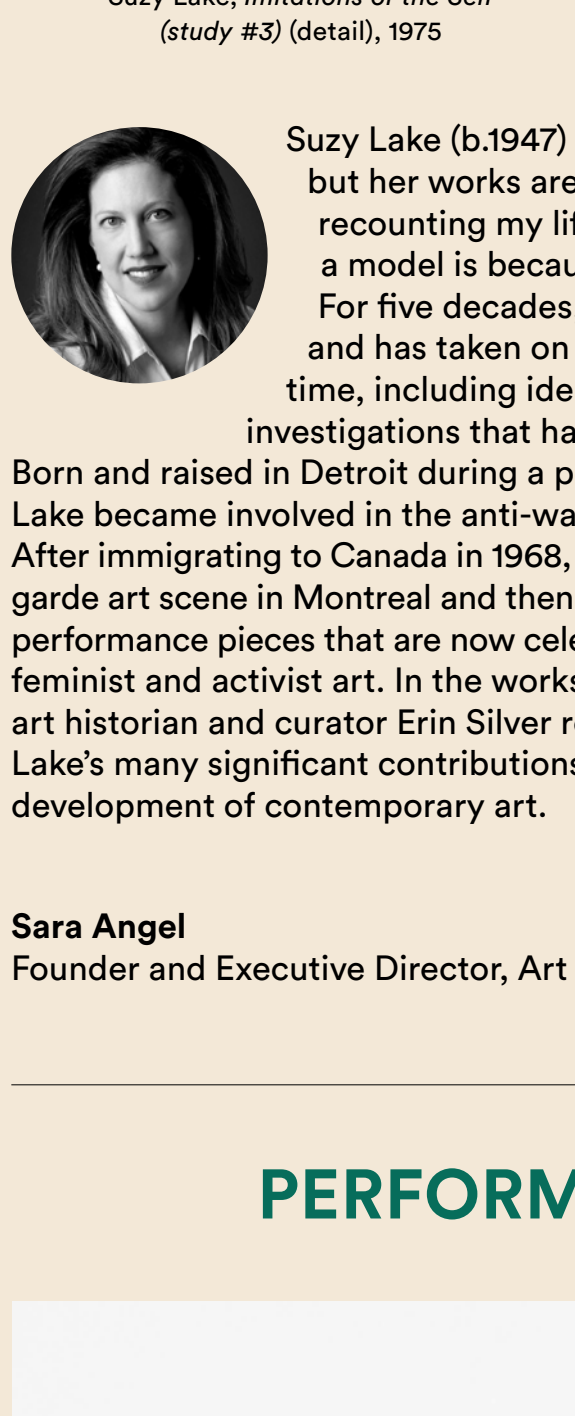


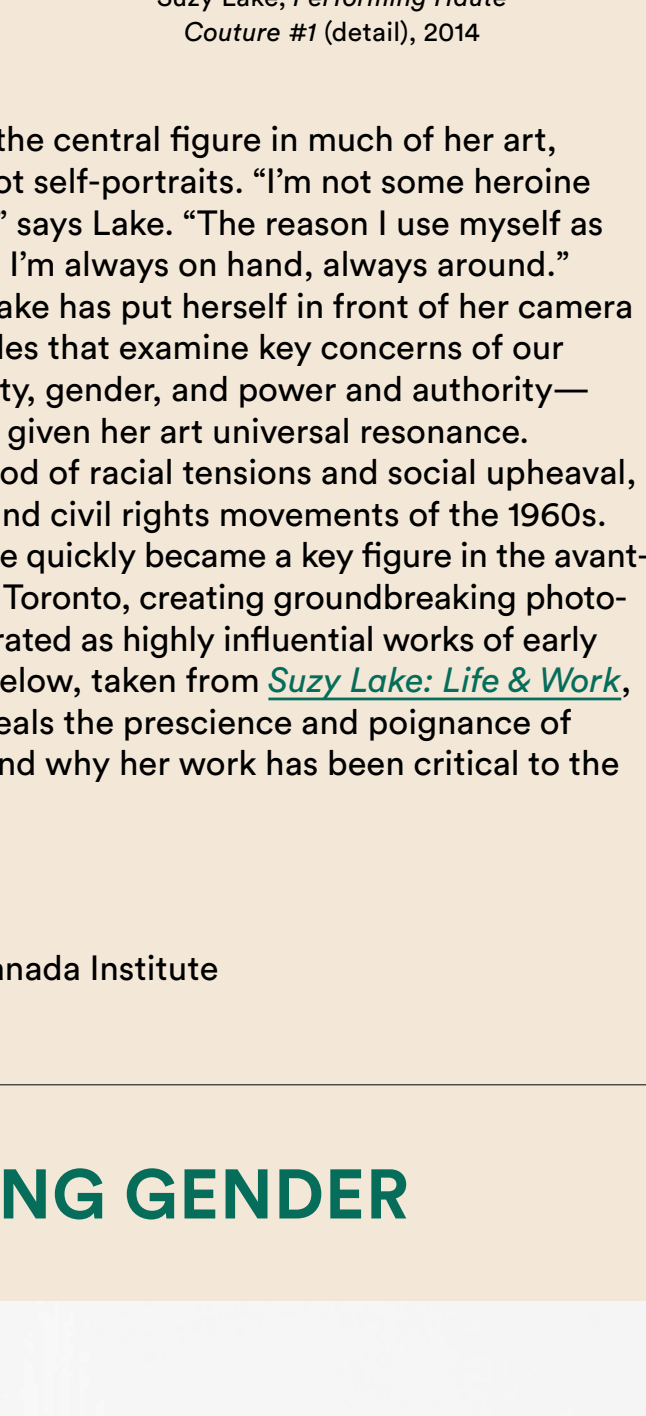
ROLE PLAY

THE MANY FACES OF SUZY LAKE

*Decades before “the selfie” sparked a cultural revolution, Suzy Lake altered the course of art history by making herself the subject of her photographs. Today the Art Canada Institute proudly publishes **Suzy Lake: Life & Work** by Erin Silver, which explores how throughout Lake’s celebrated career she used her camera to push the boundaries of photography and inspire a new generation of artists.*



Suzy Lake, *Imitations of the Self (study #3) (detail)*, 1975



Suzy Lake, *Performing Haute Couture #1 (detail)*, 2014



Suzy Lake (b.1947) is the central figure in much of her art, but her works are not self-portraits. “I’m not some heroine recounting my life,” says Lake. “The reason I use myself as a model is because I’m always on hand, always around.”

For five decades, Lake has put herself in front of her camera and has taken on roles that examine key concerns of our time, including identity, gender, and power and authority—investigations that have given her art universal resonance. Born and raised in Detroit during a period of racial tensions and social upheaval, Lake became involved in the anti-war and civil rights movements of the 1960s. After immigrating to Canada in 1968, she quickly became a key figure in the avant-garde art scene in Montreal and then in Toronto, creating groundbreaking photo-performance pieces that are now celebrated as highly influential works of early feminist and activist art. In the works below, taken from *Suzy Lake: Life & Work*, art historian and curator Erin Silver reveals the presence and poignance of Lake’s many significant contributions and why her work has been critical to the development of contemporary art.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

