

In the early 1920s, Man Ray clipped a photograph of an eye onto a metronome and called the result *Object to be Destroyed*. A notation on a later drawing of the piece suggests that the eye be of a former lover, and that the piece be smashed when whoever sees it in motion can stand the steady beat no longer. As it clicks back and forth, this unblinking eye of a faded desire taunts the viewer with its mechanical certainty, its inevitability. The fathomed gaze of the viewer, seeking possession of some ineffable truth, is confronted with the mockery of a stale stare that will not be understood. In the late 1940s, some students, angered by this implacable rejection of their subjectivity, finally reached the limit of endurance and destroyed the piece while it was on display in a Paris museum. But they found they could only recouple its derisive laughter. For in ridding the world of the original work, they brought into being its progeny of replicas, as Man Ray authorized the creation of an edition of replacements.

This irrepressible cyclops, maniacally flicking off the passing of time, can stand as a metaphor for both an all-encompassing media culture (particularly that other one-eyed monster, the television), and the avant-garde response to that mass-produced nirvana. Each tries the other, at a remove, as each attempts to wrest control of the soul of western civilization. Each attempts to outstare the other, to outmaneuver it. But each constantly removes its attention, as if to vanquish its opponent by ignoring it, only to return ever more fascinated. Occasionally the game is refused: one thinks of artists like Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and later, Serra and Marking, kindred spirits to the French students who wanted to smash the infernal machine, kindred spirits condemned to repeat their act of heroism over and over as

the gaze of their oppressor simply shifts itself, replaces itself with a representative copy. Since the 1950s, succeeding generations of avant-gardists, taking note of the self-defeating posturing of the refusniks, have tried in one way or another to accommodate the ticking metronome in order to somehow beat it at its own game. The resulting rhythm of change within a simple structure of repetition has been the heartbeat of art ever since.

Looking at art since the 1950s, it becomes apparent that there have been several wave patterns, which, at the points of intersection or contact, cause a greater complexity to develop. The larger pattern unfolds as a change in focus from thinking about presentation to thinking about representation. We have seen how, faced with a dominant notion of art as a transformative activity, Paolozzi could not, at first, declare his collected images and tear sheets art. He and the others of the Independent Group could only incorporate Pop material

by expanding the idea of the art work to include the issues surrounding its presentation. The emphasis on exhibition design operated as a cover under which the non-artistic could be brought into contact with the real thing. In their different ways, Oldenburg and Warhol changed the terms of this argument, making the representation of mass media within an art context the central issue. Shortly thereafter, the epistemological researches of artists like Smithson and Boccione showed this concern to be relatively naive in understanding art's relationship to the other discourses of culture. Their inquiries paved the way for the work of the late 1970s and early 1980s which attempted to reconfigure the Pop project as a more abstract activity concerned with the workings of representation in all areas of the culture.

from: *Florida Dreams: The Rise & Fall of Pop*
 Clocktower & MIT Press 1988



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Shirtless*, 1975. Black and white photograph, 20 x 15 in. Courtesy the artist and Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Within this overall pattern a smaller one emerges, more predictable in its trajectory. Each significant move generates a small industry determined to return the argument to the production line, manufacturing aesthetic packages that can be more easily dispensed to waiting collectors. Thus, the Royal College graduates of the early 1980s gussied up the ideas of the Independent Group, while countless artists worked to make the Top Art of Warhol and the others more palatable to the public in the later part of the decade. More recently, we have seen a generation of artists reformulating the various strategies by which the artists of the early 1980s sought to address the commodification of discourse that results from a collapse of meaning within representation as a justification for the production of attractively meaningless commodities.

To many of us who arrived in New York around 1975, a similar situation seemed clearly in place. The stringent informality of Postminimalism had given way to a more academic and aestheticized practice that ultimately had to be understood as denying the achievements on which it was based. And this in turn allowed more room for all the varieties of deliberately dumb, pretty art to receive undue attention. Worse, there seemed little real connection between what was going on in the art world and what was going on elsewhere. Art was caught up in a narcissistic system, self-regarding, self-enclosed, and irredeemably boring.

While art was stagnating in New York, there were plenty of other things to look at and think about. The city itself was nearing bankruptcy, its physical structure rapidly deteriorating—one highway had collapsed; the bridges were declared in danger; the subways were more and more likely to break down. In some parts of town, buildings were being abandoned by their owners, while in others real estate speculation was rampant. The most arresting images were being presented by the propaganda industries—the mass media of television, movies, and advertising, with their devastating mixtures of news, nostalgia, and special effects. It was a darkly

ironic time, a midnight time had developed since the end of since Watergate, since the oil airwaves of our shared uncon the previous decade had been narcosis of old movies and re was a time in which a sense of a nostalgic phantasm.

