

**Body Language: The Presence and Absence  
of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in **Art/Art History** from  
The College of William and Mary

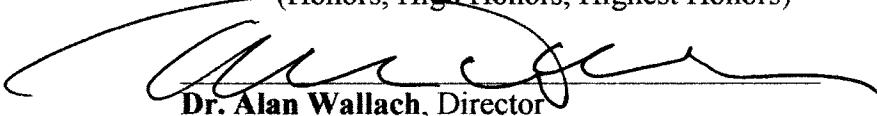
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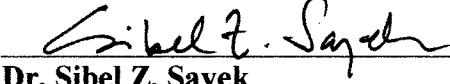
Joan Elizabeth Bowlen and Peter Montgomery Zimmerman

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**Dr. Alan Wallach, Director**

  
**Dr. Sibel Z. Sayek**

  
**Dr. Christy L. Burns**

  
**Professor Victoria H. Scott**

Williamsburg, VA  
May 5, 2008

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## FOREWORD

Professor Charles Palermo, during the final weeks of his Fall 2007 “History of Photography” survey, presented selections from Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine’s work of the late 1970s as examples of postmodern aesthetics. These few *Untitled Film Stills* and *After Walker Evans* photographs struck a chord for both of us, opening up completely radical and new ways of thinking about art and art history.

In the following spring, we further investigated the role of the author in relation to postmodern theory and methodology within and beyond the classroom. We realized we needed to reevaluate our own conceptions of what makes art worthwhile and resonant, continually returning to Sherman and Levine’s work as a crucial starting point. Our combined fascination with their oeuvres inspired us to propose a joint honors thesis project, with the support of Professor Alan Wallach, through which we could develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of their artistic operations.

We spent this past summer apart-- Joan in Harrisonburg, VA and Peter in New York City-- but devised a schedule for readings that we then later discussed via email, phone and snail mail. Upon returning to Williamsburg in August, we set up a blog through the Charles Center. This online space gave us the ability to reach a wider audience (mainly in the form of our attentive and doting relatives), flex our writing skills while also creating the impetus to post often. We produced over 150 pages of text, ranging from reading responses and thematic surveys to intellectual essays and photographic analyses. This forum helped us spread our articles to interested parties, and also supplied us a venue in which to become familiar with each other’s writing style.

During this past fall semester, we had the amazing opportunity to visit Metro Pictures Gallery in New York City for Cindy Sherman's *Cosmopolitans* exhibition opening on November 15, 2008. Being face-to-face with her brand new series of photographs, taking in the scale, print quality and layout of the show was awe-inspiring and, quite frankly life changing. Due to our sheer determination and slight irreverence, we maneuvered our way through a giant throng of art world regulars to get the chance to meet Cindy Sherman in person.

Near the end of the semester, we both realized that the project lacked a certain breadth. We were striving to make connections between Levine and Sherman that were not necessarily viable or justified. It was clear we needed to diversify our approach, and thus we decided to include Barbara Kruger, thereby eliminating the dichotomous relationship we had built between the other two artists. Kruger's work motivated us to renegotiate our own understandings of feminism as it relates to art, and without her the paper would have failed in its intent to provide our particular feminist methodology.

Over the course of the past year, we conducted a number of interviews with many of the writers we read for this project. The kind email responses from authors such as Laura Mulvey, Douglas Crimp, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Amelia Jones, Catherine Morris and Johanna Burton really personalized their art historical contributions for us. Howard Singerman, Phyllis Rosenzweig, Gail Stavitsky and Joost van Oss generously offered us their time to engage in conversation about our project and the artists, either over the phone or in person. We are greatly indebted to all of them for their magnanimity, grace and assistance.

## INTRODUCTION

It is easy to make generalizations about artists and their work when historians and critics place them within categories such as impressionist, modern or postmodern-- labels that attempt to provide a coherent sense of historical continuity between movements and shifts in the art world. However, these classifications often obscure the artist's intention and lessen the resonance of an individual work of art. They favor homogenous explanations, thereby restricting alternative layers of meaning from gaining recognition.

We take issue with this essentializing process toward art-making practices and operations, opting instead for an approach that renegotiates the expectations and methods of the Modernist impulse. Post second-wave feminism in art provides a compelling framework that is sustainable and constructs a self-sufficient vocabulary in which divergent voices are meaningful, relevant and necessary. Embracing dissension and variance allows a multitude of interpretations about art without reducing one another.

In order to suitably analyze the work of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger, we wish to engage this type of discourse. The aim of our project, however, is not to promote these women artists as the *ne plus ultra* of feminism. Rather, we attempt to investigate their work on its own terms. This does not negate a feminist perspective within their intentions and practices, but instead combats any effort to wholly justify the artist's motivation as solely feminist.

We begin in chapter one with an examination of these three artists in 1981. We believe this year marks the point at which Sherman, Levine and Kruger most blatantly and unabashedly confront the art market and processes of high-art canonization. Rather than conform to a similar critique though, they provide a wide range of attacks, thereby

acosting the cultural milieu with different forms of social commentary.

Chapter two focuses on specific series in Cindy Sherman's photographic career that largely go unnoticed. By chronologically advancing through the past thirty-five years, we delineate the ways in which Sherman readily challenges culturally-defined roles, especially in relation to gender. She is not afraid of appearing vulnerable through implicating herself in the eccentricities of her characters, nor does she restrict her pictures to adhere exclusively to a feminist vernacular. Her constant manipulation of stereotype and sexual politics keeps Sherman relevant through her entire career, even though she mostly uses herself as the photograph's only human referent.

In order to evaluate the role of the author in appropriation art, in chapter three we provide historical context for Sherrie Levine's mixed media explorations of the 1980s and 1990s. We dissect her recasting of Gerrit Rietveld originals (a project including artist Joost van Oss) to reassess her position towards her artistic influences. Instead of presenting Levine's work of the late 1990s as resentful and hostile, we propose that she oscillates between levels of critique and homage, thereby establishing a diachronic collaboration with the male Modernist masters whose work she engages.

Lastly, in chapter four we explore Barbara Kruger's employment of installation techniques to manipulate, deflate and reshape cultural spaces. We highlight her 1991 exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery, in which Kruger activates the white-cube structure by covering all of its surfaces in photomontage and blocks of text upon bright-red backgrounds. Her visual assault destabilizes the viewers' remove, thrusting them into direct ideological confrontations. Kruger aggressively questions unspoken assumptions in cultural codings, protesting against dominating forces of oppression.