PERFORMING GENDER

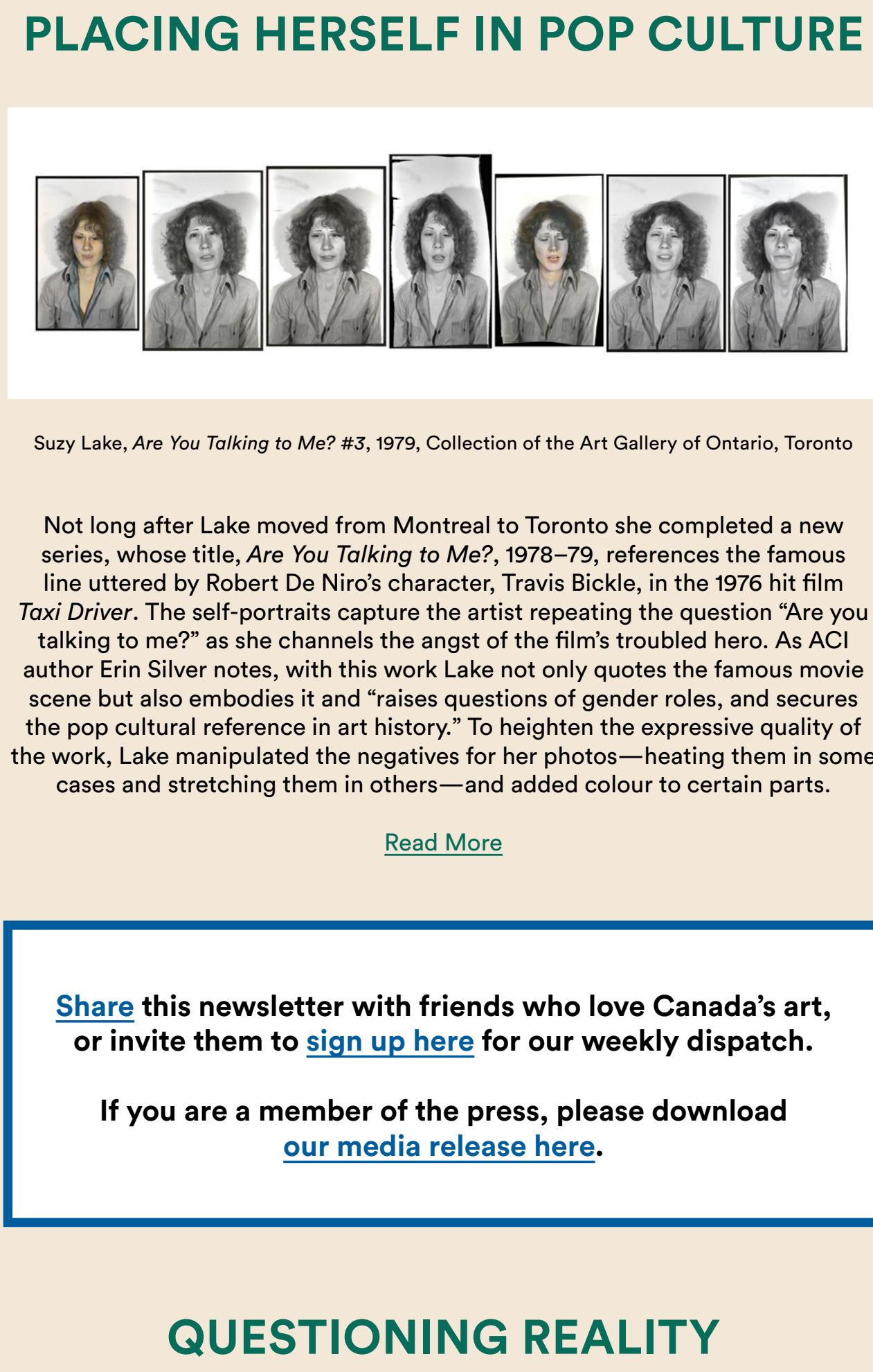


Suzy Lake, *Miss Chataleine*, 1973, Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In the photographic performance *Miss Chataleine*, 1973, Lake took on an iconic Canadian brand and challenged how women are represented in the mass media. Presenting a grid of twelve images of herself, she collaged a variety of fashionable hairstyles onto her head to investigate the portrayal of women in consumerism and magazine culture. In each component of the work Lake wears whiteface makeup, originally used in theatre to erase an actor’s personal characteristics—a fact that playfully highlights the point that gender identity is performative. This work and others like it thrust Lake into the foreground of feminist art, and she strongly influenced internationally renowned artist Cindy Sherman (b.1954).

