellow painted walls seem to be some sort of attempt at making the place feel more comfortable, shinier, like summer.

I enter the Dutch word for "menopause" in the search bar: *menopauze*. Twenty-five hits. Surely, there must be more results? It's menopause after all. If there is one place where there would be a lot to find about this topic, it must be here at the archive of women's history. I look at the bottom of the page to see if there are more pages to browse, but all I got was these twenty-five visuals. Seventeen of them are from the same series, shot by the famous Dutch photographer Bertien van Manen, of the making of a documentary called *Vido*, the abbreviation for *Vrouwen in de overgang* (Women in Menopause), a Dutch advocacy group for menopausal women who were active sometime between 1970-80.

Did I spell it correctly – *menopauze*? Yes, I did.

I try other search options:

Vrouwbeelden ("female images"): 500+ hits. Combined with *menopauze*: 25.



How my
periods
have stopped
what am I?

Let's celebrate
our last
fuckable
day!

Menopause is
a feature
not a bug
of human
evolution

I've outlived
my ovaries.
Am I useless
now?

What is
my
expiration
date?

Wild
Matriarch

Medisch ("medical"): 691 hits. Combined with *menopauze* 0. Combined with *ouderen* ("elderly"): 2. *Ouderen* combined with *overgang* ("the change"): 15 hits.

I'm confused. The largest women's archive in the Netherlands, and hardly any visuals related to menopause? I ask one of the information specialists working at Atria. "Menopause as a keyword for visual archival images is a difficult reference. Depending on the topic of the collection that is donated, or that we acquired, we archive it under several keywords", she tells me.⁵⁴

If a collection has already one or more keywords, Atria will use those, including menopause, if it is provided. If there are none, Atria will do this themselves. In this last case, when menopause is not specifically tagged, it is a difficult concept to pin down on an image. Because what exactly are the distinguishing elements based on which you tag visuals as menopausal? Age? Wrinkles? And what about visuals that have nothing to do with menopause, but picture women who fit into that group because of their age?

On the other hand: why not use *also* the keyword menopause if applicable? Not as the only one nor as the most important one, but *also*, as one of the tags. It makes menopause visible. Not only by picturing the women specifically, but also by showing that menopausal women are part of society in general. Period.

Dear people of Atria, if you're reading this, I have a request: please consider my proposal, because not attaching this specific keyword to the visuals is like denying this phase of a woman's life, leaving her invisible. Again. Still. Menopause remains a taboo, it remains a topic that is publicly only discussed in whispers. It remains a sign that women are redundant once they can no longer reproduce.

In this vein, Jackson writes that "representations of older women or of menopause itself remain rare in Western culture—at least outside of comedy, where menopausal women are usually the butt of the joke."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Personal conversation I had with an information specialist when doing research at Atria Oct 21, 2022

⁵⁵ Jackson, *Pain and Prejudice - a call to arms for women and their bodies*, 63

Chapter 11

When the Shit Hits the Fan – Attempt IV

• When the Shit Hits the Fan – Attempt IV

- Did you ever take a look at a woman – an older one- sitting next to you in public transport, in cinema, on a bench in that cozy little park near your house? And did you ever ask yourself how she may feel at that moment? You might, I'm not saying you haven't. But
- you are probably the odd one out. It's this taboo I talked about earlier that causes this looking away, this invisibility. This taboo that does not live among women, because we talk about it a lot. Often. In all kinds of media and among ourselves. This taboo that
- has been imposed on us by society, by patriarchy because traditionally we are simply not heard. And not being heard means not being seen, means not existing at all.

- As Mary Beard explains in great detail in her book *Women & Power A Manifesto*:⁵⁶ "I'm not saying that women's voices raised in support of women's causes were not, or are not, important (someone has to speak up for women); but it remains the case that women's public speech has for centuries been 'niched' into that area."
-

- Beard is not very optimistic about changing that. "These attitudes, assumptions and prejudices are hard-wired into us: not into our brains (there is no neurological reason for us to hear low-pitched voices as more authoritative than high-pitched ones), but into our culture, our language and millennia of our history."