## Chapter One:

### 1981

*“I would rather say that I work with pictures and words because they have the ability to determine who we are, what we want to be, and what we become.”*

--Barbara Kruger [1987]<sup>1</sup>

*“I wanted to make the viewers embarrassed or disappointed in themselves for having certain expectations upon realizing that they had invaded a poignant or critically personal moment in this character’s life. That was my intention.”*

--Cindy Sherman [1987]<sup>2</sup>

*“Here's a funny story. When I moved to Los Angeles I moved into a beautiful Sixties' Inter-national Style house in the Palisades overlooking the water. My landlords, who were sunday painters, were really excited. They gave me the house because I was an artist. The first thing I moved in were my Bill Leavitt paintings and they got so depressed. They said, "Is that your work?" And I said, No, they are by a friend of mine." And then I pointed to the photographs after Walker Evans, and I said, "That's my work." And they said, "Oh, those are beautiful."*

-- Sherrie Levine [1993]<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Jeanne Siegel, “Barbara Kruger (Interview)” in Jeanne Siegel, ed., *Art Talk: The Early 80s* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1988), 303.

<sup>2</sup> In Jeanne Siegel, “Cindy Sherman (Interview)” in Jeanne Siegel, ed., *Art Talk: The Early 80s* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1988), 275.

<sup>3</sup> In Constance Lewallen, “Sherrie Levine” in *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Vol. 6 No. 2, (1993) 83.

“I am here for the rage of all women, I am here for the women fighting back.” This direct, ruthless admonition articulated by Leslie Labowitz, Suzanne Lacy and Bia Lowe in their performance piece “In Mourning and In Rage” (1977) in many ways typifies the kind of activist art practices accounted for in contemporary understandings of the history of feminist art. The collective grouping of women in a public setting, often in some sort of costume, aggressively demanding equal rights and an eradication of male patriarchal hegemony (as is the case in this performance piece) epitomizes late 1970s feminist activism. Masha Meskimon, however, urges the twenty-first century writer to rethink this moment in history, in order to reevaluate the strengths of modern canonization. She writes,

“[We should rethink a chronologically defined field of knowledge for] the opportunity to deconstruct the so-called alternative canon and interrogate the conceptual parameters of ‘feminist art.’ Those of us who write about women’s art are only too aware of the way a few well-known women and their work can come to stand in for all women and, perversely, further occlude both other women’s work and any detailed critical responses of their own.”<sup>4</sup>

Meskimon’s entreaty to proceed with caution in developing any sort of definitive canon of feminist art is not only valid but imperative. While her point focuses specifically on the problematic formulation of a master narrative of feminism across national boundaries, her argument resonates within twenty-first century art history as well. Rather than characterize feminist art-making operations as homogenous, championed by a few widely-revered women artists, Meskimon urges writers to actively challenge any and all essentializing claims of this nature.

In order to fully investigate and appreciate the work, opinions and achievements of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger, we endeavor to sustain

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<sup>4</sup> Masha Meskimon, “Chronology Through Cartography: Mapping 1970s Feminist Art Globally,” in Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 323`.

Meskimon's discourse. In the past, many writers-- especially those from *October* magazine-- grouped these three women artists together as the triumvirate of postmodern feminist art, thereby reducing their individual significance and potency. We intend to recover Sherman, Levine and Kruger from this process of canonization that effectively diminishes their distinct voices.

The year of 1981 marks a central point at which these artists attract a great deal of critical attention and commercial success in and around New York City. While each was making their most daring work to date, critics merged their respective practices to illustrate ostensibly comprehensive theories of postmodernism, thereby neglecting to emphasize Sherman, Levine and Kruger's varying feminist assertions. In this chapter, we attempt to reclaim each artist's voice. By rooting our investigation in a thorough analysis of their work from 1981, we intend to subvert the dominant discourses of the time period and reestablish the radical innovation of each artist's production.

## **SHERRIE LEVINE**

Craig Owens, writing in 1982, highlights the paradox of the author in Sherrie Levine's photographic process by labeling her as anything but an artist. He writes, "Levine has assumed the functions of the dealer, the curator, the critic—everything but the creative artist...in an attempt to counteract the division of artistic labor in a society that restricts the artist to the manufacture of luxury goods destined for the real agents of art-world appropriation—the dealer, the collector, the museum."<sup>5</sup> By inserting herself

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Owens, "Sherrie Levine at A&M Artworks," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 115.

into the roles of the commercial artistic establishment, Levine effectively destabilizes its system of meaning. By exposing the invisible boundaries between roles in the art world, such as curator, dealer, collector, historian and critic, she engages in a process of distancing. It becomes unclear as to her specific intentions and practices-- exactly as Owens describes. By identifying with these other characters, Levine unmasks our own expectations and beliefs of what it means to be an artist.

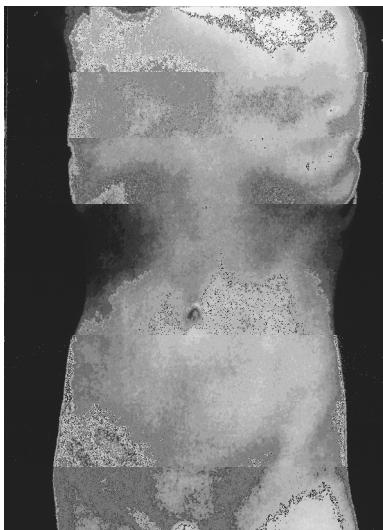
Owens is responding directly to Levine's *After Walker Evans* series, originally shown at Metro Pictures in May of 1981. In the show, she exhibited a number of re-photographs taken from catalogue reproductions of classic Walker Evans images. Focusing specifically on Evans' participation with the Farm Security Administration in 1936, Levine appropriates his iconic pictures. By photographing reproductions of Evans' work, she creates twice-removed images, further expanding the space between original and copy. However, because Levine selects such well-known stills, she is blatantly exposing the pastiche of her practice. And upon the moment of recognition in the viewer, the space that existed because of her reproduction is immediately collapsed.

In her 1987 essay "Living With Contradictions," Abigail Solomon-Godeau asserts that Levine appropriates more than just an image with her *After Walker Evans* series. She writes, "[The rephotograph's] engagement with dominant (aesthetic) discourses whose constituent terms (and hidden agendas) are then made visible as prerequisites for analysis and critique. As circumstances change (for example, with the assimilation of appropriation into the culture at large), so too does the position of the artwork alter."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Living With Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics," in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic Histories, Institutions and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991), 146.