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MAKER OF THE MALLEABLE



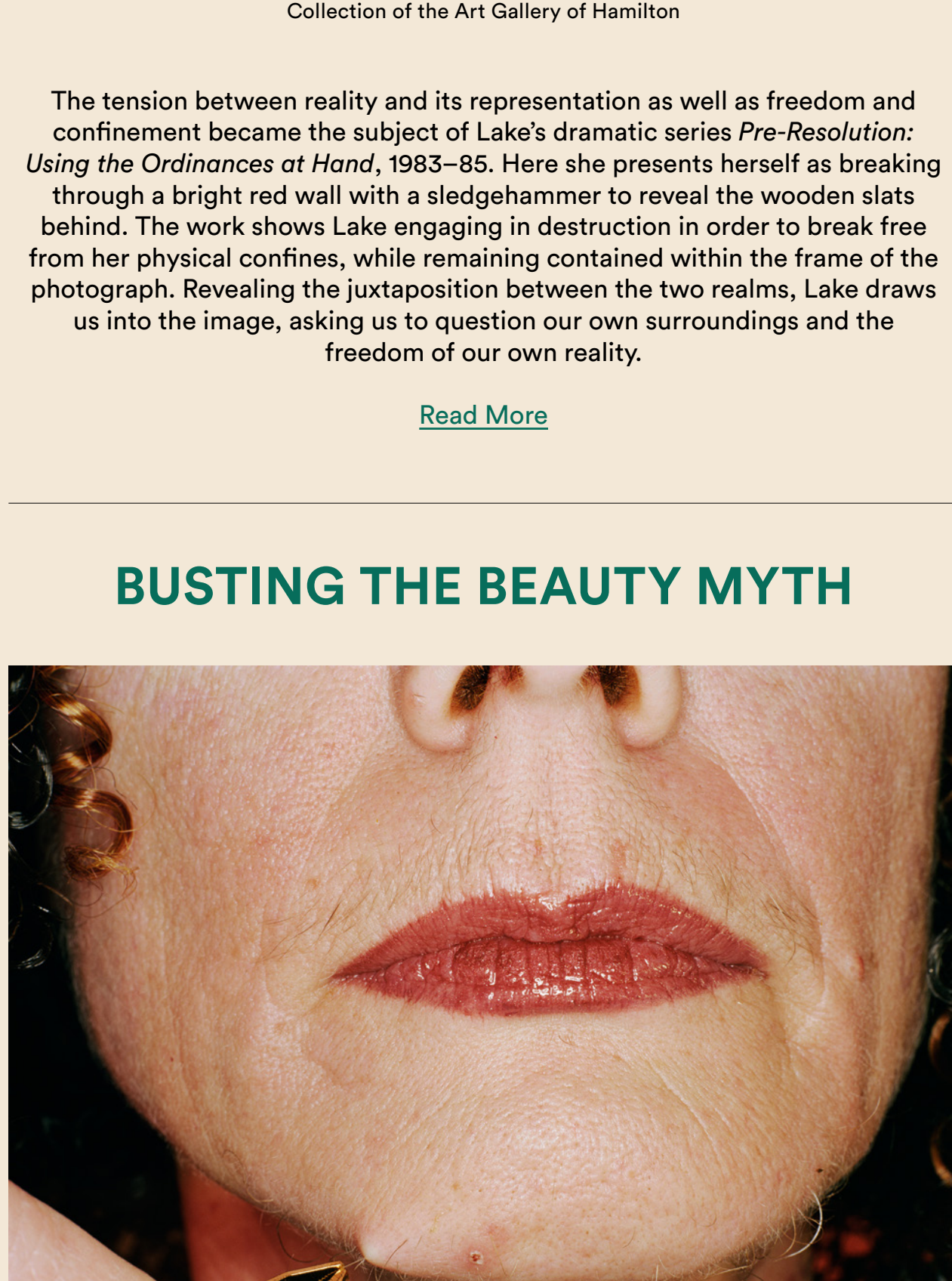
Suzy Lake, *Suzy Lake as Françoise Sullivan*, 1973–74 (printed 2012), Georgia Sherman Projects, Toronto

With this work from her *Transformations* series, 1973–75, Lake pays tribute to the leading Quebec artist and pioneer of modern dance Françoise Sullivan (b.1923), whom she met in Montreal after moving to Canada in 1968. In this sequence of self-portraits, Lake’s face gradually morphs into Sullivan, signifying the influence of those we admire as well as the malleable nature of identity. After initially working in painting, drawing, and printmaking, in Montreal Lake shifted to camera-based forms of media as she became increasingly invested in issues related to the body, gender, and identity. In her new city, Lake became a prominent figure in the local avant-garde scene and helped found the artist-run centre Véhicule Art Inc.

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To learn more about Françoise Sullivan, read ACI’s book [Françoise Sullivan: Life & Work](#) by Annie Gérin.