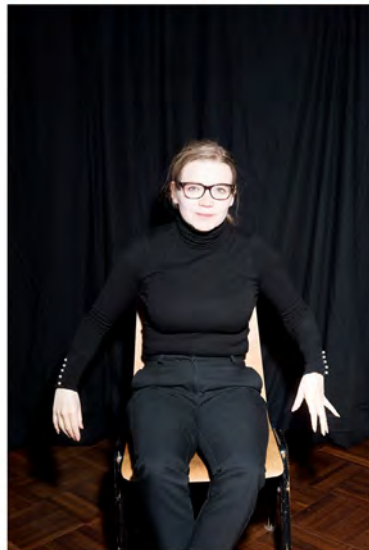
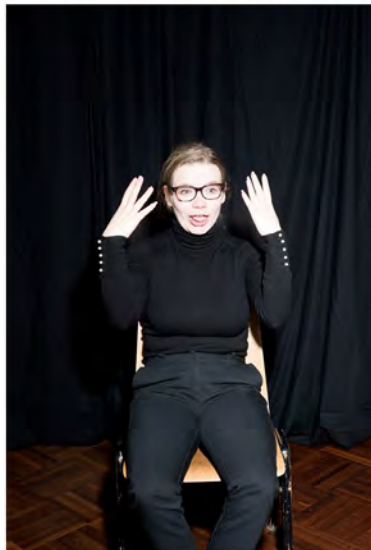
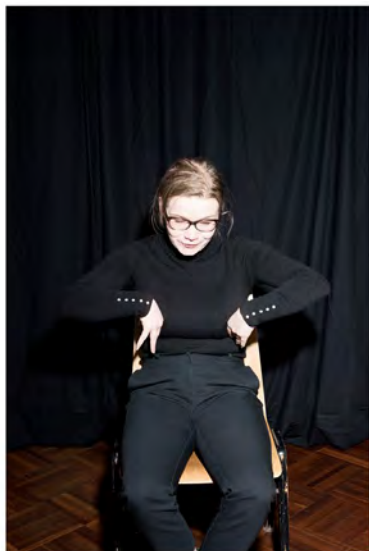
- So just sit down and let it all go? That's not how I'm hard-wired; even though I didn't grow up in an activist family, I was taught my voice is just as valuable and should be heard just as loudly as my

brothers'. And it is also certainly not what Beard tells us. "We have to be more reflective about what power is, what it is for, and how it is measured. To put it another way, if women are not perceived to be fully within the structures of power, surely it is power that we need to redefine rather than women?"

Considering that power does not solely manifest through speech but also by means of visual representation, redefining power in my opinion means showing and telling what menopause is. What it really looks like. Not just simply mentioning the symptoms, but showing where and when they pop up, expressing how they feel. On public transport, in cinema, on a bench in that cozy little park near your house.

'When the shit hits the fan' is doing exactly that. Unadorned, straight to the point. I can't make it more beautiful, and I don't want to make it more beautiful. Because it is what it is.

Let's break this taboo.



Chapter 12

Epilogue: The Change

Epilogue: The Change

At the start of composing my thesis, I thought had it all figured out. I would describe menopause from three perspectives: medical science, society⁵⁷ and photography/media and explore how these realms framed this female life cycle. I would examine how this affects the way menopause, or more precisely menopausal women⁵⁸, are portrayed. And, most importantly, how women - or more precisely how I, for it was also about me - felt about it. It would be my attempts at making menopause visible. My attempts at showing how medical science, society and the media in general, and photography in particular look at menopause.

Based on that analysis, as I had thought, I was going to look for another narrative. Another perspective that contributes to the real role, the real value that women, we, have. Images that represent how we feel, how we want to be seen. Images that enable us women to finally live our lives as we want to, as we choose to. Free from any patriarchal meddling whatsoever. Amen.