Solomon-Godeau observes that the success of Sherrie Levine's work lies in its ostensibly complete presentation as an authentic work of art. Each of her re-photographs, then, is its own distinct masquerade. Through carefully choosing highly recognizable images, Levine's act of claiming these pictures as her own is radical and problematic. Because they physically appear in concert with Evans' originals, Levine's work seems like nothing more than a cheap copy; however, the sheer act of direct appropriation and



**FIGURE 1.1**

**SHERRIE LEVINE**  
*After Edward Weston (#5), 1980*  
 black-&-white photograph  
 10 in x 8 in  
**Courtesy of the Paula Cooper Gallery**

*Authors' Note:* We were not able to secure the image reproduction rights for the After Walker Evans photographs. Therefore, we chose to include an After Edward Weston photograph.

authorial reassignment openly challenges the Modernist ideal of the unique object. If Evans' photographs extend beyond their formal properties by engaging in an emotional dialogue with the viewer, Levine's re-photographs provide a rupture in this connection. Her work then creates an intellectual tension for the consumer, in which the art object's supposed infallibility is threatened.

Howard Singerman relates this anxiety concerning the role of the author to a Duchampian uneasiness with the readymade: "Any number of commentators on Levine's work have linked it to the readymade, usually to the readymade in what one might call its

weakest form.”<sup>7</sup> By appropriating Walker Evans’ canonical images from 1936 and claiming them as her own work, Levine reinserts a Duchampian debate into the contemporary art world of 1981. And as Singerman aptly identifies, many writers reject any artistic notion in Levine’s practice whatsoever, relegating her work to the realm of non-art. Repudiating the *After Walker Evans* series’ merit does not detract from Levine’s intention; rather, such a rebuff elucidates one’s objection to decisively anti-Modernist art. Her appropriation tactic not only critiques authorial privilege-- it dismantles its necessity. Thus, photography as an artistic medium can never be the same after Sherrie Levine’s re-photographs.

Artist Barbara Bloom, one of Levine’s contemporaries, recalls seeing the *After Walker Evans* series for the first time in 1981: “Oh my God, that is so radical and so insane. It was also brilliant. Sherrie didn’t address any of the esthetic issues, just narrowed it down to the most essential idea about what constitutes ownership of an image, and that was it.”<sup>8</sup>

## CINDY SHERMAN

Ambiguity is one of the most important aspects of any Cindy Sherman photograph. In almost every single image, the question of “Where is Cindy?” is not only relevant but essential. The ways in which Sherman uses her body as a canvas upon which characters are built, stereotypes either reinforced or challenged, and stories are composed point to the role of doubt, ambiguity and mystery in her art.

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<sup>7</sup> Howard Singerman, “Sherrie Levine’s Art History” in *October 101*, Summer 2002, 98.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Bloom, quoted in Linda Yablonsky, “Photo Play” in *Art in America* (April 2009): 107-108.

The most famous series of photographs from Sherman's early career are the ubiquitous *Untitled Film Stills*, shot between 1977 and 1980. She describes the desire to create these images as an outgrowth of examining clichéd representations of actresses in a way that is both playful and engaging. In the essay accompanying the Museum of Modern Art's catalogue of the *Stills*<sup>9</sup>, Sherman writes,

"At first I wanted to do a group of imaginary stills all from the same actress' career, so in those first six photographs the hair doesn't change that much-- I think I made her blond because that seemed very actressy and perhaps because I still had brown hair... I was playing. I tried to make her look older in some, more of an ingénue in others, and older-trying-to-look-younger in others. I didn't think about what each movie was about. I focused on the different ages and looks of the same character."<sup>10</sup>

The inspiration came from a single character; however, the series grew into seventy images capturing various female figures in a wide array of environments, states of mind and fashions.

A critical aspect of the *Untitled Film Stills* is their voyeuristic nature. In an interview with Jeanne Siegel from 1987, Sherman discusses how one of the main influences for creating the *Stills* was a desire to expose the relentlessly penetrating male-gaze by constructing images fueled by artificiality. She states, "My 'stills' were about the fakeness of role-playing as well as contempt for the domineering 'male' audience who would mistakenly read the images as sexy."<sup>11</sup> While Sherman may have attempted to use humor as a device to point to some of the ridiculousness of the situations, there is a definite sense of terror, distress and oppression in the images. By cropping them a certain

<sup>9</sup> The Museum of Modern Art bought the entire *Untitled Film Stills* collection for one million dollars in 1995-- a huge amount of money for photographs.

<sup>10</sup> Cindy Sherman, *The Complete Untitled Film Stills Cindy Sherman* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Siegel, 272.

way (thus determining the frame of each photograph), carefully selecting the environment in which the character is placed and the various props and poses, Sherman makes conscious decisions that point to the fetishized act of viewing of a supposed male consumer. Laura Mulvey reads these photographs as moments of unavoidable scopophilia. She writes, “The camera looks; it ‘captures’ the female character in a parody of different voyeurisms. It intrudes into moments in which she is unguarded, sometimes undressed, absorbed in her own world of her own environment.”<sup>12</sup> By specifically and decisively posing each subject in a calculated environment and frame, Sherman not only invites the voyeuristic gaze, she compels it.

In 1981, after gaining considerable attention within the art world through the success of the *Untitled Film Stills*, Ingrid Sischy, then editor-in-chief at *Artforum*, commissioned Sherman to shoot a series of photographic double-spreads for the magazine. Responding to *Artforum*’s horizontal format, Sherman constructed images in which her characters unabashedly engaged the pornographic codes of magazines, such as *Playboy* and *Hustler*, thus furthering her investigation of the male-ness implicit in the acts of viewing and consuming. While she had displayed images using horizontality in the past (especially the *Rear Screen Projections* (1980) series), the *characters* were rarely arranged horizontally; rather, they often remained vertical while the frame of the image was horizontal. Rosalind Krauss explores the effect that this shift in orientation has on the images: “From being a projection of the viewer looking outward toward a visual field imagined as parallel to the vertical of the upright body of the beholder and his or her plane of vision, the view now slides floorward to declare the field of vision itself as

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<sup>12</sup> Laura Mulvey, “A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman,” in Regis Durand, ed., *Cindy Sherman* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 288.

horizontal.”<sup>13</sup> Krauss highlights the crucial reorientation as indicating a semiotic shift.