BARRIER BREAKER

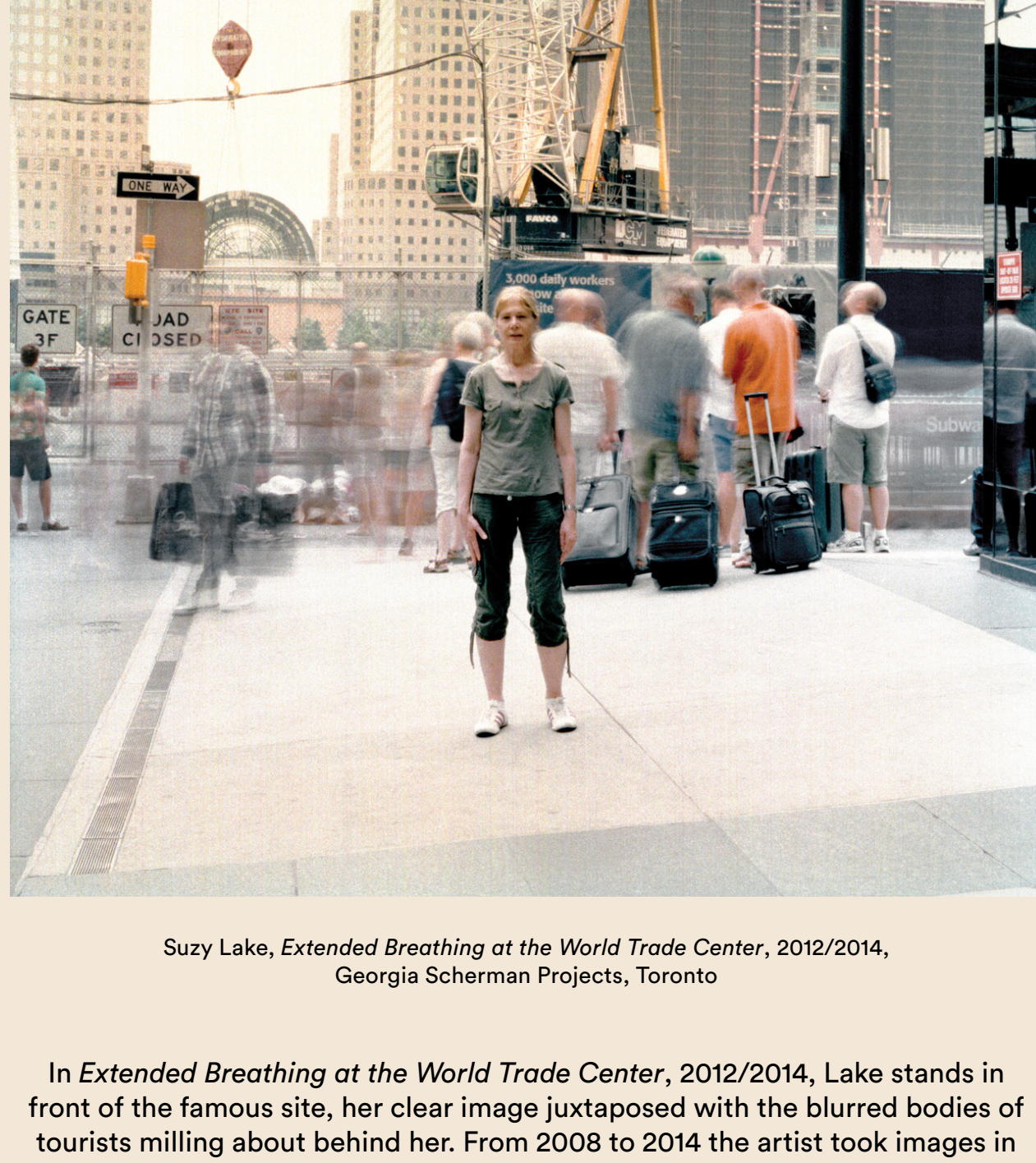


Suzy Lake, *Choreographed Puppet #3*, 1976/1977, Georgia Sherman Projects, Toronto

Choreographed Puppets, 1976–77, was a breakthrough work for Lake and a piece that brought together performance and photography in a fresh light. Lake shows herself suspended in a harness from a scaffold while two “puppeteers” above controlled her physical movements. The blurred image of her body renders Lake unrecognizable, continuing her exploration of the concept of identity—and the loss of it as a result of being manipulated and controlled by others. As the work’s title indicates, Lake’s performance was influenced by dance, particularly experimental forms that favoured expressive improvisation and unpredictability—qualities that ran counter to contemporaneous trends in photography.

