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THE PICTURES GENERATION

The hallowed halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York would seem an unlikely setting for “The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984”: an exhibition of artistic insurgents who dissected the images and words of the mass media with cutting ken. Here the past is far from settled, and while many figures represented in the show have already secured a place in the history books, group hagiography is hardly easy among practices so diverse and ongoing. Yet even if the works defy rigid, canonical terms, this first group retrospective still gave us an astonishing corpus—allowing an era’s real complexity to surface and then be amplified in critical debate. *Artforum* asked art historians MICHAEL LOBEL and HOWARD SINGERMAN to reflect on the show’s picturing of a moment that holds great sway over our own.



View of “The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984,” 2009, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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Outside the Frame

MICHAEL LOBEL

ONE OF THE MORE CURIOUS SEQUELAE of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s staging of “The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984,” curated by Douglas Eklund, was the controversy surrounding the exclusion of Philip Smith from the show. Smith is one of five artists—the others were Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, and Robert Longo—whose work Douglas Crimp had included in the 1977 show at Artists Space in New York titled “Pictures.” The event gave this group its name, in part, and has since been mythologized

as a pivotal moment in postwar art. While those other four artists were represented by pieces in the Met show, Smith was not—and he merited only one mention in the catalogue, with no complementary reproduction of his work. In response, Crimp and other critics, including Barry Schwabsky in *The Nation* and Holland Cotter in the *New York Times*, raised the issue of Smith's absence, which in turn generated a flurry of postings by various art bloggers. While a seemingly minor episode, the debate offered insight into the difficulties of writing the history of recent art—particularly when the conflicting claims to that history are made so apparent.

This is hardly a unique set of circumstances. The voices raised to protest Smith's exclusion are reminiscent of a similar outcry that attended the staging of "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" in 2007, another large survey that attempted to categorize a set of recent artistic practices. At that time, too, questions arose about how and why certain artists were included but others left out. These sorts of questions take on a different cast in the case of the Met show, since it dealt with artists who often addressed issues of notoriety, fame, and celebrity as their primary subjects—whether in Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills," 1977–80, Michael Smith's performance and video riffs on television tropes, or Richard Prince's *Brooke Shields (Spiritual America)*, 1983 (which, by the way, seems to have been removed from view sometime during the first weeks of the exhibition).

Cotter directly addressed these historiographical problems a little over a month after the Met show's opening. His *Times* article "Framing the Message of a Generation" was not a review proper, but rather a think piece that considered the show in relation to the New Museum's roughly contemporaneous "Younger than Jesus" survey, in that both exhibitions attempted to chart and define generational identities. Cotter expresses deep skepticism about this generational model of art history—a skepticism I'm sure many of us share—but what is most striking about the generally negative viewpoint of his piece is how it diverges from the tone of his first review of the Met show, about a month or so earlier. His original assessment was positive, if not glowing, calling it "a winner." What subsequently troubled Cotter was the way in which these exhibitions put the winnowing process of history on full view: "We can see history being written—recorded, edited, enhanced, invented—right before our eyes. It can be a disturbing sight." The rhetoric here seems somewhat overheated—I, personally, would reserve the use of the term *disturbing* for heavier fare—and his view of the way in which history gets recorded is strangely contradictory. On one hand, the Met show is criticized for being too obedient to the historical record, so much so that "the

show feels like . . . a slice of history hermetically sealed.” Yet at the same time, the critic’s ire is prompted by the revision and selection that the telling of history always incurs, leaving some people (and events) in and taking others out.

What rings hollow to me about this kind of objection, at least in relation to the Met show, is its failure to acknowledge that Philip Smith’s exclusion from the roster was more than balanced by the inclusion of a significant number of artists who were active in these circles but whose work has not been afforded significant critical attention since that time. Cotter slams the show as canonical, but if that’s the case, could someone please show me which canon includes the likes of Ericka Beckman, Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, and Paul McMahon? The presence of work by these artists has helped reshape a historical record that has been defined by a relatively small group of art writers and by the market. The Met show, particularly the first couple of galleries in the chronological scheme, contained a good number of unfamiliar works that revealed unexpected connections and correspondences. For example, a shared interest in line drawing tied together such disparate pieces as Goldstein’s *The Portrait of Père Tanguy*, 1974, Dwyer’s *Cardz*, 1980, and David Salle’s *We’ll Shake the Bag*, 1980. (And rather than fault the show for its exclusions, I think that the zeal for inclusiveness sometimes went a bit too far: The addition of small painted works from Clough’s early-’80s “C-Notes” series and of McMahon’s 1982 *Polkadot Paintings*, in the show’s penultimate gallery, seemed rather forced—by this point, when many of the other Pictures artists had achieved a signature large-scale, slick style, Clough and McMahon had veered into other aesthetic terrain, and their later works consequently seemed out of place here.)



David Salle, *Untitled*, 1973, coffee labels on four black-and-white photographs, each 24 x 20". © 2009 David Salle/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

The exhibition also managed to reveal sides of well-known artists that have been lost in the shuffle. Hence the display of several early works by Levine demonstrated that she was working with a range of techniques and themes (collage, a combinatory approach to narrative, the mother-and-child dyad) that form an important backdrop to her later appropriationist practice. Similarly, the show gave us a much different view of Salle's project, pushing back against the artist's framing as a neo-expressionist painter in the '80s and evincing his earlier engagement with a range of media including photocollage and installation (*Untitled*, 1973, four black-and-white photographs of women drinking coffee with a separate coffee label affixed to each photo, uncannily presages some of Prince's fashion-model photos). The principle of inclusion even extended to archival materials. For a Met show, "The Pictures Generation" contained a surprisingly wide array of "non-art" ephemera—posters, magazines, period photographs—that augmented the historical record on view. The presence of these materials, and the show's dense hang, certainly contributed to a time-capsule quality; this may be yet another reason, above and beyond its revisionist brief, that the exhibition prompted such strong historiographical reflections. It thus demonstrated another generational logic: In their engagement with advertising and mass media and their repeated references to the family dramas of postwar suburbia, the assembled works can be identified as a form of "baby-boomer art."

