

THE EXHIBITIONIST



ASSESSMENTS



**THE
PICTURES
GENERATION**

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1974–1984

PICTURES DEGENERATION

Eva Díaz

Thirty-three years have passed since Douglas Crimp curated *Pictures* at Artists Space in New York. The exhibition contained work by just five artists: Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. In 1979, two years later, Crimp published a revised version of his catalogue essay in the journal *October*, expanding it to incorporate discussion of Louise Lawler and Cindy Sherman.¹ In 2001 Artists Space re-hung the exhibition and included later works by the five original participants as well as new work by four contemporary artists, triggering ripples of critical responses that joined a wave of reevaluations of the art of that earlier period.² And last year, again drawing on the renown, if not notoriety, of the original show, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's photography curator Douglas Eklund presented *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984*, a large-scale exhibition of more than 250 works by 30 artists. From Crimp's modestly scaled but ambitious show, then, emerges a fascinating *mise en abyme* around how and why *Pictures* can help historicize the art of the 1970s and 1980s.

This mirror play of references suits Crimp's claims for the works he included. *Pictures* argued that its artists staged representation in unresolved circuits of identification and desire, thereby framing subjectivity and our experience of the world as increasingly mediated by images we can never truly possess. Crimp went further in his *October* follow-up, arguing that the appropriation of mass-cultural images—a strategy familiar from Pop and earlier—had en-

tered a crucial new phase in the group he assembled. *Pictures* works challenged the viewer with an uncomfortable ambivalence: "A narrative ambience stated but not fulfilled" enacting a "spiral of fragmentation, excerptation, quotation." The works imparted a sense of anticipation tinged with anxiety; they created a "desire for signification that is known to be absent."³

In a now-familiar formulation, Crimp argued that the works themselves operated as a kind of recursive *mise en abyme*—that they were pictures of pictures: "Those processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging that constitute the strategies of the work I have been discussing necessitate uncovering strata of representation. Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification: Underneath each picture there is always another picture."⁴ At this early moment of the reception of French Marxist and Post-structural theory in the United States, Crimp was synthesizing Guy Debord's sense of the "society of the spectacle" as a world of images unmoored from history and alienated from their producers, what Jean Baudrillard would soon theorize, and hyperbolize, as the simulacral experience of a copy without an original.⁵

In expanding Crimp's argument to a wider group of artists, the Met exhibition seemed to adopt the apparent pluralism of what Crimp and others were beginning to call postmodernism. Crimp himself was wary of extending such arguments too far; for him the temporal "stratigraphic activity" of *Pictures* artworks related specifically to technologies of mechanical reproduction.⁶ It is important to keep in mind that Crimp's original show concentrated on appropriation strategies in photography and, to a lesser extent, film. The Met show largely maintained this emphasis, understanding as Crimp did that the play between simulation and originality was

a key gambit of much of the work on display.

By broadening the argument to 30 artists, the Met showcase did result in a certain loss of focus. It did an excellent job of historicizing the importance of Cal Arts figures such as John Baldessari, but the move to incorporate a broader range of West Coast practices, including early work by Barbara Bloom, Paul McMahon, Matt Mullican, David Salle, and James Welling as well as New York-based performance work by Dara Birnbaum and Michael Smith, at times overextended the Crimp paradigm, identifying appropriation as any kind of reference to pop culture or advertising, or as any sort of adoption or staging of identity on the part of an artist. Ultimately, the capable Met show held this expansion in productive tension, but it does indicate a tendency toward more fanciful forms of revisionism that has crept into other recent curatorial endeavors.

That is, if the appropriation strategies exemplified in photographic practices of the late 1970s came to define the art of the period, what happened to everything else? Other projects of the 1970s and 1980s—Neo-Geo, Neo-Expressionism, "Bad Painting"—were never critically popular, nor have they been critically redeemed in the years since. If the Met's *The Pictures Generation* extended the parameters of Crimp's original selection to include a wider range of period practices, at what point does this breadth become untenable, a loose claim that *all* the art of the 1970s and 1980s applied appropriation strategies?

To answer that question, consider a show up in spring 2010 in New York at Haunch of Venison Gallery, *Your History Is Not Our History*. Curated by two mega-successful figurative painters, David Salle and Richard Phillips, it juxtaposes works by other megaprominent male figurative painters of the 1970s and 1980s (Jean-Michel

Basquiat, Francesco Clemente, Carroll Dunham, Eric Fischl, Julian Schnabel, and Terry Winters) with contemporaneous photography and text works by female artists (Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Laurie Simmons). This awkward marriage explores, according to Salle and Phillips, the works' shared concern with "the pictorial," whose "real subject is loneliness." These and other claims are strange: How is Holzer's litany of fanatical cultural stereotypes in the aphoristic *Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82) a pictorial project? Why reduce Lawler's photos of artworks seen in the quotidian context of collectors' homes to a mere figuration of loneliness? It is also worth considering just who the "you" of the show's title interpellates. Salle and Phillips say they are laying to rest "one of the most entrenched critical conceits of the last 30 years: that the 1980s are cleaved between painting, which was seen as regressive and market-driven, and the so-called 'critique' strategies, which took the form of photography and/or text."