Instead of the props and make-up acting as the signifier, as in the *Stills*, the *Centerfolds* cast the perspective of the viewer, reading the image horizontally, as signifier for male domination and female repression.<sup>14</sup>

Sischy rejected the *Centerfolds* photographs, yet Metro Pictures exhibited them as a Cindy Sherman solo show in November 1981 (just months after Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans* re-photographs were on view). Instead of being only 8 in x 10 in (the size of the *Untitled Film Stills*--also the customary size of any film still used for publicity in Hollywood), the *Centerfolds* were 2 ft x 4 ft, a monumental shift in scale. Lisa Philips, director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, describes her experience of seeing the *Centerfolds* as arresting due to their size. She writes,

“They were shocking, seductive, confrontational, and at 2 x 4 feet, were among the largest photographs I ever witnessed. The scale of photography has been steadily on the rise since the *Centerfolds* were shown over twenty years ago, and now they seem positively classical, even quaint.”<sup>15</sup>

The shift in dimensions is indicative of a few key aspects of the work: Sherman’s repudiation for Sischy and the *Artforum* editorial team, a desire to make a significant visual impact through color and scale, and an attempt to shock the viewer and expose the hegemony of the male gaze.

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<sup>13</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Cindy Sherman: Untitled” in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 125.

<sup>14</sup> Cindy Sherman does not title her works, but rather leaves them all “Untitled.” Thus, it is either through her discussion of specific series or the labeling of art critics and historians that names begin to appear for series of Cindy Sherman’s work.

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Philips, “Introduction” in *Centerfolds* (New York, NY: Skarstedt Fine Art, 2003), 5.

Laura Mulvey, who six years before the *Centerfolds* published her famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” examines Sherman’s pictures in order to reveal this latter point of male gaze and objectification. She writes,

“These photographs reiterate the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of femininity. While the *Untitled Film Stills* fake a surrounding narrative, so the camera does not draw undue attention to its presence; the 1981 *Centerfolds*, on the other hand, announce themselves as photographs and, as in a pin-up, the model’s eroticism, and her pose, are directed towards the camera, and ultimately towards the spectator.”<sup>16</sup>

Mulvey’s concept of the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of femininity is crucial to Sherman’s practice in 1981, in that it establishes the female body as the object of an eroticized fetish. By placing the subject within the horizontal format, focusing the viewer’s gaze downwards and filling the field of vision with the subject’s body, levels of visual and psychological intimacy are linked with a definitively potent sexuality in the image and subject. Because Sherman’s body fills most of the space in the *Centerfolds*, it is impossible *not* to look at her, her body and her pose. One cannot retreat and take solace in the sheer aesthetic pleasure of a background, props or tertiary characters as a way of escaping her presence. Sherman’s body is not just the main point of focus-- it is the only point of focus. It is impossible to disengage from the act of visual consumption of the embodied female as eroticized fetish.

By enlarging the photographic format while narrowing the field of vision, the subject (as object) evokes claustrophobia, suppression and fear. *Untitled #93* (1981) exemplifies Sherman’s use of these techniques. The character lies in a bed with a blanket clenched in her clammy hands, her hair in complete disarray, make-up running from either tears or sweat. Her eyes gaze up toward an indeterminate light source and appear heavy, world-weary and opaque. The viewer can attribute a number of meanings to this

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<sup>16</sup> Mulvey, 290.

gaze, and all would be valid; each viewer must conceptualize of his or her own interpretation.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps she is a porn star recovering from a grueling shoot, taking a break in a nearby bed. Maybe she is an abused girlfriend after a violent altercation.



**CINDY SHERMAN**

*Untitled (#93)*, 1981

color photograph

24 in x 48 in

**Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures**

**FIGURE 1.2**

The ambiguity that Cindy Sherman produces in all of the *Centerfolds* is absolutely essential in their reception. Reviewing the show for the *New York Times* in 1981, Andy Grundberg sees this uneasiness as the necessary catalyst for the photographs' success: "Despite the initial message of come-hither availability, the pictures ultimately close the viewer off; the women depicted are isolated within the photograph's field of reference by the stilted, mannered method of their representations."<sup>18</sup> Sherman is

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<sup>17</sup> Lisa Philips offers the suggestion that the reason the project was cancelled by *Artforum* was because Ingrid Sischy felt such vague suggestions left too much to the viewer's imagination (Philips, 5).

<sup>18</sup> Andy Grundberg, "Cindy Sherman: A Playful And Political Post-Modernist" in *Crisis of the Real* (New York, NY: Aperture, 1999) 121.

obviously engaging stereotypes (denoted by the fashion, make-up styles and distinct positioning of bodies) that resonated within the early 1980s. At the same time, these roles are unsettling since the subject's facial expression offers no further clues to the situation. Like in the *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman urges the viewer to construct stories-- narratives with a beginning, middle and end-- in and around these characters. However, these envisioned accounts ultimately deflate due to photography's means of production. Each image technically captures only a single moment in time, and thus it rejects any sense of temporal continuity. Narratives are only as good as one's imagination.

The remoteness with which the characters in the *Centerfolds* act and appear is crucial in observing the inner psychological workings that make these photographs come alive, in contrast to those after which they are styled. Peter Schjeldahl, writer for *Art in America* in 1981 claims,

“To say that Sherman ‘gets inside’ her characters is to state the simple truth. In each case, the ‘outside’-- costume, wig, makeup, props-- is a concise set of informational cues for a performance that is interior, the dream of a whole, specific life registering in a bodily and facial expression so right and eloquent-- albeit blank, vacant, and absent-minded-- as to trigger a shock of deep recognition.”<sup>19</sup>

The dichotomy of inner/outer is vital for establishing a relationship to these images. The “deep recognition” that Schjeldahl writes about is in fact the psychological connection one makes in relation to the codes of personality. In looking at these women, one is able to construct some semblance of a connection, either rooted in narrative extension (sympathizing with a fabricated story of events containing the image) or conditional physicality (inserting oneself into the role of the subject). And even if one does not automatically identify with the role of the victim, the aggressive framing of focusing only

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, “Shermanettes” *Art in America* March 1982: 110-1.

on the features of the body (and most importantly, the face) forces the viewer to relate on some level with the plight of the character.

Roberta Smith elucidates what she perceives as the universality of these experiences in her review of the show for the *Village Voice*. She writes, “In place of the extreme variety of her previous work, Sherman seems here to work for a consistency of psychological tone, as if to show how many situations and characters can feel almost nearly alike, how many different ways the same feeling, or variations on it, can come up for different women, regardless of age, intelligence or background.”<sup>20</sup> While Smith certainly highlights an important aspect of these photographs (the psychological tone), the attempt to group the totality of female experience into these works is not only impossible but unsound. What the *Centerfolds* do execute, however, is how narrative is sought by the photographic viewer. By obscuring the details of these accounts (reducing the field of vision, using unreadable facial expressions, etc.), Cindy Sherman effectively cuts out the ability to fully identify with any one character or situation, thus proliferating a sense of fragmentation that is not entirely achieved in her previous works.