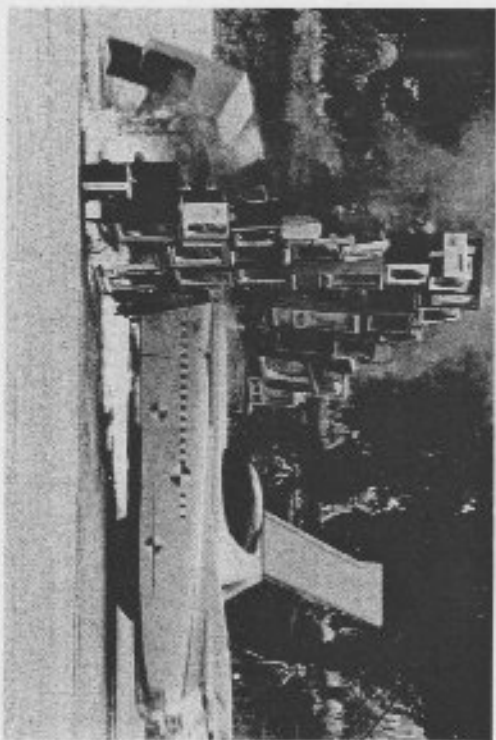
During this strange period of ing places to hang out were the bands like the Ramones or Fall its began to realize that fast, rock music could provide a su into the moribund idea of "pe like Rhys Chatham and Glenn continuing the traditions of s same time, enjoyed playing w our provided by the rock fan had grown up with John Lenn Davies as our idea of a living a Suddenly everybody was in a ;ory groupings confined to th these bands (most notably the real ambitions and went on t cess in the real rock scene. Th this activity tended to be fast studied carelessness. Attribute rock culture were appropriate deadpan irony. There was litt or for originality per se. Anyt reused as necessary, and cou seemed appropriate.

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romantic time, a mid-gilt time. A claustrophobic inertia had developed since the end of the Vietnam conflict, since Watergate, since the oil crisis, seeping through the airwaves of our shared unconscious. The rebellions of the previous decade had been quieted, replaced by the narciss of old movies and reruns on late night TV. It was a time in which a sense of history had mutated into a nostalgic phantasm.

During this strange period of limbo, the most interesting places to hang out were the bars and clubs where bands like the Ramones or Patti Smith performed. Artists began to realize that fast, psychotically repetitive rock music could provide a successful way to reinject life into the moribund idea of "performance art." Musicians like Rhys Chatham and Glenn Branca could claim to be continuing the traditions of serial music, but at the same time, enjoyed playing with the urgency and glamour provided by the rock format. Since so many of us had grown up with John Lennon, Mick Jagger, or Ray Davies as our idea of a living artist, it seemed natural. Suddenly everybody was in a band, mostly fairly transitory groupings confined to the art world. A few of these bands (most notably the Contortions) developed real ambitions and went on to compete with some success in the real rock scene. The music that came out of this activity tended to be fast and rough, betraying a studied carelessness. Attributes and images from the rock culture were appropriated and re-presented, with a deadpan irony. There was little regard for musical skill, or for originality per se. Anything could be lifted and reused as necessary, and could be done as badly as seemed appropriate.

In ways parallel to this club scene, a great many people became interested in cheap film production, using Super-8, the technology of home movies. The aesthetic here was as rough and ready as that of the music scene—production values were deliberately amateur, acting was for the most part desultory, story lines were left incomplete. The films were fast, providing a relatively cheap and accessible way to superimpose various meanings. The look was usually derived from film noir, as were the story lines and characterization, so there

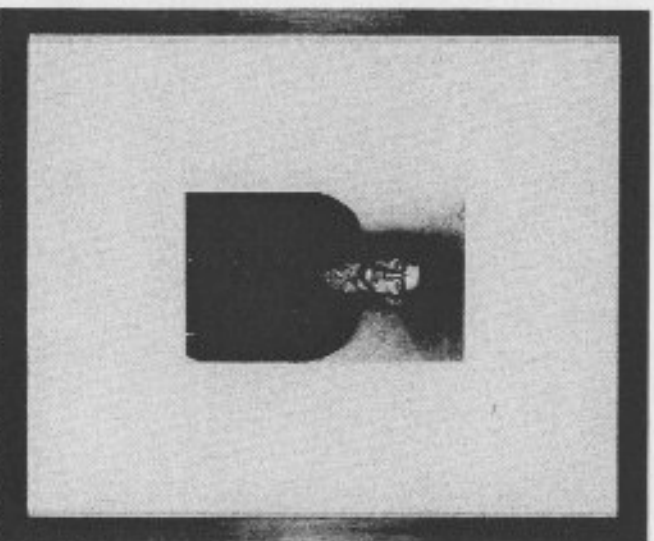


Art from *Lord of the Flies*, Schriener with Wenzel; *Madra Bay*, 1975. Courtesy Art Farm.

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were both the implicit recollection of the Cold War period, and a ready-made style suitable for representing the self-image of the downtown scene. Over this formula, filmmakers like Burt and Scot B and Eric Mitchell inscribed a relatively simplistic rhetoric of urban terrorism as a response to a fascist system of political control. A great deal of mileage was made from unconvincing sadomasochistic imagery, with William Burroughs inevitably dragged in as a legitimizing influence. This insistent political reading, more stylish than thoughtful, was then given an art dimension by the deliberate poverty of production—the inclusion of over-exposed film, jumpy editing, poor sound quality, all signifying the modesty and truth to materials of the filmmakers.

