

## Sylvère Lotringer in interview with Lynn Tillman

**LYNNE TILLMAN:** One of the first things that seems obvious about these photographs is their forthright concern with nature. Particularly in the earlier work, nature, with reference to landscape, is presented in detail. There's a very dark cast to the work, a gothic quality. So it's not an optimistic nature.

**SYLVERE LOTRINGER:** No, it's human nature.

**LT:** For the purpose of this discussion, what is nature?

**SL:** Nature pricks. Nature creeps into bodies; nature is something that in some way bodies are coming out of but not quite. Nature hides. Nature bleeds onto the bodies. It is presented as brambles and hits onto the body.

**LT:** Nature pricks bodies.

**SL:** If you push the idea of nature in these photographs, it's really mythological. Humans emerging from the earth, it's like Oedipus coming out of the earth and stumbling. There is the famous Claude Levi-Strauss analysis of Laius, Oedipus' father, when he still doesn't walk straight. He's still part of the earth. It references the old idea, the difference between culture and nature, that you can attempt to extract yourself from nature, but nature still sticks to you, it sticks to your feet, it sticks to your tongue and you're never quite extracted from it. On one hand the work is very conceptual, on the other side it's totally mythological, even pagan, with passages from Judeo-Christian iconography, Saint Christopher holding this little Jesus on his shoulders or the "Aliyah," the attempt to go toward some kind of light. The span of this work is enormous.

**LT:** There's the notion of nature as a mythological construct, as a sort of primal place that we human beings construct in order to give ourselves an origin. We construct it because obviously nature doesn't care. In a funny way the body also doesn't care.

**SL:** You have to bruise it for the body to react in some way, otherwise it's inert. Here in this photograph there appears to be a body coming out of primeval waters, dark waters; the body is like a piece of meat or a rock or

something, and it's slightly bruised. It's not very attractive, in fact it's repulsive.

**LT:** It's interesting to think of this as religious work, then you mix up the sacred and the profane.

**SL:** The interesting aspect here is the in-betweens, there is a process of metamorphosis, a change from stone or brambles to the body. You can't really tell which is which, there is a deliberate attempt to hide the parts of the body so you don't even know which part of the body you are seeing. For example, here you have limbs; limbs appear coming out from another body, twisted and they don't fit. The body is never there as a total image, it is there as a part dissociated from nature, but at the same time the body is nature. I like the in-between, even in a single picture there are elements that are very focused and elements that are blurred. There is often movement seen as a blur. I like the points of transition because, when it is very successful, there is a feeling you just don't know exactly where you are: you are in a transition.

**LT:** Do you mean one image to another in one series, that kind of transition, or from one whole series to another series?

**SL:** Each series has a definition, each has a name, and they reflect each other within the series and with the other series. It is very organized. I keep thinking of Freud because I know you think of Freud. Some of these photographs make me think of that magazine Freud use to read. He used to look for all these puzzles in a German magazine, he was excited by it because it was something to decipher. And part of Eldon's work is that it's also conceptually defensive, as if the picture weren't quite enough by itself, so he has to twist things around. It's always a puzzle: where's the head? where's the leg? Everything is distorted, hidden and you have to do real work in relation to these pictures.

**LT:** Yesterday I read a piece in the New Yorker about Gertrude Stein, and one of the author's premises was that part of Modernism's style, its leaving out or difficulty was, as seen in Gertrude Stein's work, manifested in her desire to avoid certain issues in her life. I have trouble with this one-to-one view, the idea that one makes a style that allows one to obscure something so as not to talk about, say, one's sexuality. Yet you have to make allowances for the consideration that the psychological is always in the

aesthetic, that we are always also making choices aesthetically in tandem with psychological as well as social determinants.

SL: In this series, "Promise", you have a woman's chest with breasts that are partially hidden; it's one of the most subtly erotic of all the pictures. It's possible that the body can be recognized for what it is, but it's hidden, it's buried, it's blurred, if you don't look very carefully a chunk of skin could very well be a stone; it's hardly human. Here the body is fragmented, it could be a piece of meat that has been bruised or barbecued, but it's another body. And you have a hard time because sometimes someone else's hand is inserted and hidden. Basically it is all textures. For example in this image, it is probably a torso, probably a heart that has been opened up, the impression is conveyed through a scar in the place where it has been opened up. The body is charcoaled or covered with dirt: it looks like pigskin rather than skin.

LT: It's funny to think about promise, that concept, in relation to something that has the quality of so much sludge and murk. Why is it promise?