With the *Centerfolds* in 1981, Sherman appropriates the look of commercial genres, moving from the effect of the B-film to the porn magazine. She contemplates the vulnerability and humanity of women, but does so in a way that is centered on the ambiguity of the experience. In no way is she a sex symbol in these photographs, despite the little bits of flesh showing, the short skirts, or the potentially sexy positions. Instead, the characters in the *Centerfolds* all display a certain level of terror, either through a reaction to a situation, a psychological condition, or by conveying feelings of physical defenselessness. While it would be convenient to label Cindy Sherman as a decisive

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<sup>20</sup> Roberta Smith, “Cindy Sherman” *Village Voice* 18 November 1981.

feminist in every way, the doubt present in these photographs-- a result of uneasiness bred by uncertainty-- dislodges them from being essentialist derivatives. Rather, Sherman's *Centerfolds* both typify and reject stereotypical notions of the female experience. They present a liminal space of familiarity in which women can identify with the referent and feel detached from her melancholy. However, the one thing the *Centerfolds* do combat is the unremitting male gaze implicated in the act of looking.

## **BARBARA KRUGER**

There is nothing equivocal about the messages contained within Barbara Kruger's photographic collages; however, the same cannot be said of the artist herself and her placement within the artistic community. Barbara Kruger has been a chameleon of sorts over the past thirty years, constructing her identity ever since she was a student at the Parsons School of Design in New York. Diane Arbus, one of her professors, urged her to pursue writing instead of art-making, as Arbus saw Kruger's talent for writing lucid, precise prose. In 1971, Kruger took a job as head graphic designer for *Mademoiselle* magazine at the young age of twenty-two. Having to act as the executive voice for the design department forced her to train her eye, focusing on text/image relationships and their importance for an economy of words.<sup>21</sup> After leaving this position, she devoted her time to being a full-time artist, and in 1973 was included in the Whitney Biennial. In 1975, however, Kruger quit the art world to study critical theory and teach, but in 1977 returned to making art as her main source of income.

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<sup>21</sup> Carol Squiers, "Who Laughs Last?": The Photographs of Barbara Kruger," in *Barbara Kruger [Thinking of You]* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 147.

After reading Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu and Julia Kristeva, Barbara Kruger shifted her focus in object making away from the more craft-oriented works she produced before 1975. Instead, she adopted a style of image/text juxtapositions that featured fairly ambiguous photographs and concise, yet direct messages. In 1978, she self-published a book titled *Pictures/Readings*, in which she placed photographs of building's exteriors on the right page of a spread, and on the left included narrative texts describing some sort of relationship, dialogue, dilemma, or dramatic scene. The narrative informed the pictures, and the pictures in turn validated the narrative; otherwise, these two elements would seem un-anchored, floating in a world of abstract data. The *Pictures/Readings* book led to Kruger's work on hospitals later that same year. In this series, she worked with much of the same layout and format, but instead shortened the text segments to quick phrases, like "Go away," "Not now," or "Not that," or lists of succinct explorations into the world of power dynamics, experience, and the human condition, with phrases like "The illumination of the physical," "The technology of disposability," "The body as machine" and "The comfort construct." The *Hospitals* (1978) works pushed Kruger towards the sharp, biting and aggressive phrasing style that would be the defining mark for the red/white/black photomontages that she begins to produce in 1981. But what must be mentioned about this series is that the *Hospitals* was really the first moment when Kruger began to engage the constructs of hegemony, death and violence, and did so in a way that was theatrical in its juxtapositions and extrapolated confluence of significances.

Barbara Kruger, despite her shift in the late 1970s towards a clearer style of presentation, still defied categorical placement. Many questioned where she fit into the

art world-- whether from the standpoint of graphic designer, architect, sculptor, etc. In her catalogue essay for Kruger's large-scale mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Ann Goldstein quotes David Deitcher, writing in 1991, illuminating this quandary of classification. He writes,

“Is she just an artist? Just a feminist? A writer? Designer? Critic? Architect? Reduction of difference to sameness, reduction of differences to binary oppositions: Kruger’s continuous refusal to make peace with such logic in a society that cannot live without it has ensured the continuing importance of her practice as a model of resistance to arrest.”<sup>22</sup>

Her forays into installation, sculpture, mixed media, advertising, social activism, politics and paraphernalia design all point to Dietcher’s uneasiness in placing any specific label on her. Kruger’s position in continually uprooting expectations and dichotomous distinctions (artist vs. non-artist, designer vs. non-designer) makes it difficult to wholly categorize her art-making practices, which in turn helps maintain her relevance over the past thirty years.

Barbara Kruger’s work demands an active examination of social stereotypes. Instead of accepting them as they are, she exposes their inaccuracies, thus pointing to their pervasiveness and destructive qualities. She gives voice to those ostracized by societal frameworks of sexuality, gender, religious views and socioeconomic class. Kruger expresses her artistic identity through the post-modern, feminist style of manipulating recognizable visual media into a stylistic recasting that instills doubt, speaks to a fragmentary mode of existence and dismantles essentialist conceptions of cultural utopia.

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<sup>22</sup> David Deitcher in Ann Goldstein’s “Bring In the World,” in *Barbara Kruger [Thinking of You]* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 25.

In 1981, Kruger begins making the photomontages for which she becomes famous. Through an intuitive arrangement of image, text, and framing, and a restrictive color palate of black, white and red, Kruger develops arresting collages with which she seeks to deconstruct social norms. She takes found imagery-- primarily photographs from magazines, advertisement databases, catalogs, and medical trade publications-- crops them, and then matches her own text with the photograph to reinvent the content contained within the sales pitch.<sup>23</sup> Images that seem innocuous in commercial advertisement become messages of patriarchal oppression and domination because of her strongly worded textual indictments. The phrases cannot be simply reduced from their hostility into easily digested moral codes; rather, they seem to explode upon the moment of their reading. They are astonishing and destabilizing, leaving the viewer to either grasp for some justification in his or her defense or reaffirm the sentiments expressed.

Kruger's *Untitled (Your comfort is my silence)* (1981) provides a compelling example of the power her juxtapositions possess to unnerve the viewer. The stark, black and white 60 in. x 40 in. image presents the disembodied head of a 1950s-era businessman, holding his finger up to his lips in a silencing gesture. Little can be ascertained about the man, due to the fact that shadow consumes most of his facial features and his eyes have been replaced by the words "Your Comfort" in a giant text block. This reduces his characteristics to the generalized outline of a masculine form. The remaining part of the caption--"Is My Silence"-- stands before the raised hand, and the entire placement of the text generates an interplay between the viewer of the image and the silenced Other. This inclusion of text dispels any ambiguity contained within the

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<sup>23</sup> Squiers, 147.

pictorial image and directly confronts the spectator with the pronoun “your.” It instigates a personal conversation that transforms the passivity of viewing into activeness.