What this work had in common was an attitude of familiarity towards popular culture, a mixture of love and contempt for the omnipresent images of capitalist consumerism. No longer grounded in experiences of a specific place, but rather in that widespread no-place of television and rock that transcends the old virtues of history and nationality, this work seemed to see itself as universal in a way very different from the mythically inspired transnationalism of high Modernism. At the same time, it remained locked within the extreme localism of downtown Manhattan. Most of this activity remained essentially ephemeral, true to its sources in popular culture and the art world. Yet there were some artists around who were interested in working with the same range of information, but in a more permanent way. At that time, such work kept, of necessity, a low profile. Gradually connections were made, studios visited, but it remained an essentially private affair. Matt Mullican and David Salle both had shows early on at Artists Space, while the gallery was still in SoHo. But few people saw them, and fewer cared. It was not until Helene Winer and Douglas Crimp put together the Pictures show at Artists Space in 1977, introducing the work of Jack Goldstein, Sherrin Levine, and Robert Longo, among others, that the tendency received proper attention. Crimp wrote a substantial catalogue essay outlining some of the reasons this work should be considered, but there was little follow-up in the art press, and no interest from commercial galleries. In fact, it was not until



Sherrin Levine, *Smiling Father Alexander Medvedev*, 8, 1987. Etching and color photolith, 20 x 16 in. Courtesy Henry Bone Gallery, New York.



Matt Mullican, *Smiling Grogg*, 597, 1987. Etching, 16 x 16 in. Courtesy Henry Bone Gallery, New York.

Three years later that Brooke Alexander mounted *Mustrator & Allegory*, the first commercial venture with the work, and by that time Metro Pictures was about to open and Mary Boone was ready to show Mullican and Salle.

The material formally appropriated was available to anyone who cared to use it. The fact that the material had possibly been observed or unconsciously collected by persons other than myself in effect defined its desire and threat. It was this 'factor availability' that verified my fictional transformation and helped cool down the reference to an observable reality.
Richard Prince¹

At some point in 1977, Richard Prince started taking images from magazine advertising. Using a standard 35 millimeter camera as his only tool, he focused on what appeared to be significantly recurring motifs—watches, pens, cigarettes—and rephotographed them. The resulting pictures, freed of their usual frame of advertising copy, took on a totemic quality. Fragments of a lost discourse, they seemed as though they ought to mean a great deal but kept that meaning a mystery. The following year, Prince repeated the procedure, choosing first pictures of male, and later female models. What became articulated was a kind of comedic mime show, an elaborately stilted melodrama of pose. The firmy metric of the advertising image began to peel apart, and in the succeeding years, Prince continued to mine that collage, using a growing repertoire of more sophisticated intrusions and manipulations.

Richard Prince has always declared an interest in the stance chosen to take the measure of the world. His own pose has been that of the detached observer, a detective seeking clues somewhere in the late-night fantasy, in a world where the repeating images of commercial breaks take on the aspect of a reality check. As he sifts through the image bank—collecting, selecting, categorizing—he provides the equivalent of a voice-over with the matter-of-fact accounting of psychological disabilities that fills his written work (much of this also appropriated from other sources). This introspective



Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery.



Chin Inehood

¹Richard Prince, "Mustrator & Allegory," CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, June 1980, and *Real Life Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1980.



Source: Manhattan

interrogation of the means of representation yielded a sexualized reading surprisingly akin to that of the Surrealists. Just as they had wandered the streets of the city seeking a chance encounter with an erotidism that would redeem the banality of modern life, so Prince would let his fingers do the walking through the pages of glossy magazines, seeking the ineffable. The male gaze, which turns all it sees into fetishes of desire, is here turned on itself, evoking the claustrophobic closure of Wernick's voyeurism. Even in its somnambulist state, the Surrealist private eye is pursuing an investigation, here even that is slowed to a fictive reenactment in which what is sought is already known. Hypnotized by the illusion of its own power, this passive eye becomes increasingly introspective. An hallucinatory disengagement occurs, seeming to set the artist free of the everyday.

This delusion of freedom differs from other male fantasies of empowerment only in its passivity. Like its more active counterparts, this fantasy too is a movement towards closure, and the certainty of a final solution. And it must be said that the secret shame of the art world is its continuing, near-exclusive fascination with the expression of male desires and fears. Condoned by the modernist myth of originality, that fascination has survived intact in an era that is claimed to have outgrown the tradition of the new. The male artist's wish to create himself anew, through his own efforts, free of the prior constraints of the world of culture, has been conceded as a masturbatory fantasy since the early 1950s, when Rauschenberg allowed his paints to come all over the bed linen. And yet this same fantasy has served to fuel the recent marketing success of the much-vaunted "new spirit in painting." The work of Prince, and to a greater extent of Salle, has been implicated in this regressive movement, and has only been able to escape inclusion by steadfastly refusing interpretation. The work's ice-cold distance enables each to present misogynistic misogyny as a case to be studied, more or less as interesting as the other representational codes the work foregrounds.