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PLACING HERSELF IN POP CULTURE



Suzy Lake, *Are You Talking to Me? #3*, 1979, Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Not long after Lake moved from Montreal to Toronto she completed a new series, whose title, *Are You Talking to Me?*, 1978–79, references the famous line uttered by Robert De Niro’s character, Travis Bickle, in the 1976 hit film *Taxi Driver*. The self-portraits capture the artist repeating the question “Are you talking to me?” as she channels the angst of the film’s troubled hero. As ACI author Erin Silver notes, with this work Lake not only quotes the famous movie scene but also embodies it and “raises questions of gender roles, and secures the pop cultural reference in art history.” To heighten the expressive quality of the work, Lake manipulated the negatives for her photos—heating them in some cases and stretching them in others—and added colour to certain parts.

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QUESTIONING REALITY & REPRESENTATION

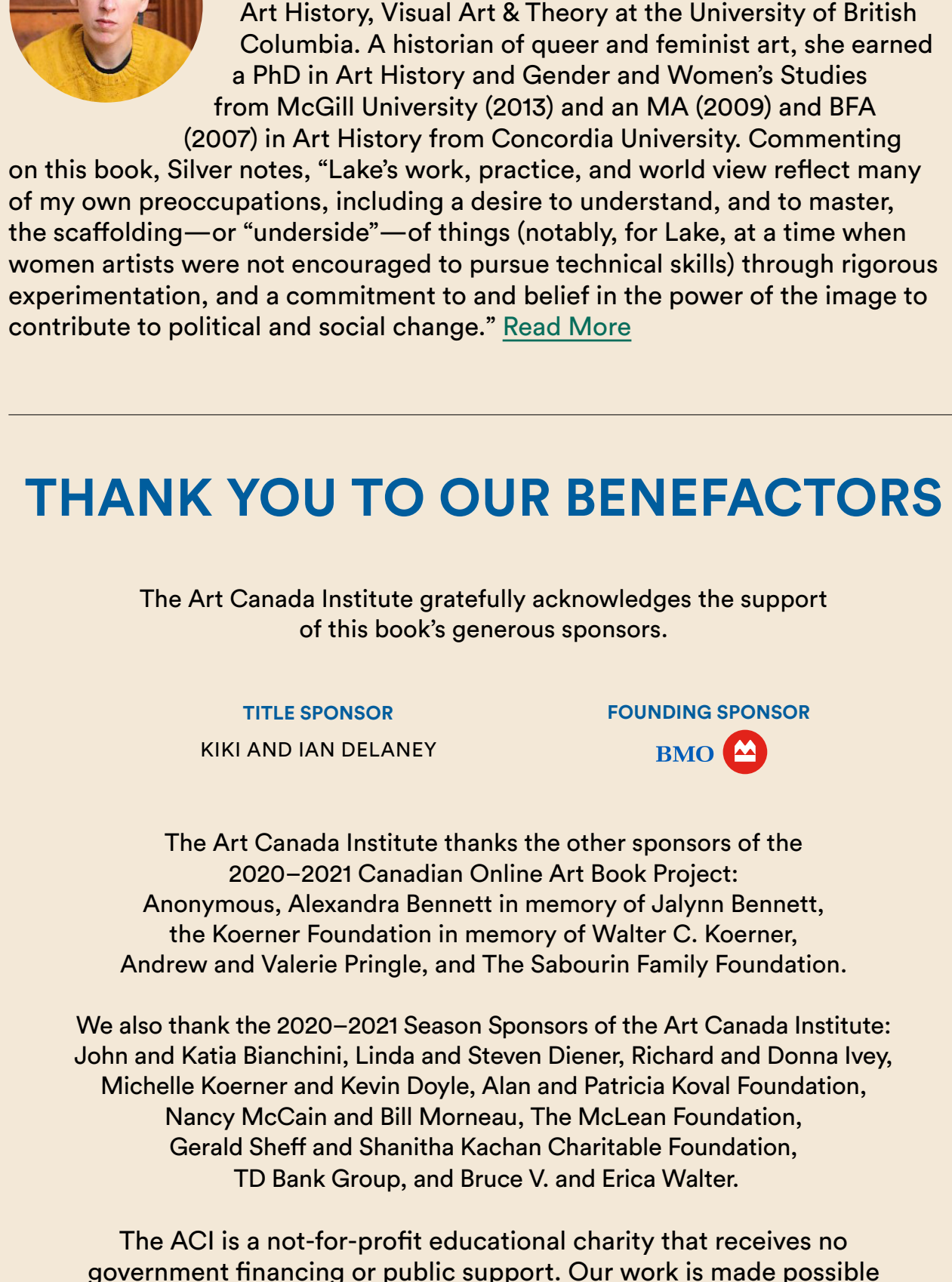


Suzy Lake, *Pre-Resolution: Using the Ordinances at Hand #6*, 1983–84, Collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton

The tension between reality and its representation as well as freedom and confinement became the subject of Lake’s dramatic series *Pre-Resolution: Using the Ordinances at Hand*, 1983–85. Here she presents herself as breaking through a bright red wall with a sledgehammer to reveal the wooden slats behind. The work shows Lake engaging in destruction in order to break free from her physical confines, while remaining contained within the frame of the photograph. Revealing the juxtaposition between the two realms, Lake draws us into the image, asking us to question our own surroundings and the freedom of our own reality.

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BUSTING THE BEAUTY MYTH



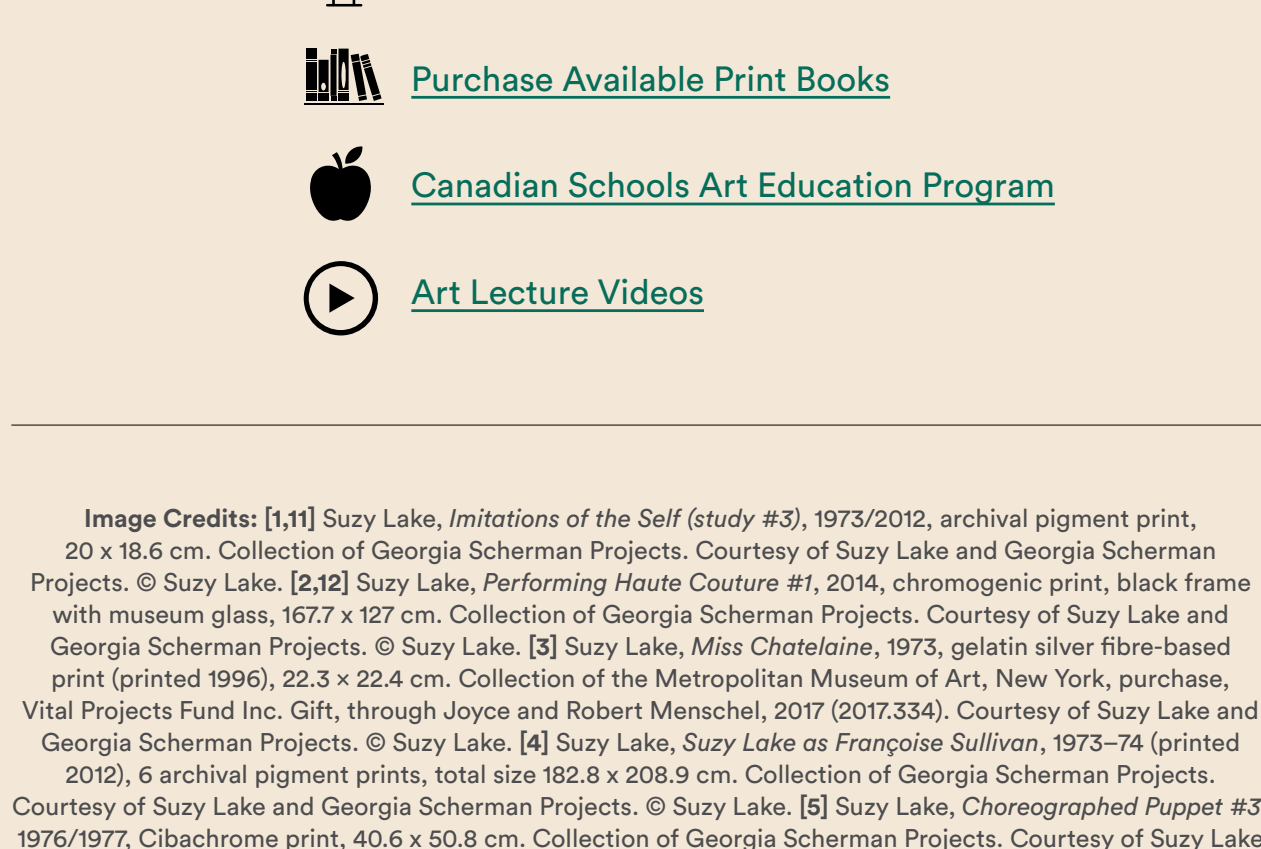
Suzy Lake, *Pluck #2*, 2001, Georgia Sherman Projects, Toronto