The exhibition, then, substantially revises our understanding of art in the period. One of the major effects is that it moves us away from viewing the 1977 "Pictures" show as the central, decisive instant in the formation of a collective approach—which is how many of the received readings of this moment have framed it. Such narratives follow a familiar (and simplistic) historical model, in which history is shaped primarily by singular events that bring about clear and readily identifiable shifts. Art history tends to embrace these episodic, punctual narratives, which often link the birth of art movements to pivotal exhibitions (whether Fauvism to the 1905 Salon d'Automne or the YBAs to "Freeze" in 1988). Eklund's intention to push his account away from such a model is already evident in the show's starting point, which sets things off several years prior to "Pictures" and instead illustrates how artistic developments tend to accrue incrementally, in fits and starts, with many quickly lost to history but significant nonetheless. Hence we are given a much more diffuse sense of the formation of "Pictures" practices, particularly via the disclosure that, well before 1977, many of these artists had begun establishing their own networks in centers outside New York City, such as Hallwalls in Buffalo, New York, and CalArts outside Los Angeles. What's more, the emphasis on Crimp as the sole organizing force behind "Pictures" is

also modified through a renewed awareness of the efforts of other curators and critics—particularly Helene Winer, who had known Crimp for several years and who, as director of Artists Space, had a hand in the show as well. Eklund’s catalogue does important work in bringing attention to Winer’s impact on the scene, especially in her earlier stint as director of the Pomona College Art Gallery, where she was deeply engaged with the presentation of new art in Southern California—whether that of a later “Pictures” artist like Goldstein or of Joe Goode, Allen Ruppersberg, and Bas Jan Ader.

YET THE MATTER OF OMISSION remains. Smith’s contribution to “Pictures” in 1977 consisted of several large oil-pastel drawings filled with disparate images—a girl with a parakeet, parachutists, architectural interiors—arrayed in roughly horizontal registers. The borrowed feel of the imagery and the lack of clear narrative related them to the other works in that show. For his part, Eklund has explained Smith’s exclusion from the Met exhibition as an aesthetic judgment. Some have taken issue with that stance, although it merely echoes Crimp’s substitution of Sherman for Smith in a revised version of the “Pictures” catalogue essay published in the journal *October* in 1979. It’s likely that Smith’s more visibly medium-based, hand-drawn approach no longer fit Crimp’s articulation of postmodernism.

Indeed, Crimp had his own thoughts about Smith’s absence from the Met show. When interviewed by arts journalist Lee Rosenbaum (who posts under the *nom de blog* [CultureGrrl](#)) in April, [Crimp opined](#): “He was not so much of the group, of the social world, of the people who formulated this. He’s gay and this [the Met’s show] is a very straight configuration of artists. I don’t know what’s happened to him, career-wise. It’s a slightly touchy subject: I think Philip is upset, reasonably.” This recourse to Smith’s sexuality as a possible explanation for his exclusion seems to me rather unconvincing. Yet it does raise an interesting—and unexplored—issue: There were, in fact, a number of gay men who actively participated in these circles, but their engagement tended more toward criticism and curating—which is why their presence isn’t deeply felt in the exhibition proper (although it’s more evident in the catalogue). Foremost among that group would be none other than Crimp himself, along with Craig Owens, who like Crimp was affiliated with *October* and became a vigorous proponent of the postmodernist idiom in which he saw many of these artists working. That list would also include some less familiar names: Joe Bishop, who was trained as an artist but also curated the underrecognized 1979 exhibition “Imitation of Life” at the Joseloff Gallery of the Hartford Art School, which included work by Levine, Prince, and Salle as well as Richard Artschwager, Nan Goldin, and James Welling; or Marvin

Heiferman, who organized another significant early exhibition, “Pictures: Photographs” at Castelli Graphics in 1979; or critic Paul Taylor, who, although he arrived in New York from his native Australia relatively late—in 1984—lent an important voice to the dialogue about this art, particularly in mid-’80s interviews with central figures in the milieu.



Philip

Smith, *Bring*, 1977, oil pastel and pencil on paper, 100 x 62".

The names of Owens, Bishop, and Taylor—all of whom died of AIDS—remind us of a powerful loss experienced by this generation, one that may have signaled something of an endpoint. Although the AIDS crisis warrants only one mention in the Met's catalogue and appears to have had no place at all in the various discussions of the show's exclusions, it is, I think, an important historical factor to consider as marking the limits of a particular artistic sensibility. The media savvy of Pictures art certainly had an impact on AIDS protest graphics—note the echoes of Barbara Kruger in the work of collectives such as Gran Fury and the Silence = Death project—yet the latter often rejected the cool, ironic detachment of Pictures work in favor of direct activism and topical political messages. Moreover, the artistic focus on abjection and the body in the wake of AIDS—think Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Kiki Smith—impacted Pictures art, most clearly in Sherman's "bulimic" images of the late '80s. Could it be, then, that the widespread critical attention to one artist's absence from the Met show might be signaling a recognition, on some level, of this broader generational loss?

Now, this is about the point I expected to wrap things up. But in the midst of writing this piece, I realized that something was missing; while reflecting so much on Smith's absence from the show, I had neglected to get his take on the issue—in a way, I was merely reiterating his exclusion. (In fact, it seems that no one—not even the critics and bloggers who had bemoaned his absence—had bothered to contact him either.) And when I did speak with him about the issue, Smith raised some reasonable objections: First, if the show was meant as a comprehensive historical survey, how could one explain the decision to include only four of the five original "Pictures" artists? Smith reiterated his affinity with the other artists of this so-called Pictures generation, as evidenced, for example, by a 1975 slide-show performance—held at Artists Space, no less—that relied on both found images and found sounds. He challenged the notion that there was a clearly defined, cohesive grouping or movement at the time ("I think this is sort of hindsight mythology. It's not like everybody moved in a pack back then. Was Richard Prince hanging out with Sherrie Levine every day? I don't think so"). And he was puzzled by the suggestion of sexuality as a potential explanation ("This is the first time I've ever read about me being a gay artist—this is news to me").