The pervasive manner of cultural expression persists despite the work of a growing number of women artists

dedicated to breaking the stranglehold of this art world fascination. Exemplary in this regard have been Yvonne Rainer's restructuring of film narrative, exposing its standard conventions as mechanisms to lock in unthinking and unexamined sexism; Sherrie Levine's blunt appropriations of the work of emblematic male artists, denying the singularity of the discourse of originality; Jenny Holzer's anarchic listing of received deas, contradictions piled upon each other in a delirious recital of absurd authority; and Barbara Kruger's ag trop photographs, in which the rude laughter of the dispossessed rends the seamless fabric of a domineering ideology.

I have argued for a certain stasis in Prince's work, an hypnotic foreclosure. Sherrie Levine's early work can be understood to suggest a more active intervention in the mechanisms by which the media represent us to ourselves. For a show at The Kitchen in early 1978, she proposed making a presentation of three related images in three separate ways. Three pictures of an elegant young woman and child, in a high-resolution black and white reproduction, were taken from the pages of a glossy fashion magazine, each then cut to form the silhouette of one of the iconic presidents—Washington, Lincoln, Kennedy. In each case, a picture of a particular male fantasy, one that has resuscitated through art history since the Renaissance, is inscribed within an icon of male power as it is manifested in the modern state. To avoid turning these pictures into fetish objects, Levine intended to keep them ephemeral. A poster was to be made of the Washington, to be put up in the streets of SoHo, a poster announcing the Lincoln, and a slide presentation, in the gallery, of the Kennedy. Thus, the pervasiveness of a certain kind of representation would be emphasized, and its status as a projection, in the Freudian sense, made literal. The show went forward solely within the usual confines of the art world. The poster, which might have brought a larger segment of the public into a relation with the work, went unrealized.

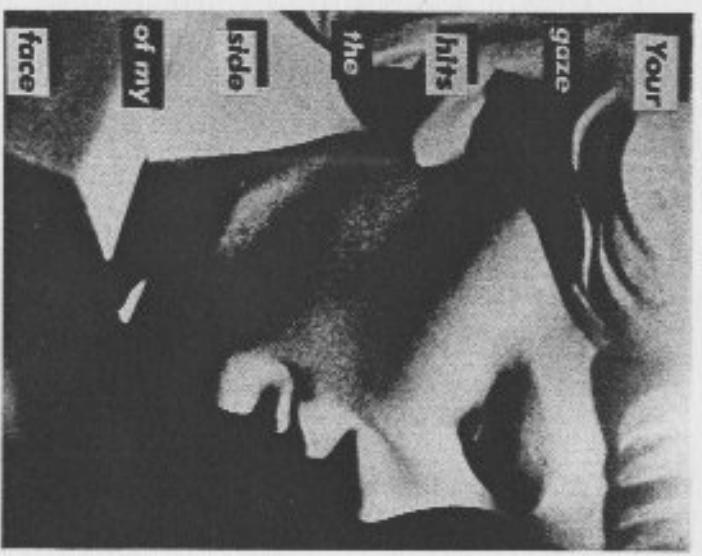
It was precisely to this wider public that Jenny Holzer addressed her work of the same period, carrying out a campaign of small scale bill posting throughout lower Manhattan. Of a size that spoke of an economy that

was both necessary and right, her handbills listed, in alphabetical order, a cacophony of statements that, taken together, defied all logic. The confidence of these Truisms, statements of personal belief and public knowledge, is shattered in the confusion of their ridiculous contradictions. Here the various tongues that the authorities speak are revealed as of a kind, as the reader, at first reeling from the range of oppositions presented as truth, begins to recognize that the statements clothe their meanings in rhetorical constructions. Coming across these anonymous warnings and imprecations on a broken-down wall in the East Village, or in a back alley in Tribeca, one recognizes a staginess, even a kind of hysteria. The voice of authority is made unbelievable. Holzer's reckless display of this absurd holowness in public discourse, later effected through the use of electronic signs, T-shirts, and plaques as well as the posters, recalls the situationist strategies of Daniel Buren or Lawrence Weiner, but within a larger context than that framed by the institutions of art.

Holzer's stream of language denies the possibility of a personal voice, for the personal is seen to be constructed from the public realm. All one can do, then, is manipulate the given in such a way that the personal might emerge—a position surprisingly close to that of Richard Prince.

Taking a somewhat different approach, Barbara Kruger attacked this problem of self-representation by developing a very distinct persona through the idiosyncratic voice of her writing. Advancing at high speed, this voice pushes hyperbole to the limit, as it displays a position in relationship to the fantastic world of television and the movies. It is a voice by turns sympathetic, amused, and outraged. Its characteristics are already in place in an early piece written in 1979:

The audience is yelling and clapping, arousing an unreferencing wall of sound. Lights flash. Johnny is screaming the names of the contestants. . . . The viewing audience focuses on the bodies of the lucky ones. The outfits, the bouncing breasts, the girls. People that shouldn't be caught dead in a pair of slacks. They



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled* (Your gaze lifts the side of my face), 1981. Photograph, 55 x 41 in. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

assault the stage like a brigade of had an acronym for a week. And they are Happy. They are Truismed. They is Right.
Barbara Kruger?