My story would be a small link in a bigger picture, a bigger picture of other stories about menopause, stories that also show a shift in perspective. It would be a small drop. Together with all those other small drops, it would erode patriarchy.

Drip, drip, drip.

I would start by advocating to change the word menopause. Because words matter. Like images, they determine how we see and speak of something or someone. I therefore would suggest to stop using the word Menopause and replace it by The Change.⁵⁹ It is not a pause, us women do not go back to what we were doing before that pause. We are going

⁵⁷ For my definition of society see footnote 4.

⁵⁸ It is not about the phenomenon, of course, but about the women involved. You don't show puberty either, you show young people, and how they deal with their fluctuating hormone balances.

⁵⁹ The Change is a literal translation from the expression being used in Dutch language. It is sometimes used in English as well, but not that often. In Dutch language though there is a tendency using the word menopause more and more because it is internationally more used.

through a period of change, looking for a new balance. It takes time, it may take some time, and once we have found the balance, we start a new part of our lives. That's why: The Change.

And, as I had thought, such a new period calls for a celebration. A ritual, to honour The Change. In North Brabant, where I grew up, it is tradition to eat cake when you get your first period: becoming fertile is something to be celebrated. On a similar note: scientific research shows that women in different parts of the world experience menopause in different ways. As an article in a British psychological magazine states: "The menopause transition is an interesting example of a biopsychosocial process in that the majority of women experience some physiological changes, which may be influenced by a range of psychological, social and cultural factors."⁶¹

My line of thought: Why not celebrate the end of menstruation too? No more tampons, no more unexpected bleeding (in your white trousers...), no more having to soak your bedding in cold water to remove those damned blood stains because even the thickest sanitary napkin didn't stop the blood from leaking. No more stomach ache, no more PMS - I can go on forever. It's worth a party, don't you think so? How beautiful and encouraging is that?

A coming-of-age story, that would also be part of it, I had thought. Like the ones about puberty, that phase of life where you are also looking for a new balance, where your hormones also show you all colours of the emotional spectrum: *Himmelhoch jauchzend, zum Tode betrübt*⁶². Where you also end up in a more balanced period. It takes time, it may take some time, and once you have found the balance, you start a new part of your life.

I would compose this coming-of-older-age story with my daughter, I planned. It would be different from the classic coming-of-age stories, for sure. It would have to be something about looking to

the future and looking to the past, something with generations or generation gaps, young-old. Something like that. I planned a shoot, I wanted to explore this coming-of-older-age story. We had a lot of fun doing the shoot, my daughter and I, in our

⁶⁰ A salient detail: the first ejaculation is not celebrated.

⁶¹ Ayers, Forshaw & Hunter, "The menopause."

⁶² Translated in English it means: Heavenly joy, Deadly sorrow. This phrase comes from a play of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, titled "Egmont" (1788). It became proverbial.

living room. Especially because my daughter actually had fun in the process. "Look mum, this is you in your menopause." Thank you, my lovely daughter. How beautiful and encouraging is that?

I had it all figured out.

Until, during my research, I stumbled upon this literature study on image perception⁶³ commissioned by Dutch advocacy group WOMEN Inc. Central questions: What are the harmful effects of inadequate representation in the media? What do the humanities and social sciences know about this? One of the conclusions: the patriarchal image of women has been shaped over the centuries and is so ingrained in our DNA that we have come to consider such images as real and true. Changing that perspective is a long-term challenge.

And I wondered: what role can photography play in this? Can photography at all lead to a different perspective, contribute to a better world?