SL: Because promise is a movement, the movement towards something. And then the promise doesn't quite make it. You have some possibility for some grace at the beginning then it all gets messed up by the brambles and the body really doesn't quite take off. When there are two bodies together in a sexual embrace, it is all very dark and indistinct. They are all bodies that are coming out of, or coming down; they could be dead.

LT: So, is that the fruit of all this?

SL: Yes. The bitter fruit: the promise.

LT: Drying on the vine. One of the things that seems to run throughout all the work is an attention to detail, to a part of something. With rare exceptions is a whole depicted. There's a part, a fragment, a detail, and sometimes as with human skin, it usually is seen very close. It's one of the things which I think photography can do. Remember in Blowup that moment when the photographer keeps getting closer and closer and finally sees this blurry thing, evidence of something. Sometimes when you are looking at a picture, you go closer and closer, and of course the image is opaque and on the surface. There is something about all of his work: none of it has depth. It's about remaining on the surface. We don't need to look back, we are not looking into the image.

**SL:** Because we look from extremely close. When you use a telephoto-lens and get very close to an object then you have a very short range, things which are very close to what you are focused on are immediately blurred. The sharpness is very relative and transient because you immediately get into the blurring.

**LT:** Even when it's not blurred and we're very close-up, as with the skin, it's a sort of pun, because it is the skin of the photograph as well. It's pure surface. And maybe there are little holes, like the skin is in fact punctured, but it's a kind of visual tease. The flatness of these photographs resists our desire to enter into them. It is something which photography can do probably better than almost any other medium.

**SL:** But even when it is as precise as the skin, and it's relatively precise here, it gets blurred there. You can't sustain the focus and then the skin gets so close it begins to look artificial, like something that is reflective. It's hardly skin, it's dead, like plastic.

**LT:** Do you think god is in that detail?

**SL:** God would be very blurred these days. On the other hand you have to emphasize that some of these series are extremely sharp and focused. In the whole economy of the picture they work together. I like this one better because it is not just that it is difficult to decipher, but because there is so much happening. And also because there is so much craftsmanship involved; it is really detailed. The second thing is the meaning of course. It carries a lot of meaning even if the picture is blurred. It is the effort that it takes. For example, it took me two hours to figure out that this is a pail roped onto a man's back. The back is shot in such a way that there is a fold of skin, you are not quite sure. But when you actually decipher the position of the body, then you have some sort of emblem of human effort. You have the idea of the body that's in some pain or has to sustain some weight: here the bird is dead; here the foot is shown very close-up blurred, and what isn't blurred is a stone that penetrates the skin. Here you have what could be two lips touching. It's soft focus, it's fleshy, it even looks like a breast, but it's not. And then it's surrounded by this effort and pain and death and burning, and the nose is bleeding. It is close-up and it's kind of repulsive. You have the lips here which are somewhat attractive, although it is a little monstrous at the same time.

**LT:** There is something like disgust at work in some of these images. So what's going on that's repulsive?

**SL:** The closeness. The closer you are the more repulsive it is. There's a repulsive element. Here in the "Fissure" series, an eye can be taken for a lip. And this may be a woman's sex but it's blurred. The images are very busy, they give impressions, ideas, but they are not precise. Every time I look at something I know it's not going to be what it's supposed to be; the first glance is never the right one, that's why there is a Freudian element in these pictures, it's always displaced in some way. There is a woman's nail here and what could be a vagina, an orifice, a fissure. Here teeth are biting on an undescribed piece of meat which could be a thigh.

**LT:** The tweezer looks as if it's pulling out a hair, or putting a fragment of metal into the flesh: it's quite disgusting. There is an element of threat.

**SL:** Penetration. Tearing apart skin that is bruised and open. Eyes that are half dead. I wouldn't tie it down to an explicit religious thing, but in some ways life is something religious, it's all about trying to be born and being dead before you even get there.

**LT:** What do you mean by religion?

**SL:** Religion is always tied up with the cycle of life, life and death. This work is religious in that respect; there are all these elements of anguish and cruelty, because obviously cruelty teases things out; there is some life but you have to pay for it. The "When?" series is very symbolic. I've just seen Christian Boltanski's work recently again. As soon as you see accumulation then you can't help referencing the Holocaust..

**LT:** I was thinking of some of the hidden body work of Cindy Sherman from the late eighties, which was also about disgust and repulsion, which referred to and referenced horror movies, but I don't think Eldon is referring to media in the way she did. I think it is something else, maybe the religious.