My conversation with Smith made it clear how quickly (and rather uncritically) I had constructed my own narrative about this episode—and how quickly it could be challenged or even overturned. These difficulties are inherent in treating contemporary art in historical terms, particularly with respect to the

dialogue that ensues between curator or scholar and artist. For one, the commitment to the artist's voice (one often claimed by contemporary curators) can very easily come into conflict with a commitment to history. What does one do, for instance, when the historical record contradicts the artist's own account? Further, any attempt to write history necessarily involves exclusion, categorization, a certain amount of contingency. So in the case of the Met show, I see both sides of the issue. I identify with Eklund, tasked with the job of historical revision, who had to make difficult—and inevitably controversial—choices about inclusions and exclusions, who had to draw lines, to define things. But on the other hand, I understand Smith's viewpoint: He's in a particularly good position to ask questions about how those sorts of decisions get made, to call attention to how subjective they may be. The writing of history always involves such choices and negotiations, but they become that much more evident when the subjects about whom one is writing are able to talk back—to harangue, to scold, to offer up their own counternarratives.

The Met, of course, is an institution that has the heavy weight of history behind it (hence Longo's signature figures, hung in the museum's Great Hall, couldn't help but echo the ancient Greek friezes a few steps away). No wonder the issue of historiography became so pressing with this exhibition. But there is one final issue that strikes me as significant. Although Pictures art's embrace of advertising and mass-media forms—like that of Pop before it—tends to convince us of its clear engagement with the new, it retains a significantly historical dimension. This was evident throughout the Met show: in Kruger's use of period stock photographs, in Laurie Simmons's cache of '50s and '60s toys in her signature dollhouse images, in Levine's silhouette evocations of the "fathers of our country," and in Sarah Charlesworth's newspaper appropriations, aptly titled "Modern History," begun in 1977, to name but a few. And though this art's postmodernist champions tended to see such references as symptoms of ahistorical pastiche or irony, that diagnosis may have been made too quickly—particularly since this was a generation that has proved to be so concerned with its place in the historical narrative. These artists were engaged in various reflections on the past even before they became, in turn, the objects of historical scrutiny.

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Language Games

HOWARD SINGERMAN

NO GROUP OF ARTISTS since the mid-1960s has been so spoken for—and so displaced—by the writing about it as the Pictures generation. Curator Douglas Eklund's recent survey exhibition, "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984," and its enormous, three-hundred-plus-page catalogue aimed to push aside much of this criticism, to allow the artists and their moment to be seen anew—or, more precisely, to be *written* anew, in a different language. The show presented a number of lesser known (and therefore less written-about and reproduced) works. Equally important was the inclusion of seldom-seen but oft-cited pieces, from Jack Goldstein's films and his three-panel *The Pull*, 1976, to the single pair of black shoes left over from Sherrie Levine's *Untitled*, 1977. The works looked fresh, in part because they were a little more shopworn, smaller, and more handmade than I remembered, and thus more tentative than the art-historical and theoretical arguments they have come to represent.

The exhibition was good to see, but the attempts and failures of the catalogue and the historical project it lays out are more interesting—and, I would argue, symptomatic—than the successes of the exhibition itself. According to Eklund, the goal of the show and its book was that together "they will revise and clarify our understanding of the development of postmodernism in the visual arts in America." In his desire to come to terms with postmodernism, Eklund seems to echo the concerns Douglas Crimp expressed in the second version of his seminal essay "Pictures," published in the journal *October* in 1979. "If *postmodernism* is to have theoretical value," Crimp warned, "it cannot be used merely as another chronological term," nor, he adds in a footnote, can it be used as a synonym for *pluralism*; "rather it must disclose the particular nature of a breach with modernism." Yet in spite of Eklund's introductory promise, the word *postmodernism* appears only twice more, and each time only in passing. This is just the first of a number of anomalies in a very curious catalogue.

It becomes clear early on that Eklund actually has little interest in Crimp's attempt to come to theoretical terms with the Pictures work. He mentions in his introduction—just before his invocation of postmodernism—that the artists of the Pictures generation had "learned from the writings of French philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva . . . to adopt a cool, critical attitude toward the . . . seductive mechanisms that were being focused on them." But Eklund seems uninterested in the specifics of these theorists' lessons (and I would hesitate to summarize them as he has): Kristeva is never mentioned again; Foucault appears just once more and Barthes three times. Lacan, too, is missing, and while Crimp's original 1977

“Pictures” essay ends with a call for a critical return to Freud, the master appears here only twice and only in his adjectival form, “Freudian.” Eklund seems to deeply distrust “French philosophy” or Continental theory and, even more, the theoretically informed criticism that emerged in relation to postmodernism. For him, art criticism always comes too late, and always in excess. Nowhere is that judgment clearer than in his discussion of Cindy Sherman’s “Untitled Film Stills.”

Much theoretical discourse has swirled around these pictures since the late 1970s, adhering to them like barnacles on a ship’s hull. . . . [Sherman’s] work launched a thousand dissertations and seems tailor-made for the oceanic tide of gender and representation studies that would overwhelm their occasionally talismanic power as images. Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” though published two years before Sherman’s first Untitled Film Stills were made, became the foundational text for this critical approach. . . . Not that it matters, but Sherman herself is not prone to this kind of intellectualizing of her own process, except as it overlaps with everyday experience and feelings. This account will not attempt to summarize these theories nor to provide yet another.

Beyond the maritime metaphors, there are other odd tics in this passage. Take, for example, the “though” that introduces the chronologizing of Mulvey’s exceptionally influential essay, to suggest that Sherman can’t have read it; and the “not that it matters” that allows Eklund to say that the artist wouldn’t have been interested anyway. Eklund’s language aims—and indeed his project is—to save Sherman from theory, particularly from the sense that she might have had theoretical interests that anticipated the work.