**BARBARA KRUGER**

“Untitled” (Your comfort is my silence)

60” by 40”

photograph

1981

COPYRIGHT: BARBARA KRUGER

COURTESY: MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

**FIGURE 1.3**

The verbal placement of the word “your” expels the observer from the comfortable role of patron into that of perpetrator, thus forcing an alignment with the businessman in the image.<sup>24</sup> The onlooker is now implicated in the silencing of the implied Other (read: female Other) who has no visual representation, but exists solely in Kruger’s constructed space of text and image. The businessman and the viewer have been indicated by Barbara Kruger in a larger scheme of suppression-- one enacted to marginalize all groups outside of the patriarchy. Through the usage of pronouns and the presence of clothing cut in the style of the Western business suit and male physiognomy, the viewer is able to decipher Kruger’s challenge in using both text and image.

This reading of meaning through both the verbal and the visual presents Kruger’s deconstruction of the imposed codes through which societies interpret the world around them. Her attempts at dismantling hegemonic social structures are in strong concert with Walter Benjamin’s belief that photography would become the media for enacting change. His famous essay from 1931, “A Short History of Photography,” underlines cultural reliance on representative and verbal cues in order to read the visual world. He writes,

“It has been said that ‘not he who is ignorant of writing, but he who is ignorant of photography will be the illiterate of the future.’ But isn’t a photographer who can’t read his own pictures worth less than an illiterate? Will not captions become the essential component of pictures?”<sup>25</sup>

Benjamin addresses the mechanical nature of photography, which initially removes the human hand from the apparent objectivity of the image. However, it is the presence of

<sup>24</sup> When discussing the semiotics of Barbara Kruger’s images in his 1984 essay, “The Medusa Effect, or, The Specular Ruse,” Craig Owens quotes Roland Barthes’ remarks on the power of the pronoun. For Barthes, the pronoun had the authority “to personalize all information, to make every utterance a direct challenge, not directed at the entire mass of readers, but at each reader in particular.” (Owens, 194) Craig Owens’ article will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven, Leete’s Island Books, 1980), pp. 215

titles-- of words and verbal descriptions-- that inscribe meaning and situate these images, thus constricting the range of interpretations and the scope of the photograph.

Contextualization destroys the detached neutrality of a photograph-- a fact that the advertising industry has long incorporated into their presentations to the public. Through this subversion of meaning, companies and industries have established multitudes of signs that attempt to entice the viewer to form superficial needs, fulfilled only by consuming the products for sale. It is this verbal manipulation which Benjamin spoke against and Barbara Kruger actively works to undermine through her own distinct union of word and photograph.

Another excellent example of Kruger's use of gender as sites of social commentary and cultural warfare is *Untitled (We don't need another hero)* (1987). This work superimposes a bold strip of red background and white text stating "We don't need another hero" on top of an image of a young girl and boy. The girl leans over the boy's shoulder, pointing to his budding bicep muscle. While her pose may be initially read as predatory, the girl is wholly submitting to the masculinity of the boy out of wonder at his impressive physique. One could argue that masculinity in this picture is not only on display, but is at the same time being performed, in that it conforms to the socially prescribed patterns of masculine behavior.

This performance of gender, fitting with appropriate cultural definitions, grants agency for the male, thus forcing the female into submission. Her awe of his male abilities (shown by the openness of her mouth and arched eyebrows) carries a deep and raw eroticization of male sexual prowess, in the appearance of vulnerability in her pose, the sensual touch of her finger to his muscle, and his look of self-satisfaction and desire.

This arrangement carries specific value judgments and power relations (male is more functionally robust and thus more important), but Kruger ruptures them in her appropriation. The image is ripped from its potential innocence through Kruger's inclusion of "We don't need another hero," and pushed way beyond its original intent into the arena of gender politics, so that its collaged form bursts forth with aggression, scorn, hostility and unchecked vitriol.



**BARBARA KRUGER**

"Untitled" (We don't need another hero)

109" by 210" (277 cm by 533 cm)

photographic silkscreen/vinyl

1987

COLLECTION: FISHER LANDAU CENTER FOR ART, LONG ISLAND CITY, NEW YORK.

COURTESY: MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

(MBG#4186)

**FIGURE 1.4**

The image chosen for this picture is problematic. It is clear that it does not come from the late twentieth century, or else the boy and girl would be dressed much differently. Instead, it functions within the codes of past forms of visual representation, as it appears to come from World War II-era America. The characters' texture, design, and pose recalls J. Howard Miller's ubiquitous image of a woman rolling up her sleeves and

declaring “We Can Do It!”<sup>26</sup> While that picture asserts the equal capability of woman as worker, human and social agent, the image Kruger chooses completely reverses that ideological statement, while still looking like it came from the same era as Millers’. Why, then, is this image so problematic? One of the main reasons *Untitled (We don’t need another hero)* provides the viewer with so much turmoil is that the found image appears to be unproblematic at first. It depicts two children engaging in a seemingly harmless activity; however, it is this conviction of their innocence that exposes one’s full compliance with the ideological restrictions placed on women who adopt the guise of childlike naïveté. When Kruger inserts the text “We don’t need another hero,” she fully elucidates this acquiescence and vigorously attacks it.

The word “we” at the beginning of the phrase immediately thrusts the argument into a dichotomous relationship, in which “we” becomes “not-you,” because the tone of the full collage (text and found image combined) is coded in aggression. Kruger’s sex as female is irrelevant to understanding the feminist message of this work, because the “we” matched with the logic of the image forces the statement into the realm of the female. Thus, *Untitled (We don’t need another hero)* claims a shared yet single belief/voice of women as a collective site of cultural warfare. Perhaps there is room for a backlash from women claiming that Kruger is incorrect in her presumptions of essential female sentiment. However, Kruger’s work is neither apologetic nor safe. Her images actively function to expose and dismantle the polarity of gender as it relates to male and female power dynamics, and thus restores respect for women as equal human and cultural

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<sup>26</sup> This image has often been mistaken for “Rosie the Riveter”—a cultural icon created to represent the multitude of women who worked in factories during World War II while men fought overseas. Sheridan Harvey provides the history of Miller’s image, demystifying its genesis. For more information, visit Harvey’s contribution to the Library of Congress’ website: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/journey/rosie-transcript.html>

agents. Therefore, we cannot expect Barbara Kruger to play by the rules, much less those imposed, even silently, by a dominating male figure. Instead, she attempts to explode those notions, and in doing so redefines what feminist art means and how it functions within and beyond the art world.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **The Presence and Absence of the Body**

*“I don’t know if people understand what my intentions are, looking at it, but they can recognize things right away and recognize whether they’re turned off or laughing or what sort of immediate reaction they have.”*

--Cindy Sherman [1987]<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Siegel, 281.