This voice, and the personal artifice of all Kruger's work, the descriptor of attention from and back, the sense of detail as a the referencing of present insults turn appearances in popular culture, these provide the structure upon everything, from her media culture large contexts. These last are and, like Holzer's Truisms, are defunction as art objects, billboard book covers.

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assault the stage like a brigade of squirrels who haven't had an acorn for a week. And they are Smiling. They are Happy. They are Frowled. They are on The Price Is Right.
Barbara Kruger

Her voice, and the persona it articulates, is the generator of all Kruger's work. The descriptive aphorism—the hysterical shifting of attention from subject to object, and back, the sense of detail as an index of the absurd, the referencing of present insults to a history of their return appearances in popular culture since the 1940s—these provide the structure upon which she builds everything, from her media column in *Artforum* to her large phototexts. These last are her primary vehicle, and, like Hozer's *Truisms*, are designed so that they can function as art objects, book covers, T-shirts, even male-rock covers.

Typically, Kruger isolates and enlarges details of pictures appropriated in one way or another from mass media sources. Many of the images are rather ordinary, somewhat domestic, most are in black and white, often quite grainy. That is to say, they tend to be sentimental, filled with the nostalgic longing of most representations of male desire. Bursting across their surface in a controlled riot of typography, Kruger's voice shatters the complicity of these images which are of women, but not primarily for women. This voice sometimes seeks so dearly with the viewer, sometimes levies accusations. In either case, the viewer is confounded—just who is the ventriloquist behind these dumb pictures? The critical disruption the works perform takes place in that transaction between the piece and its audience. The work operates as a species of performance.

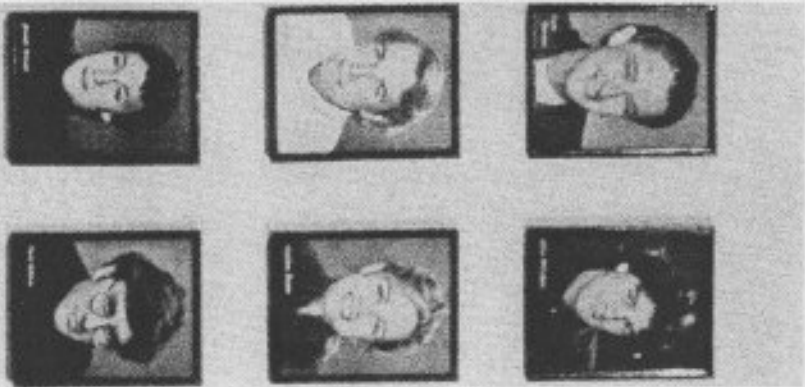
This recognition that the workings of representation in the cultural arena is a matter of performance can be seen as an animating factor in Cindy Sherman's work also. As early as 1977, she was dressing up, mostly in 1950s period drag, to go to work as a gallery assistant. These temporary displacements had a campy charm, but it was not until Sherman began to record them photographically, within an entire *mise en scène*, that



Barbara Kruger, *Smiled After I hear the word culture, take out my checkbook*, 1985. Photogram, 136 x 90 in. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



1981, 1981. Photo
Work



the work began to take off. The possibility of imitating a performance involving the adoption of another's identity and then stilling the game, freezing it within the frame of the camera, enabled a far more complex interaction to occur. For now the tables could be turned, the artist's dreamlike search for a self-image reconfigured as a public act that is the subject of a singular gaze, the remote controlled camera standing in for the viewer. Thus, a private event is seen unfolding at the command of a stranger, the creation of a self demonstrated as a matter of convention. No wonder the later work turned nightmarish, as the perky secretaries and runaways were replaced by disfigured monsters and work.

Since 1978, Cindy Sherman has been engaged in a discursive examination of the public image of women as found in B-movies, soap operas, and the melodramas of fashion advertising, which is to say in the image constellation many women feel compelled to accept as oracular. Sherman, using herself as model, subjects herself to the rigors of the occluding of others in an attempt to work through to a position from which she might begin to picture herself for herself. Before the ever-vigilant eye of the camera, which unblinkingly records every hopeless mannerism, every mediated, compromised attempt at self-realization, she crosses up and acts out the roles assigned to protogenetic young women: Secretaries and tramps, vamps and nergives, the abused and abandoned, the seductive and sexy, the athletically asexual, the little girl lost, the haughty fashion queen—such are the images Sherman tries on for size. Lights and filters are manipulated to provide the requisite contextual clues: the chiaroscuro of film noir and its many progeny, the back lighting of the fashion shoot, the vase-lined filter of soft porn.