WHILE I DON’T SHARE Eklund’s opinion of theory—or, for that matter, his sense of its historical role in art and art criticism—I want to take “The Pictures Generation” as a good-faith effort, a conscious attempt to find another way to think through this work. If nothing else, scraping away the barnacles of theory and anthologized criticism (particularly as they have circulated through the academy and the art school) allows other writings to be read, and Eklund does indeed introduce a number of other, far less official texts: unfamiliar reviews, essays, and artists’ statements that feel closer to the ground and to the artists themselves. He spends considerable time with David Salle and James Welling’s “Images That Understand Us,” a dialogue published in the *Journal of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art* in 1980, when I was one of the publication’s editors. While the text “failed to attract notice as a response” at the time, Eklund provocatively argues that it was intended not as the report from New York my fellow editors and I had commissioned, but as a

retort. He uses the piece to push back retroactively against what he argues was the authors' initial target—and what is most certainly his: those “*October* critics” who early on had already “decided upon” the generation’s “history and key players.” Thus Eklund reads Salle’s appeal to “images which, rather than offering themselves up for a boffo decoding by the viewer, instead *understand us*” as a pointed riposte to Crimp’s 1979 “Pictures” essay, to the certainty of Crimp’s authorial voice, and to Crimp’s blanket dismissal of painting in favor of a critical photography and “a theoretical understanding of postmodernism [that] will also *betray* all those attempts to prolong the life of outmoded forms.” (As we shall see, the word *betray* figures in Eklund’s discussion as well, albeit rather differently.)

Eklund’s summary assertion is a curious one. But it makes his own project—the history he wants to write—quite clear: “‘Images That Understand Us’ implicitly differentiated Salle and Welling’s CalArts activities from the Pictures phenomenon.” The argument here is that before they were shackled with the polemics that Crimp, Rosalind Krauss, and Craig Owens published in *October* and that Owens and Hal Foster published in *Art in America*, the artists of the Pictures generation were a coherent community with a shared and lived sensibility in relation to images and their reproduction. Many of them, like Salle and Welling, came from the California Institute of the Arts, where they had studied with John Baldessari: “Like most postcollegiate social circles, the Pictures group was united by a shared set of references and worldview—generational and cultural—that was an exercise in collective selfdefinition as a form of alienation from the mainstream. Jokes and music are often the way in which these ineffable feelings can momentarily take form, and it was as much camaraderie as art that bonded these artists together.”

The story Eklund wants to tell starts with Baldessari in Valencia in 1974, rather than in New York in 1977 with the first “Pictures” exhibition or in 1979 with the *October* essay. Indeed, Eklund starts with student work, arguing rather preemptively for the right to decide “what was mature and what was juvenilia in their nascent oeuvres.” One of the effects of this decision is to emphasize the bruised and wary tenderness that seems to characterize the early work. While he mentions the coolness of reproductive media, say, or the distance produced by appropriation and the withdrawal of the author, what interests and perhaps touches Eklund most, I think, is the sort of feeling that Valentin Tatransky wrote of in a 1979 *Real Life Magazine* review of Levine’s collages, images of babies appropriated from a how-to-draw book: an “apparently contradictory combination of desires . . . the desire to express significant emotion, and the reluctance, combined with a modernist

awareness, to create with the hand . . . the desire to express an attitude to an image, combined with the desire to leave the image alone. . . . Attitude is everything.”

Eklund is certainly right that an interest in melodrama is central to these practices. The ability of the mediated image to pull real emotional strings, precisely in its fictionality, is of paramount concern, and this is what I take Welling and Salle’s phrase “images that understand us” to mean. But Eklund is after more than that: He wants a history and a meaning for that “attitude,” for the artists’ preventative, premature disillusionment. He cites a work that Levine made before she moved to New York in 1975, in which “she conjugated the verb ‘to betray’ on separate sheets of paper”; the work is not included in the show, but it could be its emblem. Themes of betrayal and disillusionment run throughout the exhibition catalogue, from its opening pages to the artists’ birth dates, as though incurred by their astrological signs: “Whereas the baby boomers, born in the mid-1940s, had a sense of confidence in their ability to transform the world, these artists, who came of age in the early 1970s, were greeted by an America suffused with disillusionment—its hopes for political and social transformation dashed, wracked by opposition to the Vietnam war, and anguished by the Watergate crisis.” Betrayed first by America—according to this very strangely truncated history—the artists are betrayed again by a moralizing, politicized art criticism, whose claims were “too much to ask of art, which in the end is always just a pawn in a much larger game.” And finally, they are betrayed by the market and by one another: “Before 1980, the competitiveness among the Pictures artists . . . was funny when the stakes weren’t high, but as friends’ careers took them to different galleries and they experienced the relative success or failure, attention or neglect, that are the inevitable by-product of joining a gallery, the competitiveness was no longer a joke, but real. Within a year after Metro Pictures opened, the writing was on the wall.”

EKLUND’S CHOICE TO BEGIN both the exhibition and the catalogue in 1974 inflects his title. It puts the emphasis on the “generation” and its postcollegiate adventures—and effectively renders the 1977 “Pictures” exhibition itself a merely political event. The central question here is not that of a critical postmodernism, but of who was in and who was not: There is, as other reviewers have already noted, a line in the index that directs readers to “*Pictures* . . . artists not included in.” One could ask the same questions of Eklund’s show, of course, and it is my sense that a number of artists are included not for the qualities of their work—or for their shared attitude toward

images—but for their place within a specific network of friendships and betrayals.