Since the outset of her career, Cindy Sherman has been performing visual character sketches using the photographic medium. She assumes a vast array of roles in order to reveal the pervasive nature of stereotypes and to provide a critical analysis of mass media imagery. In a 1987 interview with Jeanne Siegel, Sherman describes her work as a tool for generating social awareness, saying:

“Maybe I want people to look at my work and use what they’re seeing to help themselves to either see or recognize something that they realize is really stupid...the role-playing was intended to make people become aware of how stupid roles are, a lot of roles, but since it’s not all that serious, perhaps that’s more the moral to it, not to take anything too seriously.”<sup>2</sup>

Sherman posits the work to resonate with viewers and to force a critical confrontation with their own actions and perceptions.

Her skill in producing fully realized personas and landscapes—in the case where her work lacks a human presence—paradoxically imbues the photograph with senses of validity and theatricality. The incorporation of stage aesthetics and performance art, which construct this duality, allows Cindy Sherman’s work to continually undermine the concept of the feminine self as defined through cultural modes of representation.

Throughout this chapter, we examine series from Sherman’s varied career that have largely gone unnoticed. By continuing chronologically, we investigate the ways her oeuvre incorporates stereotypical depictions of women and implodes these characterizations’ validity through an oscillating presence and absence of her own body.

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<sup>2</sup> Jeanne Siegel, “Cindy Sherman (Interview)” in Jeanne Siegel, ed., *Art Talk: The Early 80s* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1988), 282.

### **A PLAY OF SELVES (1975)**

*A Play of Selves* (1975), one of Cindy Sherman's very first photographic projects, splits the psyche into embodied representations in order to probe female experience. Two hundred and forty-four paper doll-like photographs of Sherman compose the work. Each picture is cut out and arranged in tiny photographic collages that create a running visual narrative. She pastes them in a straight tickertape-like line along the gallery wall. Through the careful positioning, costuming and sizing of each cutout, Sherman creates a play devoid of words, but which nonetheless tells a four act story of a jealous woman and a clichéd host of sub-characters that comprise her psyche: "Agony," "Desire," "Vanity," and "Madness." Rather than using only one character to reveal the inner workings of the mind, *A Play of Selves* provides a multitude of one-dimensional passions.



**FIGURE 2.1**

**CINDY SHERMAN**

*A Play of Selves*  
(Act 4, Scene 9), 1975

71 black and white  
photographs (total)  
mounted on board  
15 x 14 inch board  
16 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches framed  
**Courtesy of the Artist  
and Metro Pictures**

**From L to R:**  
Vanity, Agony, Madness,  
Desire, The Frivolous Young  
Woman, A Broken Woman

Sherman then further fragments the main character into different permutations of personal identity: “The Actual Main Character,” “The Character as Others See Her,” and “A Broken Woman.” This compositional element complicates the main character’s transparency, infusing this work with Sherman’s signature twisting of banality. “The Character As Others See Her” appears in the guise of a plain-looking teenage girl wearing large glasses, sporting severely pinned hair and a long-faced expression. “A Broken Woman” dresses more attractively in a form-fitting dress but still appears slightly naïve. Lastly, “The Actual Main Character” looks almost identical to “A Broken Woman,” except for a mask that conceals the upper half of her face.

In *A Play of Selves*, the main character (consisting of the three previously mentioned permutations) believes her lover is cheating. In her mind, she creates an imaginary sketch of how the other woman looks-- this rendition is characterized as “The Frivolous Young Woman.” During the play, the main character’s psyche (shown in four parts) helps to comfort her through this emotional turmoil. In the end, the psyche, as a collective, confronts the “Frivolous Young Woman” and shrink her to nothing larger than a doll (Figure 2.1). This allows the main character to hold the “Frivolous Young Woman” in her hand, thereby re-asserting her power over this fictional opponent.

*A Play of Selves* represents an early, experimental formation of Cindy Sherman’s mode of operation. The work centers on an examination of highly readable stereotypes and the ways in which theatrical and photographic media compartmentalize women into specific categories, such as vain, crazy, frivolous, etc. In the introduction to the first full printing of the work in 2007, Sherman reflects on these cutouts and their relationship to her later series: “This is the only work I’ve ever done that was consciously

autobiographical...It's corny, sincere, and obvious, yet makes so much sense in how my work has developed, the similarities and the differences."<sup>3</sup> Though she does not elucidate these similarities and differences, Sherman establishes that this early work displays many of the thought processes that inform her later photographs. *A Play of Selves* demonstrates Sherman's continual interest in revealing the inner constructs of the female psyche and exposing social perceptions of women, though with a much more essentialist view of feminine emotions.

The play also presents Cindy Sherman's desire to incorporate a performative sensibility into her photographs. As one critic covering the 1976 Hallwalls show for the *Buffalo Courier Express* commented: Sherman is "So dramatic an actress, such a convincing make-up artist and rubber-faced mimic that viewers will be dazed by the depth of her talents."<sup>4</sup> Though Sherman maintains this sense of theatricality throughout her oeuvre, she moves away from the play's single narrative and the need to provide written labels for the characters, in order to diversify the range of superficial and stereotypical depictions that come within her scope.

## **THE FASHION (1983,1984) SERIES<sup>5</sup>**

In 1983, Cindy Sherman expands her examination of feminine identity in the mass media. Her critique previously manipulated the codes of voyeuristic cinema

<sup>3</sup> Cindy Sherman, *A Play of Selves*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> "Ms. Sherman Stars as Cast in Photo Essay on Herself," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, August 18, 1976 as quoted in Gail Stravitsky, exhib. cat. essay, *The Unseen Cindy Sherman: Early Transformations 1975/1976*, (New Jersey: Montclair Art Museum, 2004), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Sherman returns to this series for a layout in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine in 1993, but as this chapter looks to position Sherman's initial moves away from her work prior to 1981 and to describe alterations in her artistic innovations, these photographs will not be discussed in detail.

(*Untitled Film Stills*) and exploitative pornography (*Centerfolds*). However, with the *Fashion* series of 1983-4, Sherman positions her photographs against a specific mode of feminine representation found in clothing advertisements. High fashion photographs meld the identity of the image's character with her clothing material, so as to suggest that the relationship between subject (character) and object (clothes) is inextricable-- the existence of one depends on the presence of the other. Sherman exploits this identification process, constructing pictures that in no way execute the supposed function of fashion advertisements. Instead, her characters seem peculiar and bizarre, thus deconstructing and exposing the stereotypical coding of women in fashion photographs.