The success of these post-Pop appropriators lies in the complexity of the response they elicit. Staring at these works, we find them staring back at us. We recognize ourselves in the mirror of reproduction they hold before us, and we do not know if we should be flattered or offended. Like Man Ray's infernal object, they taunt us with the knowledge that our response is likely to be inadequate. Does Prince celebrate the triumph of a depro-

itized aestheticism, or insult us for succumbing to the blandishments of the merey good-looking? Does Sherman seduce us with her pathetically pretty girls, or force us to reconsider the ways in which we view women? Does Kruger's aggressive address return a radical politics to the cultural arena, or merely provide a radical poetic backdrop to business as usual? How do we resolve the puzzle of Warholian mimicry, the perfected realization of an amateur simulacrum of the hyperreal? No matter where we look, it is becoming increasingly difficult to recognize an "original" from a copy, or from a copy of a copy. Mimicry has replaced innovation as a creative value. We recycle everything. This is now a given; we understand the value of reuse. We no longer think we must discard what we have in order to gain access to that shimmering mirage, the new.

In May 1982, Alan Belcher and Peter Nagy opened a small gallery in New York's East Village. Dissatisfied with a moribund alternative system that seemed more interested in securing a stabilized grant income by presenting the familiar rather than taking risks, Belcher and Nagy were among the first artists of this period to extend the logic of artists' magazines, and open their own gallery. While a self-consciousness that seems almost periodic in retrospect, they called their gallery Nature Morte. In this deadly time of forgetting, when excellence is valued less than appearances, when the real gives way to the reproduction, when "natural" refers to a flavor or a fashion look, the double entendre in the idea of a nature morte takes on a melancholy cast. Perhaps this is not so new, for since the Renaissance reached Northern Europe, painters have used common objects of everyday life to construct elaborate moral tales. As we walk through our museums, ornate cups and simple beakers, exotic fruits and ordinary vegetables, fish, fowl, and sides of meat pile up in virtuoso displays of abundance and fecundity tinged with the infelicitable sadness of death.

There were soon other signals of the emergence of a younger group of artists concerned in some way with issues similar to those that moved the group loosely associated with Metro Pictures that included Sherman



Cydney Sherman, *Untitled*, 1985. Color print. In 729 x 494 in. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

These younger artists were drawn to the more intimate transaction that takes place at home, in front of the television. As a result, they sought to entrap meaning in the ceaseless flow of everyday products and the peccaging that sells them rather than in the more spectacular events of the public realm. In this sense their work tends to engage in the rhetoric of still life, the simultaneous celebration of—and warning against—the delights of conspicuous consumption. The works tend towards intimacy, a quietude beyond the reach of public control. There is often a quality of deliberate tentativeness, even temporariness, about these works.

A show at White Columns during the last months of Josh Baer's directorship was presented by *REAL LIFE Magazine* and was intended to introduce a number of artists whose work seemed to take something of a side-long glance at what often is ignored as peripheral information, a category that shifts with changing fashions and interests. Work by seven artists was presented, and included Jennifer Bolander's lightlike renderings, photostats of drawings of photographs, odd corners and details of important-looking interiors; Ken Lum's amusing proposals for remaking minimal sculptures in contemporary home furnishings—an open cube using four sofas and end tables, a sofa partially buried in throw cushions; David Robbins' arcane meditation on the finer details of the Hammerer Schlemmer catalogue; Michael Ross' tiny fluorescent renderings of luxury homes for sale.

Characteristically, this work can be seen to operate through the strategy of the glance. The objects under examination are not analyzed or stared at. Often they are not even fully seen. They are glimpsed, caught momentarily before the channel is switched again. The subject of the work is not what is depicted, but the speed with which that image can be picked up and processed. If there is a stilled quality to the images of the life that surrounds and supports this work, there is nevertheless a transient humor flickering through the pictures, a quick laughter that is mostly bitter and disappearing, but also contains real pleasure. Peter Nagy brings the ethereal quality of the media image that



Cydney Sherman, *Untitled*, 1982. Color photograph, 20 x 24 in. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

seemingly transparent mirage that glances through the television screen, flits across the movie, flies so lightly on the pages of the magazines, before disappearing into the depths of our unconscious. Nagy sorts up relevant images that have a threateningly long half-life. His pictures have no substance, they are only Xerox. They are ideas barely made tangible, but with enough visibility to be subject to endless reproduction. The paradox is that Nagy convinces us of the credibility of these mongrel signs, patched together from fragments of the pre-existing, precisely because they have no body. They are not real, so we can believe in them. And when we do invest our faith in them, we find that the joke is on us.

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David Robbins is involved in a prolonged investigation of a certain kind of power relation. This investigation unfolds in his writings as well as in his visual pieces and concerns the fascination media stars exert over their subjects. Robbins wants to understand that fascination and appropriate it for us all, to allow *everyman* (to become) *his own Elvis*. But he also knows that this is treacherous ground, an area in which it would be all too easy to slip into the bathos of self-aggrandizement. To prevent that possibility, Robbins deliberately disables the pretensions of the work, renders it in a certain way hopeless. For example, *The David Robbins Show*, an exhibition at Nature Morté, presented an array of self-portraits that were so variously pathetic that their irony could not be missed. Or again in Talenz, his reprise of Man Ray's group portraits of artists, Robbins had a studio photographer of the "stars" make idealized headshots of eighteen of his peers, ensuring that the sheer quantity of generic good-looking and straight-dealing packaged into the presentation would make it clear the work approaches the idea of artistic fame in a rather complex way. Robbins pictures celebrity rather than celebrities. In this sense, his work is about a fetishism, not of the object, but of the grid of repetitions that entraps both object and subject. As we know from reading *People* magazine or watching *Entertainment Tonight* on television, the objects of our fascination themselves are not important. They remain completely interchangeable. What is important is the mechanism of



Elvis Presley.