Surely we could use a more finely grained examination of the art world in the late '70s and early '80s than we have had thus far—one that would attempt to historicize the role of criticism, as well as the social and intellectual interactions of artists and writers, rather than to dismiss these as extrinsic or parasitic.* But in many ways, what we get from the catalogue is a very streamlined and familiar history. Beginning the story at CalArts with Baldessari and his students allows Eklund to bring out a readymade (and, with Richard Hertz's Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia [2003], a pre-memoired) cast of characters to enact an old art-historical narrative: the relation of fathers and sons. Salle and his peers are the children of Conceptual art, and they form “a Frankenstein's monster let loose on the more genteel members of the earlier generation.” Eklund notes over and over how the CalArts artists betray Conceptual orthodoxy and dismay their elders. The artists associated with the alternative space Hallwalls in Buffalo, New York—Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, Robert Longo, Sherman, and Michael Zwack—are posed as a counterpoint to the CalArts artists; however, their teachers (Les Krimms, Barbara Jo Revelle, and Paul Sharits, for example) are not so well known or so comfortably aligned with Conceptualism. The Buffalo contingent are thus less easily drawn into Eklund's Oedipal narrative, yet he nevertheless insists on their opposition to their “self-serious, even pretentious” Minimalist and Conceptual predecessors: Once again, their “apparent embrace of popular culture shocked the members of the Conceptual old guard.”

While this is a satisfyingly familiar art-historical structure, it effectively eclipses a number of the artists in the exhibition—most of them women slightly older than the generation the catalogue supposes. Introduced at various stages in the story, Dara Birnbaum, Sarah Charlesworth, Louise Lawler, and Levine are walk-ons here. They each came to New York individually, without a shared backstory or “important” teachers, and their themes and anecdotes matter only insofar as they can be placed in relation to those already on the table. Barbara Kruger fares the worst in this respect. While she had been exhibiting in New York since the early '70s and was represented in the 1973 Whitney Biennial—by work clearly engaged with the feminist discourse around handicraft—her career, indeed her life, before the Pictures generation is paraphrased in this way:

Kruger had started out painting, switched to words after attending a reading by Patti Smith, designed photomontage book covers for reprints of revolutionary texts published by Schocken Books, did layout

for *Mademoiselle* magazine as a day job, and was once told by Diane Arbus that she talked the way Dorothy Parker wrote. Her most recent artwork was a book and exhibition called *Picture/Readings* in which single panels of elliptical narrative each faced a seemingly unrelated close-up photo of a different stucco-walled house façade that suggested a way into the story but went no further.

This summation caricatures Kruger and erases her career as an artist and a writer. But even within the logic of Eklund's argument and his attempt to find the Pictures generation in the postwar American suburbs, far more could have been said about *Picture/Readings*, a project from 1978; at the very least, these pieces should have been included in the exhibition itself. They do, after all, share their truncated suburban scenarios with the damped emotions and frustrated narratives of works actually displayed, such as Salle's early *Untitled*, 1973, and James Casebere's *Subdivision with Spotlight*, 1982.

What is most peculiar about the catalogue's treatment of Kruger is that not only is there no mention of her criticism, there is no discussion of her work or her writing in relation to feminism. Perhaps the most unfortunate effect of Eklund's resistance to theory, whether as an interpretive or a critical or a political language, is that it does not allow him to acknowledge its historical presence—and specifically to register how intertwined the discourses of critical theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism were by the early '80s. It's not that Eklund doesn't mention feminism, but rather that he repeatedly discounts it, either by situating it in the past—Sherman and Laurie Simmons, we are assured, “felt no need to identify themselves as feminist”—or reducing it to local politics, to Lawler's and Levine's dismay, for example, that because of the return of “‘macho’ painting” they had to “wait their turn in line for a gallery to grant them an exhibition.” Or it is made nearly unspeakable: Eklund writes of Birnbaum's canonical works, “In both *Wonder Woman* and *Kiss the Girls*, the feminist message is so clear as to almost be secondary.” It is as though the curator needs to rescue the artists from anything that might smack of a committed and theorized feminist position, in order that they can be true artists; and there is, he seems quite clear, an uncomfortable relationship between women artists and theory.

At least that is the effect of a story Eklund tells of the photographer Jeff Wall, who once, in conversation with Dan Graham, referred to “Ericka Beckman, Dara Birnbaum, Sarah Charlesworth, Jenny Holzer, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Barbara Kruger, among others,” as the “theoretical girls.” Eklund uses this phrase in a number of places, at once to raise theory as an issue of gender and politics in the early '80s and, ultimately, to avoid discussing it.

There is no mention of what theory those artists may have been reading, or why, nor is there any examination of the label's costs. Eklund imagines that Wall wanted to distinguish their work as "cerebral and intellectual, in contradistinction to the 'messy' physicality and animal intuition of male artistic prowess"—but that explanation sets the women Eklund has included in the "Pictures Generation" exhibition against the very ambiguity and complexity he wants to place at the center of the group. In reading after reading, women artists seem to go in for the very "boffo decodings" that Salle and Welling—and Eklund—rejected as part of rejecting *October* and the project of a critical art. And the specifically feminist interest in melodrama and the staging of affect is underscored in the exhibition itself, in works ranging from Sherman's film stills to Barbara Bloom's *Homage to Jean Seberg*, 1981. When Eklund's text finally acknowledges that "these younger women artists were part of feminism's second wave," for which "gender and sexuality were part of a larger nexus between representation and power, and images were highly coded rhetorical devices," it is difficult to know how to square it with Eklund's argument or with his refusal to acknowledge the historical impact of feminist critical discourse. There is no discussion of Owens's transformative 1983 essay "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" (I must note that Owens, in particular, is treated as shabbily as Kruger; not only does that essay go unmentioned, but his critique of painting is reduced to an idiosyncrasy of the moment, a kind of abnormal fanaticism: He is, for Eklund, the "Robespierre of the *October* group"). Nor is there mention of Jo Anna Isaak's "The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter," an exhibition in January of that same year that included Kruger and Jenny Holzer; or of Kate Linker's "Difference: On Representation and Sexuality," at the New Museum in 1984, which included Birnbaum, Kruger, Levine, and Wall.