So "you"—the bad subjects here—are materialist and feminist critics (such as Crimp) who see in these photo- and text-based works a broader criticism of the proprieties of looking, making, and owning inherent in traditional notions of beauty, artistic subjectivity, and, yes, painting. There is little doubt that at the time these two strains of art making coexisted side by side, sometimes under the label of appropriation. And it may be the case that this kind of critique was, or is, still possible through painting. Yet Salle and Phillips cannot sidestep the persuasive histories of the art of that time simply through an act of curatorial wish fulfillment. Nor does the cynicism of trying to spin Feminism's "your history is not our history" as a persecution of painting inject any new evidence that would counter the view of 1980s Expressionism as a commer-

cially driven masculine enterprise. It seems like they're trying to have that ever-elusive treat: the cake of market success eaten with the icing of critical approval.

That poses the questions: Has *The Pictures Generation* spawned a *Pictures* degeneration? Can the project of *Pictures* be revisited without misunderstanding, or, worse yet, casually misrepresenting its argument? The original exhibition, a touchstone of its period, surely deserves continuing reconsiderations. But we must weigh the interests and desires motivating such reevaluations, lest they traffic in ungrounded, anything-goes revisionism. That is precisely the sort of PoMo pastiche Crimp feared.

Notes

1. See Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (spring 1979): 75–88. The *October* essay was subsequently anthologized in Brian Wallis's influential volume *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Boston: David R. Godine, 1984). Crimp would go on to write about Richard Prince, Jenny Holzer, and Laurie Simmons, three artists who were associated with late-1970s and early-1980s appropriation practices and were included in *The Pictures Generation* at the Met.

2. See for example the October 2001 *Artforum*, which contained responses to the Artists Space re-hang by Scott Rothkopf and David Rimanelli. See also Howard Singerman's challenge to the *Artforum* series in "The Myth of Criticism in the 1980s," *X-TRA* 8, no. 1 (fall 2005).

3. Crimp, "Pictures," 83.

4. *Ibid.*, 87.

5. The popularization of Baudrillard's "simulacral" in the field of art writing, and his disproportionate influence in the art world, sorely requires more research. In particular, Crimp differs from Baudrillard in that he does not lament the lost original, but rather emphasizes "structures of signification" that open up to questions of power in production, reproduction, enunciation, and appropriation (eventually in a more explicitly Foucauldian way in *On the Museum's Ruins*). The later popularity of Baudrillard's notion of the triumph of the simulacral may in fact obscure other possible implications of Crimp's "underneath each picture there

is always another picture" as it leads to questions of power. In particular, Crimp underscores the politics of framing and quotation in the work of Louise Lawler, an artist he seemed to find most relevant as he continued to develop that argument.

6. See Crimp, "Pictures," 87. Interestingly, this is a position from which Crimp began to withdraw by the early 1990s as he moved toward practices that were directly engaged in the social effects of representation. In the introduction to his 1993 collection of essays *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press), Crimp explained that the order of the hierarchy of the two forms of appropriation he had argued for in the early 1980s—a more traditional appropriation of style (argued in Mapplethorpe's mere adoption of Modernism's codes of aesthetic mastery) superseded by the postmodern appropriation of material (embodied in Levine's rephotographing of Edward Weston "original" nudes in the Greek style)—had in actuality become inverted by the politics of AIDS activism in the late 1980s. The homophobic responses to Mapplethorpe's work in and about gay subcultures indicated "that Mapplethorpe's work interrupts tradition in a way that Levine's does not" (p. 7). In an important way, Crimp was arguing that the interpretation of works changes over time.

DOWNTOWN GOES UPTOWN: PICTURES AT THE MET

Robert Storr

There is no denying the importance of Douglas Crimp's 1977 *Pictures* exhibition at Artists Space in New York. A small but pivotal landmark in the history of late-20th-century vanguard art—I will leave it to others to quibble over the absence of the prefix "neo" when applying the label "vanguard" to works or tendencies of that period—the show was Crimp's prescient and persuasive bid to define the turning point at which "modernism" morphed into "post-modernism" and to frame the circumstances prompting that metamorphosis.