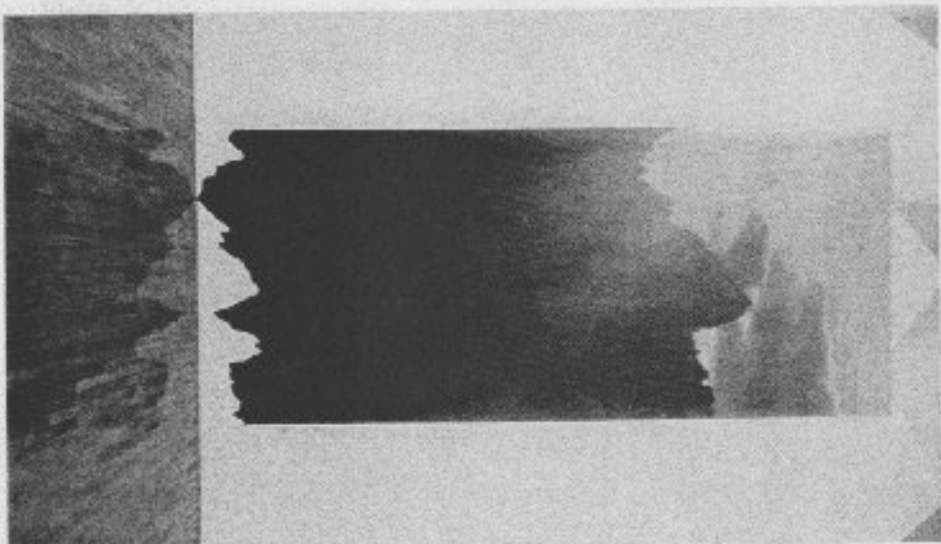


Advertising for Chanel. Courtesy Thomas Lawson.

fame, Robbins' work makes clear the passion for a code that underwrites the fetishistic relationship.

Jennifer Bolander's projects to understand the way we look at photographs, and the way they look at us—that mutually exclusive gaze that transcribes our dealings with the modern world. In her earlier work, she pursued a taxonomic approach, collecting vast quantities of pictures, to be stared at, closely, in the expectation that some mysterious essence might materialize. The newer work abandons this wide-eyed stare in favor of a shifting point of view that can accommodate different kinds of details, and the shifting relationships between them. Previously, the work depended on an intense interiority. It now operates in a manner more accessible to external observation while maintaining a sense of the private in the public arena, an example being the improbably large fragment of a discarded protonuclear Bolander encountered on a late-night street. She repossessed it, bringing this dilapidated shard of surfer spectacular to rest in the gallery, removed from its original audience. The piece, like the rest of Bolander's work, conducts a hermetic discourse on perceptual difference and similarity, setting up contrasts of large and small, near and far, image and object, that cannot be resolved with certainty. The work holds an ambiguous position, and placing the viewer in an ambiguous position, it keeps its secrets.

This second generation of "pictures" artists can be understood to be involved with an updated version of the still life. These artists reprocess and re-present images that define our being in the world, but that have become almost invisible through overuse. These are images that have become a currency of a sort, tokens in a recurring exchange of received ideas. The point of this work, however, is not simply to picture these tokens, but to investigate the endless movement between them. An example of this might be Jeff Koorn's decision to cast a "collectible", say a ceramic locomotive designed to contain a bottle of whiskey, in stainless steel, ensuring that the whiskey is properly re-laced and re-sealed. With a certain intoxicating logic, the relatively inexpensive, and thoroughly tacky object is recast as a very modern item of cultural worth. In the process, the



Jennifer Bolander, *Notive Mix*, 1987, Surferies, 80 x 72 in. Courtesy
Museum Modern Gallery, New York.

spirit of the original, mere alcohol, is alchemically transformed into the Spirit of Art. Such work, with its emphasis on mechanical processes, foregrounds its concerns with repetition and reproduction. Like all those involved with still life, artists like Koons are concerned with the workings of fetishism—not a fetishism of things, but rather one of signs. They would investigate what Baudrillard has called “a passion for the code which controls objects and subjects, subordinates both to itself, [and] delivers them up to abstract manipulation.”¹²

All products “have a limited shelf life. During that span they must be seen at their best and must be properly displayed or they will not achieve their purpose, which is to be consumed. If the packaging is wrong, or the display inadequate, the shelf life quickly reduces to zero. The product vanishes into a nether world of failed dreams and crushed hopes, of Deloyreans and Tricketts and platform shoes. Haim Sternbach is a connoisseur of the deficient, of the product that tries too hard to overcome its predetermined limitations. And with the love of the connoisseur, he has no wish to photograph his trophies, or to paint, or otherwise re-create them. He simply wants to represent them, give them another chance. So he builds them special shelves, sympathetic shelves, on which their life can be prolonged infinitely through the healing graces of taste and composition.