"The Pictures Generation" stops at 1984, perhaps because it has simply used up its decade or because the friendships it set out to trace had by that point dissolved. But the exhibition and its catalogue come to different conclusions. The catalogue ends rather unconvincingly with the dashed "crossover dreams" of artists such as Longo, Salle, Sherman, and Michael Smith, all "tempted" by television and movies. The exhibition, however, concludes with echoes of women's laughter. Its last room features Levine's watercolors after Léger, Mondrian, and Stuart Davis; Lawler's photographs of the Tremaine and Paine Webber collections; and their collaboration *A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything*, 1981–82, alongside Kruger's *Untitled (Buy Me I'll Change Your Life)*, 1984, and a wall of Allan McCollum's *Plaster Surrogates*, 1982–84. To my mind, this is a more satisfying ending, and one that suggests an alternate history. For the final effect of the catalogue's resistance to theory is to render

the work hermetic, denying what is most interesting and historically specific about it—not the artists' circulation (who knew or slept with or betrayed whom when), but rather the works'. Indeed, what marks much of the work in this show is its discursivity, by which I mean not only its openness to criticism and theory but its participation in them: the ways in which the work itself posed questions to viewers, to other works, and to the field of art and language within which it very consciously operated.

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*It is, for example, quite remarkable how much the work assembled here from the moment of the 1977 "Pictures" exhibition looks, in retrospect, like work from the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1978 "New Image Painting"—such as that by Jennifer Bartlett, Robert Moskowitz, and Nicholas Africano—and how closely Richard Marshall's catalogue essay tracks to Crimp's first "Pictures" essay. This resemblance and misrecognition, it seems to me, is at least one place to measure the role criticism played in producing visual and interpretive differences we now take for granted. Crimp's *October* "Pictures" essay ends with a scathing, and now seemingly unprovoked, critique of "New Image Painting," and Salle took on the exhibition that spring in *Flash Art*, in a review published as though part of a united front, alongside yet another version of "Pictures" by Crimp and a text on the strategies of representation by Thomas Lawson: "This painting has been on a spree," Salle charged, "shopping for momentary legitimation." David Salle, "New Image Painting," *Flash Art* 88–89 (March–April 1979): 40.



Language Games

HOWARD SINGERMAN

NO GROUP OF ARTISTS since the mid-1960s has been so spoken for—and so displaced—by the writing about it as the Pictures generation. Curator Douglas Eklund's recent survey exhibition, "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984," and its enormous, three-hundred-plus-page catalogue aimed to push aside much of this criticism, to allow the artists and their moment to be seen anew—or, more precisely, to be *written* anew, in a different language. The show presented a number of lesser known (and therefore less written-about and reproduced) works. Equally important was the inclusion of seldom-seen but oft-cited pieces, from Jack Goldstein's films and his three-panel *The Pull*, 1976, to the single pair of black shoes left over from Sherrie Levine's *Untitled*, 1977. The works looked fresh, in part because they were a little more shopworn, smaller, and more handmade than I remembered, and thus more tentative than the art-historical and theoretical arguments they have come to represent.

The exhibition was good to see, but the attempts and failures of the catalogue and the historical project it lays out are more interesting—and, I would argue, symptomatic—than the successes of the exhibition itself. According to Eklund, the goal of the show and its book was that together "they will revise and clarify our understanding of the development of postmodernism in the visual arts in America." In his desire to come to terms with postmodernism, Eklund seems to echo the concerns Douglas Crimp expressed in

the second version of his seminal essay "Pictures," published in the journal *October* in 1979. "If *postmodernism* is to have theoretical value," Crimp warned, "it cannot be used merely as another chronological term," nor, he adds in a footnote, can it be used as a synonym for *pluralism*; "rather it must disclose the particular nature of a breach with modernism." Yet in spite of Eklund's introductory promise, the word *postmodernism* appears only twice more, and each time only in passing. This is just the first of a number of anomalies in a very curious catalogue.

It becomes clear early on that Eklund actually has little interest in Crimp's attempt to come to theoretical terms with the Pictures work. He mentions in his introduction—just before his invocation of postmodernism—that the artists of the Pictures generation had "learned from the writings of French philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva . . . to adopt a cool, critical attitude toward the . . . seductive mechanisms that were being focused on them." But Eklund seems un-

interested in the specifics of these theorists' lessons (and I would hesitate to summarize them as he has): Kristeva is never mentioned again; Foucault appears just once more and Barthes three times. Lacan, too, is missing, and while Crimp's original 1977 "Pictures" essay ends with a call for a critical return to Freud, the master appears here only twice and only in his adjectival form, "Freudian." Eklund

seems to deeply distrust "French philosophy" or Continental theory and, even more, the theoretically informed criticism that emerged in relation to postmodernism. For him, art criticism always comes too late, and always in excess. Nowhere is that judgment clearer than in his discussion of Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills."

Much theoretical discourse has swirled around these pictures since the late 1970s, adhering to them like barnacles on a ship's hull. . . . [Sherman's] work launched a thousand dissertations and seems tailor-made for the oceanic tide of gender and representation studies that would overwhelm their occasionally talismanic power as images. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," though published two years before Sherman's first *Untitled Film Stills* were made, became the foundational text for this critical approach. . . . Not that it matters, but Sherman herself is not prone to this kind of intellectualizing of her own process, except as it overlaps with everyday experience and feelings. This account will not attempt to summarize these theories nor to provide yet another.

Beyond the maritime metaphors, there are other oddities in this passage. Take, for example, the "though" that introduces the chronologizing of Mulvey's exceptionally influential essay, to suggest that Sherman can't have read it; and the "not that it matters" that allows Eklund to say that the artist wouldn't have been interested anyway. Eklund's language aims—and indeed his project is—to save Sherman from theory, particularly from the sense that she might have had theoretical interests that anticipated the work.



Opposite page: Jack Goldstein, *The Pull* (detail), 1976, three color photographs, each 30 x 40". This page, right: Sherrie Levine, *Untitled*, 1977, shoes, 1 1/4 x 1 1/4 x 5 1/2". Below: View of "Sherrie Levine," 1977, 3 Mercer Street gallery, New York.