**SL:** I don't want to emphasize the religious too much, I like the "Fissure" series because behind it all there's someone who really enjoys playing tricks on you, playing with the bruising, the cruelty. It's not really cruel, it's third

removed in relation to cruelty, it carries lots of affects but it's not really affected. It's very intellectual, dramatized.

**LT:** There is the element of threat in much of this work, the feeling that something bad might happen.

**SL:** In the series "Vanitas," something strange is bound to happen. I think a lot of the affect creeps through the transition and the blurring and the metamorphosis.

**LT:** And the relationship of one image to another, which has a kind of uncanny excessive effect. You really don't know exactly what it means. It's like an oxymoron, a visual oxymoron perhaps, one thing might cancel another or inflect another.

**SL:** And even within each picture there is movement; the movement is always a way of blurring things, a way of going from one state to another. Here for example, there is this attractive face, turned sideways, defamiliarized, and this movement of the light that is displaced, it immediately becomes like a scar. And next to that you have the biblical picture of a lamb's legs tied up. Then a Bacon like distortion of a woman's body on the bed. So again you don't know exactly what's happening. This is scarred, scratched pieces of flesh; it looks like a pig's foot. That's why I was talking about metamorphosis: more religious in a mythological sense, the sense that the bodies themselves are not really separated from nature and when they try to do it, they have to pay for it.

**LT:** They're not separated from art either, or representations. This work plays off of other sorts of representations we've seen before. About the notion of "blurring," how do you see it, since that aspect seems to fascinate you? Do you find that "blur" in other art forms; in writing, for instance, do you think there is blur?

**SL:** I was thinking of the whole Nietzschean notion of becoming, that everything is in transformation, in movement. The cycle, it could be towards renewal, towards promise, but here at the same time it is like angels who try to take off. There's one picture of feet in the dark, they don't even fall down on the floor, they seem to be suspended, to be hung or maybe someone is trying to lift the bodies. There is a movement towards something, but you fall back. The effort to get away from the earth and never make it. That is

why the body itself is soiled, it's in pieces. You don't achieve any sort of integrity.

**LT:** But in the blur do you see a representation of an attempt to remove the body from things that would keep it stable or fixed in a place?

**SL:** Yes, because to be human is somehow very cruel. You can't ever stand still.

**LT:** Maybe to be human, and to be alive, is to be in some way always moving. But I'm just wondering, in another medium, obviously in film, you can do this because it's about a moving picture. Even in a still frame, you can catch tiny movement. But in writing it's a different thing; you can have a sentence that races on, you can....

**SL:** But writing is syntactic, and this isn't. There's always some energy in the transformation. That's what you have here constantly. As soon as it gets a little focused it gets very cruel. Look here, there's a beak with blood.

**LT:** Somehow the series called "NO," of all of them, is the most different for me. It seems much more about archetype. It seems to be more iconic. It's not using the close-up; there's more distance; there's more depth of field; there's a sense of looking into, which you don't have with the skin or flesh series. This seems much more symbolic.

**SL:** But here you have space, it's shot in space. The fire comes from something that seems like liquid. And then this, you have the penetrating beak and then you have the Duchampian...

**LT:** Like the "Etant donnes..."

**SL:** Very naked, but down to what? It's not even stripped, it's minimized, it's shaved, and it's kind of repulsive. It's mineral, at best. It's like a crater which could be human but you can't be sure.

**LT:** I don't know what to think as I look at this or what to feel.

**SL:** Well, there's a sense of horror. It's not even disgusting it's just, wow: this is a body, or this is not a body. Then you have the opposition between the beak and the body. They are turned exactly in the opposite direction, they

refer to each other. It's very carefully constructed to create this opposite composition. There is the lightness of this fire. The fire itself becomes some sort of veil that flies, in a sense it purifies. And here is this image which is totally dark.

**LT:** It's interesting how the legs and the beak mirror each other, and the fire embraces both. The series is framed by a sense of being out of control.