I thought of the recurring photos of flows of refugees that end up in the World Press Photo annals every year. Year after year, flow after flow. I thought about two visits to London I made recently: one to Tate Modern in November 2021 and one to Saatchi Gallery, three months later. They didn't make me feel any better. Why? Let me tell you. In one of the exhibition rooms of the permanent collection of Tate Modern there is a video work on display. The text board at the entrance asks: "Can art create change? Is it relevant in the crisis? How can artists unite a movement?" In the video, a cheerful John Lennon says he is going to use advertising, like big companies do, to promote his product: peace for the people. Works by The Guerilla Girls, who protested in the mid-80s against racism and sexism in the art world, explains what they want to achieve with their actions. If you were to change the date of those actions to 2022, they would still be poignantly topical.

Three months later, February 2022, I visited the exhibition *America in Crisis* (21 January - 3 April 2022) at Saatchi Gallery, London.

The museum recommends the exhibition on its website as follows: "To

⁶³ Literatuurstudie beeldvorming, uitgevoerd door onderzoeksgroep Gender Studies Universiteit Utrecht in opdracht van WOMEN Inc, September 2016



That someone just out of pure...um...what's that word again? Wednesday morning, quarter to nine. Conversation with partner P and I'm trying to recall this word. Can't find it. It's happening more and more lately. That I can't find the right word. "That you want a lot of people to watch," I explain. "What is that word?" "Sensation," partner P says. Of course, yes. Sensation.

mark the anniversary of the Capitol Riots in 2021, explore the original 1969 groundbreaking photo project '*America in Crisis*' in dialogue with contemporary American photographers"⁶⁴. The series consists of photographs by some forty photographers who examine social change in the USA from the 1960s to the present. The accompanying texts to the different chapters of the exhibition are introduced with a quote. Like this one: "We can now 'invent the future', it has been said, or obliterate it. While technology rushes on, our politics, economics, social structure – even our psychology- vainly strain to keep up. It's a time of jolting change, of endings and beginnings." What do you think: Does this quote date from 1969 or 2022? Guess. It is the former, 1969. Though, after more than 50 years, it is still highly topical, perhaps even more than ever.

I felt desperate, panic coming up like a hot flush. Can photography lead to a different perspective at all? It cannot be, it shouldn't be that my daughter, and all my granddaughters and great-granddaughters stay represented in this same old frame of medical misogyny. Fading into oblivion. It cannot be, it shouldn't be that my son, and all my grandsons and great-grandsons keep seeing and believing in those images of women in and after menopause, these images that are made in the name of patriarchy.

I asked my teacher Adam Broomberg, who was also looking for new perspectives. Can photography contribute to a different narrative? "Certainly", he replied, "photography can contribute to change, but don't look to traditional media as an ally. Find your own channels to contribute to that different perspective." I asked my teacher Marga Rotteveel, founder of Docking Station, a photography platform that wants to contribute to a more conscious society through visual storytelling. It is not easy, but it is possible, she says. "It takes a lot of training, a lot of watching, a lot of listening. And you have to think: what change do I want to make and how am I going to do that? How do I build that story? Is it through one image, or is it a series? And what will it look like: a bus shelter, a very small booklet, a video? In other words, what media will you use? And who is your audience? It's a multi-stage rocket that has to be right; how do I do it, how have others done it?"

⁶⁴ <https://www.saatchigallery.com/> Feb 17, 2022

⁶⁵ Conversation with Adam Broomberg Dec 1, 2021

⁶⁶ Interview Marga Rotteveel Feb 8, 2022

⁶⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/10/the-secret-power-of-meno-pause/596662/> accessed Feb 18, 2022

I reread the first part of my thesis. I scrolled through all the literature, interviews, podcasts and quotes I had collected. Looking for, well, for what exactly? For that hook, that *rite de passage* that would lead me to that new perspective and how I should visualize it. And suddenly, I read that one sentence. I hadn't even noticed it at first: "To describe a passage of life, even a painful one, can itself be a form of empowerment." And suddenly I realized: my attempts at making menopause visible already manifest a new kind of perspective. In all their vulnerability, they show what I think of medical science's view of menopause, of society's and the media's view of this phase of life, and of photography in particular. I made the personal political.