WHILE I DON'T SHARE Eklund's opinion of theory—or, for that matter, his sense of its historical role in art and art criticism—I want to take “The Pictures Generation” as a good-faith effort, a conscious attempt to find another way to think through this work. If nothing else, scraping away the barnacles of theory and anthologized criticism (particularly as they have circulated through the academy and the art school) allows other writings to be read, and Eklund does indeed introduce a number of other, far less official texts: unfamiliar reviews, essays, and artists' statements that feel closer to the ground and to the artists themselves. He spends considerable time with David Salle and James Welling's “Images That Understand Us,” a dialogue published in the *Journal of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art* in 1980, when I was one of the publication's editors. While the text “failed to attract notice as a response” at the time, Eklund provocatively argues that it was intended not as the report from New York my fellow editors and I had commissioned, but as a retort. He uses the piece to push back retroactively against what he argues was the authors' initial target—and what is most certainly his: those “*October* critics” who early on had already “decided upon” the generation's “history and key players.” Thus Eklund reads Salle's appeal to “images which, rather than offering themselves up for a boffo decoding by the viewer, instead *understand us*” as a pointed riposte to Crimp's 1979 “Pictures” essay, to the certainty of Crimp's authorial voice, and to Crimp's blanket dismissal of painting in favor of a critical photography and “a theoretical understanding of postmodernism [that] will also betray all those attempts to prolong the life of outmoded forms.” (As we shall see, the word *betray* figures in Eklund's discussion as well, albeit rather differently.)

Eklund's summary assertion is a curious one. But it makes his own project—the history he wants to write—quite clear: “Images That Understand Us”

Eklund seems to deeply distrust “French philosophy” or continental theory and, even more, the theoretically informed criticism that emerged in relation to postmodernism. For him, art criticism always comes too late, and always in excess.

This page, right: Sherrie Levine, *Untitled*, 1978, offset lithograph, 8 x 10". Below, from left: David Salle, Matt Mullican, James Welling, and Paul McCloskey, *New York*, 1977. Photo: Paul McMahon. Opposite page, from left: James Casebere, *Subdivision with Spotlight*, 1982, black-and-white photograph, 16 x 20". View of “The Pictures Generation: 1974–1984,” 2009, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



implicitly differentiated Salle and Welling's CalArts activities from the Pictures phenomenon.” The argument here is that before they were shackled with the polemics that Crimp, Rosalind Krauss, and Craig Owens published in *October* and that Owens and Hal Foster published in *Art in America*, the artists of the Pictures generation were a coherent community with a shared and lived sensibility in relation to images and their reproduction. Many of them, like Salle and Welling, came from the California Institute of the Arts, where they had studied with John Baldessari: “Like most postcollegiate social circles, the Pictures group was united by a shared set of references and worldview—generational and cultural—that was an exercise in collective self-definition as a form of alienation from the mainstream. Jokes and music are often the way in which these ineffable feelings can momentarily take form, and it was as much camaraderie as art that bonded these artists together.”

The story Eklund wants to tell starts with Baldessari in Valencia in 1974, rather than in New York in 1977 with the first “Pictures” exhibition or in 1979 with the *October* essay. Indeed, Eklund starts with student work, arguing rather preemptively for the right to decide “what was mature and what was juvenilia in their nascent oeuvres.” One of the effects of this decision is to emphasize the bruised and wary tenderness that seems to characterize the early work. While he mentions the coolness of reproductive media, say, or the distance produced by appropriation and the withdrawal of the author, what interests and perhaps touches Eklund most, I

think, is the sort of feeling that Valentin Tatransky wrote of in a 1979 *Real Life Magazine* review of Levine's collages, images of babies appropriated from a how-to-draw book: an “apparently contradictory combination of desires . . . the desire to express significant emotion, and the reluctance, combined with a modernist awareness, to create with the hand . . . the desire to express an attitude to an image, combined with the desire to leave the image alone. . . . Attitude is everything.”

Eklund is certainly right that an interest in melodrama is central to these practices. The ability of the mediated image to pull real emotional strings, precisely in its fictionality, is of paramount concern, and this is what I take Welling and Salle's phrase “images that understand us” to mean. But Eklund is



after more than that: He wants a history and a meaning for that “attitude,” for the artists' preventative, premature disillusionment. He cites a work that Levine made before she moved to New York in 1975, in which “she conjugated the verb ‘to betray’ on separate sheets of paper”; the work is not included in the show, but it could be its emblem. Themes of betrayal and disillusionment run throughout the exhibition catalogue, from its opening pages to the artists' birth dates, as though incurred by their astrological signs: “Whereas the baby boomers, born in the mid-1940s, had a sense of confidence in their ability to transform the world, these artists, who came of age in the early 1970s, were greeted by an America suffused with disillusionment—its hopes for political and social transformation dashed, wracked by opposition to the

Vietnam war, and anguished by the Watergate crisis." Betrayed first by America—according to this very strangely truncated history—the artists are betrayed again by a moralizing, politicized art criticism, whose claims were "too much to ask of art, which in the end is always just a pawn in a much larger game." And finally, they are betrayed by the market and by one another: "Before 1980, the competitiveness among the Pictures artists . . . was funny when the stakes weren't high, but as friends' careers took them to different galleries and they experienced the relative success or failure, attention or neglect, that are the inevitable by-product of joining a gallery, the competitiveness was no longer a joke, but real. Within a year after Metro Pictures opened, the writing was on the wall."