**SL:** So, if you wanted to you could very well see it all as religious, but I don't think it's deeply religious. Everything is in the surface. I think there are all sorts of allusions to religion. Take for example this image from "Aliyah," this is obviously meant not to be obvious. It's a dog's muzzle held by soiled hands on a rock as if they were pushing the throat towards the rock in order to sacrifice it. It's not cruelty, there is something very ritualistic about it. Here's an aged hand grasping something; it's raised towards the sky which isn't there of course, but at the same time it's old and bruised, it doesn't take off. And this is an allusion to Saint-Christopher. It's also very difficult to decipher, but one realizes that this is someone's back. Someone, a white man is carrying a black body on his back, and the body itself looks like marble, it doesn't look like flesh at all. This is very gracious, abandoned, dead in a sense. But it's also mythological in the Christian sense. You have these two kinds of sacrifices here, one more pagan and one more Christian. I think there's a lot of play on these various references to religion, but it's not really religious. I think it is more humanistic in the sense that there are all relations to death, but without redemption.

**LT:** Maybe in some way these are creation myths, but I find myself not really interested so much in the primal, in the sense of where it's coming from. The work that doesn't have to establish its genesis, but presents us with a kind of present that has allusions to a past, seems to work better. Mythology also is about stories of origin. So, one of the things which is curious about this work is that Eldon uses the medium of photography, which is in a way one of the newest of the mediums of art, to insist upon the origin of things. There's an old-fashioned quality in the work because of the insistence on looking back and seeing things as a kind of struggle of the old into the new. The form chosen to do it in, using the flat surface of the photography has a contradictory effect. Somebody else might have worked in painting, let's say.

SL: But it is a staging of mythology; it's very staged. You don't have tableaux, but everything is extremely composed. And the definition of the subject itself, and the position of the model, it must be mind-blowing to set this up. It's also very primal in terms of coming from the beginning, but this technology, photography, the craftsmanship displayed here is extremely sophisticated at the same time. It's tricky, very planned. It's very difficult to achieve these kinds of effects.

LT: The other thing is: why are we thinking of mythology necessarily as old? If you think about Roland Barthes or you think about contemporary stories, we are constantly creating our own mythologies and our own myths, therefore it would be interesting to subject some of this work to the notion of what is new in the kind of myth that's being proposed here. How does this fit into contemporary mythologies? And what would we consider a contemporary mythology?

SL: We consider contemporary mythology the prosthesis, the body that's held inside, that's penetrated, that's colonized inside. Outside the body is hooked onto faxes, to cellular phones, to the Internet; now the body is totally abstracted and taken out of itself. I think you have put your finger on it: this doesn't appear here, there is no technological transformation or metamorphosis. We're reverting to pulses, to electronic pulses and that's really where the body is going now, the body is becoming useless as such. That's why I emphasize metamorphosis, the becoming, the passage of one thing into the next. I don't like the idea of the primal, I don't want to go back there.

LT: We can't.

SL: Lots of people try to: I was there, I don't want it any more.

LT: How do you mean you were there?

SL: In the womb. I was also there in the accumulation. It's not something I want to go back to because I'm still too much there. But what I like about this photography is the fact that somehow there's a sense of movement, of transformation, of metamorphosis; it doesn't have to go back to the primal, although it may fall back into it, but that may be, as you would say, a construction. I think the movement is successful because it gives you a sense of intellectual alleviation, you sense there is something, you can play with it.

It's a game, and the game is always something energizing. At the same time there are all these elements of frailty and death and decay, but when the body is resting in peace somewhere, hidden, it doesn't have to pretend that it's different from an object, than there is something sunny about it. And, of course, it's juxtaposed to very dark scarifications, it's embracing darkness. There are all these elements of bruises, of murders, of bodies never intact. But is the body ever intact anyway?

**LT:** No. No. I wanted to go back to "Breathless." It's funny, I was about to say this series has the strongest movie allusion, but I don't think it's Godard's Breathless.

**SL:** Breathless gives the idea of movement, you just rush, rush. And, of course, it starts with the mouth.

**LT:** The relationship of this furry object, whatever it is, to the woman's body is very peculiar. Women's bodies are thought of as soft. Yet, I would say this upside down hanging element is the body that may be trying to escape, and there is another element that is more or less fixed. There seems to be some rope. I see tension instead of softness.

**SL:** It is only soft when it is blurred. The softness takes work. The victim is always soft.

**LT:** Why does one want a victim who is a pushover, or soft?

**SL:** Because this is obviously another biblical image: a kid carried on someone's shoulders being brought up to be sacrificed; that's a possible reading. But what you see is mostly the softness not so much the rope.

**LT:** You'd want your victim to be soft because if you need to have a victim you have a lot to prove, for instance, that you yourself are not soft. There's a different notion of female sexuality being proposed in "NO" from "Breathless"; one is hard and one is soft; one is fire; the other may leave some scarring but this is a much more apocalyptic notion of female sexuality.