Long before the Dove Real Beauty campaign, in the early 2000s, Lake began exploring issues related to appearance, attraction, aging, and the lack of representation of older women within our youth-obsessed culture. *Pluck #2*, 2001, presents a close-up shot of the lower part of the artist’s face as she tugs at a hair on her chin with a pair of tweezers. Her coloured lips convey an effort to embody feminine beauty, while her facial hair removal exposes the realities of the aging body and the pressure to maintain the appearance of youth.

Employing aging effects such as glamour lighting and gels, Lake challenges conventional standards of beauty, youth, and femininity, exposing the tension of these constructs against physical maturation.

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OBSERVER OF ENVIRONMENTS



Suzy Lake, *Extended Breathing at the World Trade Center*, 2012/2014, Georgia Sherman Projects, Toronto

In *Extended Breathing at the World Trade Center*, 2012/2014, Lake stands in front of the famous site, her clear image juxtaposed with the blurred bodies of tourists milling about behind her. From 2008 to 2014 the artist took images in places of historical and personal interest—including her own backyard, London’s Trafalgar Square, and the Detroit Institute of Arts—with her long-hour photographic exposures. In contrast to the clearly rendered background in these scenes, Lake’s body appears slightly blurred due to the gentle movement of breathing. With this series Lake prompts her viewers to question their own presence in the spaces they inhabit.

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THE ARTIST AS INFLUENCER

Meryl McMaster, *Ordoevician Tide* (detail), 2019, from the series As Immense as the Sky, various collections

Suzy Lake, *Imitations of the Self (study #3)*, 1975/2012, Georgia Sherman Projects, Toronto

Consider the number of artists today who use themselves as a model in photographic works that explore issues of identity and self-representation: Lake opened up this door, and in doing so her influence has been epic—both on her contemporaries, as well as on a younger generation of artists. In this comparison we see parallels between Lake’s 1973 series *Imitations of the Self* and Ottawa-based artist Meryl McMaster’s (b.1988) work *Ordoevician Tide*, 2019. Echoing Lake’s use of whiteface makeup, McMaster follows a similar approach, as she describes, “to represent this protective social mask or persona we wear, either real or metaphorical.”

[Read More](#)

[Learn More About Meryl McMaster Here](#)

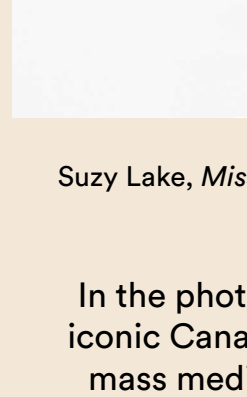
STEPPING INTO HERSELF

Suzy Lake, *Performing Haute Couture #1*, 2014, Georgia Sherman Projects, Toronto

After decades of putting herself in her work as the representative of an everywoman, Lake took a different tack with this commanding portrait, created for her 2014 retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario, introducing *Suzy Lake*. Dressed in a striking pearl-grey two-piece suit by avant-garde fashion designer Rei Kawakubo, Lake stands confidently against a dark grey background. While she boldly claims her status as an enduring presence in contemporary art, the title of the work, *Performing Haute Couture #1*, acknowledges that here too she is playing a role—as we all do in so many facets of our life. Evoking longstanding themes in Lake’s practice, including duration, gender identity, beauty, power, and resistance to the status quo, the photograph records the movement of her right arm, signalling the passage of time.

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About the Author of Suzy Lake: Life & Work



Dr. Erin Silver is an assistant professor in the Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory at the University of British Columbia. A historian of queer and feminist art, she earned a PhD in Art History and Gender and Women’s Studies from McGill University (2015) and an MIA (2009) and BFA (2007) in Art History from Concordia University. Commenting on this book, Silver notes, “Lake’s work, practice, and world view reflect many of my own preoccupations, including a desire to understand, and to master, the scaffolding—or “underside”—of things (notably, for Lake, at a time when women artists were not encouraged to pursue technical skills) through rigorous experimentation, and a commitment to and belief in the power of the image to contribute to political and social change.”

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