The trajectory of the argument, presented by this progression of artists has been a pessimistic one. Despite the undoubted vigor of the work, it can make no transformative claims. The larger culture remains unmoved. This, no doubt, reflects the feelings of impotence engendered in the opposition during the triumphant militancy of the Reagan years. Even Kruger's loud-mouthed dissent has displayed a characteristic caution—her targets remain broad enough to attract a broad range of support. But now, with Reagan's spell broken, his charisma cracked, it is time to take on the fanaticism of the far right in a more direct way. It is time to break the hypnotic fascination of that unblinking stare with its death rattle bear, time to abandon the attempt to defeat it at its own game. It is time to name

¹²Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981).



Mark Dion, anti-intervention poster installation detail from *Nis & Aids for the Federal Emergency Management Agency*, September 27–30, 1988. Courtesy the artist.

SHORTS
ARE
WRONG

Jessica Darwood, *Amey Swagart*, 1986, ink and color paper, 24 x 38 1/2 in. Courtesy the artist.

names, point fingers, time to make accusations.

170 Jessica Diamond has been doing this for some years now, remarking, in her brittle haikus, on the hopeless optimism and bad faith that ooze from the reassuring voices and faces on television. Diamond is passionately disturbed by the Pop foolishness of the men and women who offer public commentaries on our lives—the self-satisfied newscasters and snarky talk show hosts, as well as the more “creative” types like pretentious rock stars and neo-expressionist painters. But she knows

171 the only way for an artist in her position to deal with that anger is with a distanced wit, a put-down so eerie as to seem almost disembodied. Indeed, her carefully worked collage drawings have that lightness of touch characteristic of the best jokes, a flash of wit that stings with an unexpected sharpness.

Diamond's process is one of distillation, reducing the babble of the airwaves to the succinct phrase that underscores a particular kind of threat or absurdity—*Buy a Congo or Die*, *Buy a House with 200 Credit Cards*. She homes in on the mantras and magic lists of pop culture's many-faceted religion, taking particular delight in the weird imprecations that do not quite add up. The fastidiously detailed moral-code-as-dress-code of the showman preacher—Jimmy Swaggart's pronouncement that “Shorts are wrong”—is as likely to catch her eye as a newscaster's callow follow-up, bristly moving along from disaster to some good news for sports fans. It is a clarity of observation that makes the work sing: two embryos of the neo-expressionist vogue, Lupertz and Immanuel, caught with their shirts off, jewelry on, are identified as the “collipop guild.” Two television detectives with loaded names are “five dicks”; a small, delicately drawn map of the world, asks the question, “Is that all there is?” The sharpness is undeniable, but if that were all there were, the sting would soon fade. What gives this very ephemeral work its weight, what gives it its patos, is an undercurrent of sorrow, a recognition of sympathy.

As part of a 1986 exhibition at Artists Space that was designed as a politicized reconsideration of fairy tales,

Mark Dion built an hallucinatory scene to the Smurf, one of the first products to be conceived as simultaneously toy and television cartoon show. Everything in a stage set of a child's bedroom—wallpaper, sheets, dishes, ware, toys, and games—was a Smurf, or was covered with them. Against one wall of this giddy nightmare of commodity fetishism, a television played tapes of the Smurf show; only the soundtrack had been replaced with a discussion of the Smurf phenomenon in terms of the economics of its distribution and the ideological function of the show as a carrier of entrenched ideas of power, sexuality, and morality. This discussion was conducted in the squeaky voices typical of Smurf characters. In this and similar pieces, Dion develops his case through a strategic repositioning of the formal tropes of radical art, from Judd and Burien to Harcece and Atkinson, using these tropes as presentational devices. A thoroughly researched critique of a given subject, be it Coca-Cola or Superman, is delivered with a kind of disarray and humour that can also be understood to carry a sly rebuke to the often contentless radicalism of left-wing posturing in the art world.

The story so far has been about a series of oppositions, of stances taken and refuted, and taken again. The movement of the debate has apparently swung back and forth across the disputed terrain, that realm of fascination watched over by the glaring eye of the mass media, particularly as manifested in television. But another possibility has emerged in the recounting, one that suggests the possibility of an advance after all. That possibility is the discovery of talk as an antidote to the unrelenting tyranny of the all-seeing. Most of the work discussed here, born of a concern with the means of representation, has been formed in some relation to language. The paradox, that a linguistic excess is the motor generating much of so-called “pictures” art, is a delight to consider. It may not be so completely unexpected, since the history of Surrealism is the history of a similar understanding. Perhaps it was only the genius of high Modernism who sought a purifying beauty in the silence of painting. The rest of us have always known that every picture tells a story. Haven't we?