**SL:** In some sense, "NO" is a riot of sensuality, but at the same time it's monstrous. This work is like a Grand Guignol, these theatrical parodies that are both dead pan and over the top. For example this is over the top, you

have the vagina, you have the beak full of blood. As you said at the beginning of our conversation, it's gothic, it's romantically gothic. In one sense it's very strange because you go from things which are very subtle - you can't really tell what it is to others which are over the top. You go to extremes. In a sense, when it's very exaggerated, what it really says, you know, is this is an old story, this is castration, penetration business. These are Freudian archetypes. And now we already are somewhere else, but somehow it's nowhere shown, the whole technological world, it isn't there, that's why it's mythological in the traditional sense. But somehow there might be something more abhorrent about technology than the body itself, so that's why it doesn't even show up.

**LT:** Technology is more invisible.

**SL:** It's more repulsive. There's something indecent about technology so you don't want to show it. You show bodies because in some ways there's suppose to be something human about them.

**LT:** So the "real" pornography would be having two machines next to each other. Or maybe pornography only happens in cyberspace.

**SL:** You could say that there's so much emphasis on the ground, on the body, because it's as if you're losing it. You look back at it and you want to see what can come out it.

**LT:** I certainly think that the emphasis on work about the body now, which has been going on for about ten or fifteen years, has to do with loss, the loss of a notion of foundation. So the body here is looked to as a kind of foundation, but of course, as we see in work by contemporary artists like Eldon, the body isn't an absolute foundation. It's a reflection of how we see nature and bodies.

**SL:** That's all that's left. In some way the body isn't buried yet, therefore you have to pin it, or prick it or hurt it so it still appears as alive. I always thought that the whole emphasis on the body for the last fifteen years was not at all a deconstruction of the body, but rather an investigation in how to construct a body. We have to reconstruct something because it's disappearing, before it disappears. Cezanne said you have to look fast before things disappear, and I think the whole of what we think of as an exploration of new territories, is in fact trying to build territories that are already

disappearing. We are so obsessed with them because they are on their way out.

**LT:** Everything, art, writing and philosophy, is trying either to restore or visit something before it disappears or as it's disappearing. We are always behind.

**SL:** It's ubiquitous. In philosophy, in art, in writing one side is always turned towards the past. It's like Freud. Freud was exactly at the cusp of the two cultures: on one hand he looks towards the family and it's already disappearing, the patriarchal family was becoming obsolete; on the other he rebuilds it as a permanent tenet that people are going to be able to hang on to for another fifty years to make sure they have an identity and a home somewhere that they can hate.

**LT:** But what hasn't disappeared is the sexual drive. What I think Freud was doing was trying to figure out a way, interestingly given our discussion today, out of biology, to think beyond the determinism of the biological model.

**SL:** But you could say on the other hand that he anticipated the consumer drive because desire was being consumed; in consumer society you don't sell objects you sell desires, you create desires. In a way Freud was protecting sexuality. Sexuality was being revealed as too important because it was already threatened, it was just on its way to being exterminated, used everywhere so it would become the main drive of consumer society.

**LT:** I don't think it's being exterminated, rather it's the fact that it's constantly being frustrated, that we are constantly being frustrated. Look at Theodore Kucsinsky, the Unabomber. He wanted to have a sex change, he went to a therapist ages ago when he was still a young man. He wanted to be a woman, and the therapist told him that it wasn't normal. He became enraged, and he took his revenge. From these works, we could say that sexuality is very difficult and painful.

**SL:** Now you don't even have to have sex changes, in a sense we don't need sex anymore. We don't even need sexuality any more. But sexuality needs us.

**LT:** But there's all sorts of processes one goes through until one gets to the point where one says, "We don't need sex."

**SL:** Freud said that primal drives are to be used, re-deployed, fed upon. We have so few drives left, the whole society is jumping on them like a vampire.

**LT:** No, there is something disgusting, disturbing, about sex, and I think that Freud understood that, and understood that it represented why we were chained and kept very close to being animals. Look at how Shakespeare referred to it, making the beast with two backs, emphasizing we do it because we are animals. Whatever our brains or our genetic code is, or however we live our lives, the sexual act in some way compels us to go out of control. Control is so much what we are about, while sex is about a loss of control.

**SL:** To go back to Eldon, it is all very controlled. There's a strange relation with the body, with sexuality. It's not puritanical, but it's not an easy relationship to the body and sexuality.

**LT:** No, it's not easy. It's very easy.