

older

Getting old is not for cowards (Mixed remarks on aging)

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Yes, this is the battle cry that is now pulling me out of a quagmire of contemplation I got caught in while thinking about age (and aging) and reading what clever people have written about it. It's an eternal topic because it affects all of us, even those who aren't aware of it yet—young people. There is no question that anyone who cannot imagine getting old is still young.

(If you are in this category, then you should stop reading right now, because otherwise you'll get bored!)

—By the way, how old are you? —.....

If you lied just now, I understand completely, especially if you are a woman «of a certain age.» To conceal one's true age is part of the feminine ritual, it is an act of self-defense, even if in her self-image a woman looks or feels young. Getting old is also a problem of culturally coded perception, because as a woman ages she is perceived conventionally, based on her external looks. She is seen as no longer young, whereas men gain in maturity and prestige. A «downgrading» for women—an «upgrading» for men. As if aging were feminine—with all the unfavorable consequences for one's life. What is bad about this is that even women have internalized these external images and critically measure themselves and others against them. And so women struggle with their performance, their youthful masks, guided by the ideal of what is essentially girlish beauty. Susan Sontag, in her probing essay «The Double Standard of Aging» (1972!), criticized this staging of youthfulness as a form of lying and self-deception. By denying their age, women themselves become accomplices in their status not being recognized. She demanded: Liberate yourself from being an illusory beauty object! Admit your age!

But—considering how many aspects are involved in the process—isn't Susan Sontag being too strict when she says you shouldn't lie about your age? Couldn't it also mean that with this self-dramatization, you are in control?

Disregarding calendar age and biology, aging is also a cultural construction, one that is also constantly being reconstructed for the sake of more optimistic images of getting old. According to researchers, old age is an important period in life, the so-called fourth life phase. It does not have to be spent cast aside in an uneventful pensioner's existence. Improvements in medical options and self-help techniques for improving one's status when aging are accompanying the recognition that older people are part of society. We can still play an active role in many areas and contribute our skills.

Elderly beauty: Yes, it exists! A mixture of self-esteem and serenity.

Love: Older people foolishly in love, not only in tango classes or in the movies!

3 And the special love between children and old people who are curious about each other. The cycle of life's beginning and end go well together.

«Doing age»: age-appropriate fitness programs, smart and superfood, cosmetics for every square centimeter of your body, cosmetic surgery, hair implants ... but also «centers for lifelong learning,» academies for seniors that follow the motto «reinventing age.»

«Undoing age»: accepting the futility of all such things, since age does not prolong the already untenable demands of youth.

The stress of aging:

You should shape your own aging, although it results in the strenuous compulsion to perpetually self-optimize.

We are not at the mercy of getting older; your appearance is also a sign of your lifestyle. «Active = Attractive» is the message. —But it is also a struggle within oneself. Whoever takes the trouble looks better and feels stronger. Nevertheless, it must be done wisely, because desperate attempts at looking young really make you look old. Who has not seen the drama of a face-lift queen in some tasteless get-up?

I read expressions like: best ager, silver sex, generation happy end, old horny, wrinkle sex, young elderly, old elderly ... and Li Edelkoort's prognosis of the ageless society in 2020.

The age-offensive:

The «Advanced Style Blog» by Ari S. Cohen: 70- to 100-year-old women and (a few) men, street style models in mostly eccentric outfits.

All of them are brimming with life, at least at the photo shoot. To still be seen (!)—that's probably the point, even if not everyone can be as theatrical. It seems to me that the statement «I like being alive,» also as an elderly person, is what is essential. Nothing is sadder than seeing how older women in particular, in Japan for example, make themselves disappear by dressing in undefinable colors so they won't be noticed. But exactly they should be saying: «I'm still here!»

«I used to say to my students, I am between 50 and death. But now, I am proud to say, I am 80.» (Ilona Royce Smithkin, NY)

Old people as role models:

Once in a while an older person shows up as an advertising model, even for fashion: The writer Jane Didion (80), in her aged fragility, in Celine, the actress Charlotte Rampling in YY ... All well and good, but unfortunately older faces are usually only used for selling vitamins, dream cruises or luxury residences for seniors. —And where does that leave us, the less famous? —Occasionally, and to my delight, I do see a person with a lovely patina of age on a Tokyo train: Someone who does not hide their age, is well-groomed and whose style shows a mixture of being old and up to date. In contrast to the gloomy and inconspicuous old person's uniform!

Gerontocracy:

In 1950, 50% of all Germans were younger than 35; in 2014, 50% were 48 years old; and it is estimated that in 2030, 50% will be over 50 years old. What does that mean in a democracy? That old people outvote young people! For that reason, a researcher recently demanded that children be given the right to vote.

Age sociology distinguishes between different categories of age:

Calendar, administrative, biological, functional, legal, social, psychological, ethical-religious, historical and personal.

Viennese humor:

«Everyone wants to live a long time, but no one wants to get old.» (Johann Nestroy)

Celebrities:

At the age of 55, the physicist Einstein recognized his «growing difficulty of adapting to new ideas.» —Is this a consolation for us?

Picasso said that he had to become so old so that he could finally be a child again.

Goethe compared aging with starting a new trade that you still have to learn. —Doing age! He lived until he was 83 so he must have known.

Simone de Beauvoir: Aging is about getting clear about yourself. — That's quite severe. From her, we expected nothing else.

The quiet drama of aging and the so-called wisdom of age:

Loneliness, frozen habits, mineralization, fossilization ... The general slackening of all strength. —Almost any old person will deny that old age makes you wiser. A non-famous acquaintance of mine once said to me: Your eyesight gets worse, and that's an advantage. You can't see your own wrinkles as well.