Through my attempts I started to take back control of how we are represented, and thus of how we are perceived. In words of the author and curator Charlotte Jansen, who writes on feminist photographers in the 1970's, who argues that photography became a force of change in its own right in the 70's: "Experimental artists used photography in their practice to reclaim their bodies and reveal the artificial construction of gender roles in mainstream media to limit their position in both the art world and society as a whole."⁶⁸

That was fifty years ago. And still, us women are fighting these social constructs limiting us. Jansen: "There still exists a generalization that women photographing women is one of two things: a continuation and conformity to the standardized structures of the clichéd perception of the female, or to counter and provide an antidote to the male gaze." Yet, Jansen is optimistic: "[T]he female gaze is so much more than that. Women see the world differently, in just as much colour and nuance. We are beginning to see that world everywhere we look."⁶⁹

My attempts are just a start, I realize this. And we still have a long way to go to show the world how we menopausals want to be seen, want to be represented. In all our colours, in all our nuances. It is time to point my camera outwards, to you, my allies. How do you see yourselves? How do you think the world should look at you?

Slowly, we are eroding these patriarchal images.

⁶⁸ Jansen, "I'll be your mirror."

Drip drip drip.

⁶⁹ *ibid*



Make your own 'last fuckable day'-cake

My '*last fuckable day*' cake is a cheesecake. I choose this cake because it is super easy to make, without an oven. It is almost impossible to make it wrong. Of course, you are free to make another cake. In any case, make it a real *celebration cake*, because you are celebrating something, aren't you?



Recipe

Ingredients

Gelatine 12 leaves
Dry biscuits 200 gram
Nuts 100 gram
Butter 100 gram
Strawberries 500 gram
Juice of 1 orange
Low-fat quark 500 gram
Sugar 200 gram
Fresh whipped cream 250 ml
Strawberry jam 4 tbsp.

Cooking supplies

Bowls
Springform 24 cm
Food processor
Baking paper

1. Soak gelatine in a bowl of cold water for about 5 minutes. Crumble the biscuits or grind in the food processor and place in a bowl. Grind the nuts in the food processor. Mix it with the biscuits in the bowl. Melt butter and mix it with water through the biscuit and nut crumbs. Lightly grease the springform, spread the crumb and nut mixture over the base and press down firmly. Put in the fridge to allow butter to set.
2. Gently wash 300 g of strawberries and remove the crowns. Puree the strawberries in the food processor. Squeeze the orange and heat gently in a pan. Take it off the heat, squeeze the gelatine well, dissolve it in the warm orange juice, while stirring. Leave the mixture to cool. But not too much, otherwise it is already too stiff!
3. Mix together the quark, sugar, orange mixture and strawberry puree in a bowl. Whip the cream until stiff in another bowl and lightly fold it into the quark mixture. Spread the quark mixture over the crumbly bottom of the springform and smooth out the top.
4. Let the cheesecake set in the fridge for at least 3 hours. Halve the remaining strawberries and arrange them on top of your cake. Gently heat the strawberry jam with water in a pan. Brush the strawberries and the quark generously with the jam mixture.

Instead of only strawberries you can also use a mixture of blackberries, raspberries and blueberries.

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They're watering again, my eyes. Desiccating membranes, that's why. I only need to step out of my house and it starts. It's not trickling, it's more like a constant moist, fine film, leaving tears in the corner of my eye. Completely ruining my carefully applied eyeliner. The drops the doctor gave, those fake tears, don't help either.

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I'm plucking again. My chin. My upper lip. My cheeks. They are still black there, those little hairs. But on my chin and upper lip they turned grey. Shock. Stiff, grey, stingy hairs. You can see them very well in backlight. In the past I only had to tweeze once every 2 weeks, very rarely once a week. Now, I do it every 2 days.