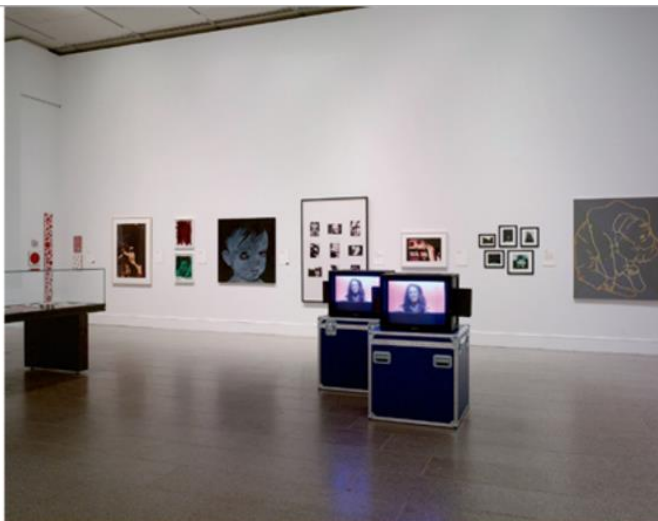
EKLUND'S CHOICE TO BEGIN both the exhibition and the catalogue in 1974 inflects his title. It puts the emphasis on the "generation" and its post-collegiate adventures—and effectively renders the 1977 "Pictures" exhibition itself a merely political event. The central question here is not that of a critical postmodernism, but of who was in and who was not: There is, as other reviewers have already noted, a line in the index that directs readers to "Pictures . . . artists not included in." One could ask the same questions of Eklund's show, of course, and it is my sense that a number of artists are included not for the qualities of their work—or for their shared attitude toward images—but for their place within a specific network of friendships and betrayals.

Surely we could use a more finely grained examination of the art world in the late '70s and early '80s than we have had thus far—one that would attempt

to historicize the role of criticism, as well as the social and intellectual interactions of artists and writers, rather than to dismiss these as extrinsic or parasitic." But in many ways, what we get from the catalogue is a very streamlined and familiar history. Beginning the story at CalArts with Baldessari and his students allows Eklund to bring out a ready-made (and, with Richard Hertz's *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia* [2003], a pre-memoired) cast of characters to enact an old art-historical narrative: the relation of fathers and sons. Salle and his peers are the children of Conceptual art, and they form "a Frankenstein's monster let loose on the more genteel members of the earlier generation." Eklund notes over and over how the CalArts artists betray Conceptual orthodoxy and dismay their elders. The artists associated with the alternative space Hallwalls in Buffalo, New York—Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, Robert Longo, Sherman, and Michael Zwack—are posed as a counterpoint to the CalArts artists; however, their teachers (Les Krims, Barbara Jo Revelle, and Paul Sharits, for example) are not so well known or so comfortably aligned with Conceptualism. The Buffalo contingent are thus less easily drawn into Eklund's Oedipal narrative, yet he nevertheless insists on their opposition to their "self-serious, even pretentious" Minimalist and Conceptual predecessors: Once again, their "apparent embrace of popular culture shocked the members of the Conceptual old guard."

While this is a satisfyingly familiar art-historical structure, it effectively eclipses a number of the artists in the exhibition—most of them women slightly older than the generation the catalogue supposes. Introduced at various stages in the story, Dara Birnbaum, Sarah Charlesworth, Louise Lawler, and Levine are walk-ons here. They each came to New York individually, without a shared backstory or "important" teachers, and their themes and anecdotes matter only insofar as they can be placed in relation to those already on the table. Barbara Kruger fares the worst in this respect. While she had been exhibiting in New York since the early '70s and was represented in the 1973 Whitney Biennial—by work clearly engaged with the feminist discourse around handicraft—her career, indeed her life, before the Pictures generation is paraphrased in this way:

Kruger had started out painting, switched to words after attending a reading by Patti Smith, designed photomontage book covers for reprints of revolutionary texts published by Schocken Books, did layout for *Mademoiselle* magazine as a day job, and was once told by Diane Arbus that she talked the way Dorothy Parker wrote. Her most recent artwork was a book and exhibition called *Picture/Readings* in which single panels of elliptical narrative each faced a seemingly unrelated close-up photo of a different stucco-walled house façade that suggested a way into the story but went no further.





This page, clockwise from top left: Barbara Bloom, *Homage to Jean Seberg*, 1981, mixed media, 11' 6" x 5' x 5' 2". James Welling, *Ericka Beckman*, 1977, black-and-white photograph, 5 x 4". Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Buy Me I'll Change Your Life)*, 1984, black-and-white photograph, 72 x 48". Opposite page: Louise Lawler, *Living Room Corner*, Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York City, 1984, color photograph, 28 x 39".

This summation caricatures Kruger and erases her career as an artist and a writer. But even within the logic of Eklund's argument and his attempt to find the Pictures generation in the postwar American suburbs, far more could have been said about *Picture/Readings*, a project from 1978; at the very least, these pieces should have been included in the exhibition itself. They do, after all, share their truncated suburban scenarios with the damped emotions and frustrated narratives of works actually displayed, such as Salle's early *Untitled*, 1973, and James Casebere's *Subdivision with Spotlight*, 1982.

What is most peculiar about the catalogue's treatment of Kruger is that not only is there no mention of her criticism, there is no discussion of her work or her writing in relation to feminism. Perhaps

the most unfortunate effect of Eklund's resistance to theory, whether as an interpretive or a critical or a political language, is that it does not allow him to acknowledge its historical presence—and specifically to register how intertwined the discourses of critical theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism were by the early '80s. It's not that Eklund doesn't mention feminism, but rather that he repeatedly discounts it, either by situating it in the past—Sherman and Laurie Simmons, we are assured, "felt no need to identify themselves as feminist"—or reducing it to local politics, to Lawler's and Levine's dismay, for example, that because of the return of "macho" painting they had to "wait their turn in line for a gallery to grant them an exhibition." Or it is made nearly unspeakable: Eklund writes of Birnbaum's canonical works, "In both *Wonder Woman* and *Kiss the Girls*, the feminist message is so clear as to almost be secondary." It is as though the curator needs to rescue the artists from anything that might smack of a committed and theorized feminist position, in order that they can be true artists; and there is, he seems quite clear, an uncomfortable relationship between women artists and theory.

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