Old age miserliness:

I don't have very much time left, which is why I have to decide what I do carefully. —However, it is never certain how much time still remains.

The image of tree-rings: Japanese toshi o kazaneru.

Memory:

The adding up of lived time, remembered time, to compensate for a lost world, for having no future?

Looking at a photo from earlier:

Is that me? No, that was me. I would gladly place my true self there, but I know, it would be to no avail. In order not to get any more upset, I close the photo album immediately! (However: Would I really like to be that person from earlier? Not really.)

When did I first notice that I was getting older?

One day when I was in a bad mood, I saw a different reflection in the mirror than I was used to. I was startled. But only for a moment.

5 The art of living for a stoic: Do what has to be done. One thing is finish your business.

Hokusai on art and aging:

«Since I was 6 years old, I have had a mania to draw the shapes of things. When I was 50, I published a huge number of drawings, but everything I created before the age of 70 is not worth mentioning. At about 73 I understood a little about the true nature of animals, plants, trees, birds, fish and insects. It follows that when I am 80 years old, I will have made even more progress and when I am 90, I will be able to see the mystery of all things. At 100 I will surely have reached a degree of wonderful perfection, and when I can count 110 years, everything I paint will be alive, be it a stroke or a dot.»

(Hokusai lived until he was 89.)

It is always possible to gain more insight and experience.

And: «Getting old is still the only way to live a long time.» (Hugo von Hofmannsthal)

Karin Ruprecht-Prenn

translation from German / Cynthia Peck

When do we start to get old? Or feel old? When do we start to wear «age-appropriate» clothes (costumes)? Who are our role models telling us what we are allowed to wear and what not?

Aging is often described as a «metaphysical scandal.» You approach the end and that's it. Certainly there should be other ways of looking at it. But we also shouldn't make aging «sound better than it is.»

We will get old, all of us. Not only women, but men too. Men have an advantage: their wrinkles and greying temples are culturally accepted. Even when very old, some men are considered appealing and attractive. But that does not save them from weakening vision, short-term memory loss and other frailties of old age. Nor from culturally dictated ways of dressing.

«I am always greeted with the question, 'Is this for yourself?' as though I must be buying for someone else, as though I didn't buy clothes for myself – as though I must have some supply somewhere in an old trunk, left me by my mother, waiting for me to wear when I reached the right age.» – the American feminist and ageism activist Barbara McDonald when in her sixties

Clothing, above all fashion, is a sociocultural phenomenon that not only conveys gender and class, but also identity. And connected to this, also the awareness of age as shaped by society. We are as old as how we dress. In this we follow social norms, either consciously or unconsciously.

«Never tone down!» This is the appeal, especially to elderly people who dress inconspicuously or «age appropriately,» or who no longer follow their own personal style. Aging has long been part of the public discourse, even among young people. As Susanne Mayer recently observed:

«... there is a hysterical rush toward aging. It is possible that in a society which is derailed demographically, where there are more and more older people, young people are being flooded by a tsunami of aging and—trendy as young people will be—follow that trend and strive to be old together with the elderly. »

This is evident not only in the new style of twenty-year-olds dyeing their hair grey, but also by people in their early thirties lamenting the first signs of aging.

To the distress of most, we are worried about the loss of our youth for a good two-thirds of our lives. Even when young, women feel themselves aging because they compare themselves to other women, to the expected moral codes of their society and the advertising images of the fashion, cosmetics and even lifestyle industry.

«We are not judged by how old we are, but how young we are not» – Kathleen Woodward

It was pointed out first by Simone De Beauvoir and then by Susan Sontag that aging is more traumatic for women than it is for men. Aging is equivalent to «sexual disqualification,» since women's dwindling beauty and the consequent loss of their sexual attractiveness is

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more often used to evaluate them. Men are seen as a whole, whereas women's bodies are divided into two parts. The face of a woman is separated from her body and is molded according to the prevailing ideals of beauty. If over the years a woman has signs of life and experiences left on her face, she does not let them show. But that is exactly what would be desirable: considering such signs of life and experience to be attractive in a woman, just as they are in men. Alone by expressing her power and energy throughout life as reflected in her face. Without regretting lost youth.

«The biggest difference between the girl I was at 20 and the woman I am now at 48, is now I really could care less about what people that don't know me think about me. Other people's perception is not my reality. I don't want to blend and fit in.» – Sheryl Roberts

Older people are categorically characterized as being wise but also inert. Youth is used as a metaphor for energy, restlessness, progress and, above all, the appetite for things that have never been used. This is like fashion itself, which is characterized by constant change and the search for new things, while forgetting its sources and references. Defining fashion this way leaves no space for age.

But do we really become wiser and more practical when we are older?

«The feminists took me as a role model, as a mother. It bothers me. I am not interested in being a mother. I am still a girl trying to understand myself» – Louise Bourgeois

In her article *The Double Standard of Aging*, Susan Sontag explained this dilemma of a youthful and consumption-driven society while commenting on the consumer culture:

«This reevaluation of the life cycle in favor of the young brilliantly serves a secular society whose idols are ever-increasing industrial productivity and the unlimited cannibalization of nature. Such a society must create a new sense of the rhythms of life in order to incite people to buy more, to consume and throw away faster.»

Accordingly, age seems to be the opposite of what the current fashion industry wants from consumers like us.

Fashion is preoccupied with youth. It is young, perfect bodies that represent the latest styles and tempt us to long for this or that fashion (brand). It is an idealized world in which aging doesn't happen or at least should not be visible. In fact, aging is ignored.

By doing this, the fashion industry not only loses a new target group, but we, as a society, forget something even more important: Not everyone is lucky enough to have a long life. We should see aging as a chance and look forward to finally becoming calmer.

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