The *Fashion* series materializes from two commissions for magazine spreads: Dianne Benson (for *Interview* in 1983) and Dorothée Bis (for *French Vogue* in 1984). Benson and Bis provided Sherman with clothing from their newest production lines, which the artist then used to construct her characters. Though both commissions allowed Sherman some freedom to personally interpret the clothing designs, a significant tonal difference exists between Sherman's work for Benson and for Bis. She responds to Benson's "Dianne B" line with pointed mockery of fashion models, while her reaction to Bis and *French Vogue* appears darker and more aggressive toward the industry's stereotypes.<sup>6</sup>

In an interview with Jeanne Siegel, Sherman describes her creative process for the Dianne Benson photographs as an achieved equilibrium between the clothes' fashion design and her predilection for dressing up: "They were really weird clothes that were fun and inspiring, but also very powerful on their own terms—overwhelming in fact. To balance them, I started making the characters as bizarre as the costumes so that they

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine Morris, *The Essential Cindy Sherman* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 73.

would fit together and neither would overshadow the other.”<sup>7</sup> Through this collaboration of costume and character, Cindy Sherman develops an artistic approach that reconfigures the image of the female body as something outrageous and strange.

For this commission, a certain comical aspect emerges in photographs such as *Untitled #131* (1983), in which the viewer beholds an image of a rather self-conscious young woman attempting to strike an elegant pose. Sherman, wigged in an outdated 1960s-era hairstyle, stands in a form-fitting cream sequined pantsuit that awkwardly cups her breasts and constricts her legs, while she puckers her lips in something resembling a pout. Behind her, a thick pastel-colored pattern of floral wallpaper covers the entire backdrop, thereby outlining Sherman in colors similar to her clothing. Through the inclusion of these parallel colors, the décor and the dress conspire to blend the character right into the wall. Her attempts at sexual allure—the pout, the squaring of the shoulders to propel the breasts upward and the demure curtsy-like motion of the knee—fall flat as the wall subsumes her form into its faded flowerbed look. The image bears a resemblance to an amateur photographic shoot-- something homemade and thrown together. Though the figure strives to break away from her wallflower status by donning a revealing outfit, her bland surroundings ultimately win out over the silky material and the push-up bra. Sherman exposes the failure of the consumer to emulate high fashion, imparting a desire for glamour that is pitifully incongruent with the end result.

The photographs completed for Dorothée Bis and *French Vogue* in 1984, however, appear much more caustic and bleak. These images reveal a gloomier and more disturbing critique of the fashion industry, turning Sherman’s appearance into something

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Jeanne Stiegel, “Cindy Sherman (Interview),” 277

alien, gruesome and possibly manic. She recounts her process as a blatant attack against Bis' entire clothing design, stating:

"Right away I started feeling antagonism from [the French designers], not really liking what I was doing, because they expected me to imitate what I had done in the last series. But I wanted to go on to something new, and since they were going to use these pictures for Paris *Vogue*, I wanted the work to look really ugly. The clothes were boring and not the ones I had asked to use so I thought I'll just go all out and get really wild...They hated it. And the more they hated it, the more it made me want to do it, and the more outrageous I tried to be. Finally I had to finish the job and just shot some less insulting pictures just to end it."<sup>8</sup>

As a response to Bis' attempts to restrict her artistic expression, Sherman abandons the clothes' high fashion status for the label of next year's Halloween costume. Unkempt hair, jaundiced or mutilated skin, rotting teeth and psychotic expressions proliferate, while the backdrops range from oppressively dark to unnaturally bright. These photographs take the absurd interplay between character and clothes of the 1983 series and mutate the humor of human eccentricity to divulge psychotic undercurrents.

Sherman's *Untitled #138* (1984) (Figure 2.2) provides a striking example of her transformation beyond the recognizable female form. A character wearing a long, vertically striped dress and an oversized tie sits rigidly in a plain steel chair. Her legs spread wide and pull at the dress's tight fabric, contorting the large vertical lines and emphasizing the solidity and thickness of her legs and the sagging of her breasts. Sherman holds her hands in her lap, with palms and fingers extended upward in order to expose red-stained fingertips. The source of such discoloration remains ambiguous, but the self-satisfied smile that spreads across her ashen face, revealing yellowed teeth and a crazed intent, leads the viewer to believe that her hands drip blood. Looking at this

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in Siegel, 273.

constructed image, one is not to desire to emulate the figure, but rather to hesitate before the woman's strangeness.



**FIGURE 2.2**

**CINDY SHERMAN**

*Untitled (#138)*, 1984

color photograph

77 x 48 1/2 inches

195.6 x 121.9 cm

**Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures**

Sherman positions these images within a distorted deconstruction of feminine identity that no longer incorporates the nostalgia for youthful beauty found throughout the *Untitled Film Stills* and the *Centerfolds*. Instead, Sherman challenges the consumer's conception of attraction and comeliness through her presentation of freakish characters appearing to act outside of the normative advertising program. Laura Mulvey provides an admirable synopsis of the artist's achievements in the *Fashion* photographs: "The characters are theatrical and ham up their roles. A new Sherman body is beginning to emerge. She grotesquely parodies the kind of feminine image that is geared to erotic consumption and she turns upside down conventional codes of female allure and

elegance.”<sup>9</sup> The specific intention of creating “ugly pictures” marks an innovative turn in Sherman’s career.<sup>10</sup> While she still engages stereotypical framing, conceptions, and representations of women in the media, in 1983 and 1984 she deconstructs the idea of feminine beauty through glamour and exposes the potential hideous side of desire.

### **THE DISASTERS (1986-1989) SERIES**

In 1986, Cindy Sherman begins experimenting with image-making in which she removes herself as the main photographic referent, favoring grotesque tableaus showcasing scenes of destruction and mayhem. For the first time ever, these are pictures authored by Sherman without Sherman being physically present, so the ever-pressing question of “Where is Cindy?” is, at least on the surface, answered-- she’s nowhere but everywhere.

In the *Disasters* series, stereotype is both reinforced and exploded, despite Sherman’s physical absence. In no way do these images express sensual content, as in her previous works; rather, they incorporate elements of human detritus and waste, such as vomit, menstrual blood, mucus, hair, and other bodily discharge. While it seems like these corporeal byproducts act in order to further distance the viewer through disgust and horror, the photographs actually expose our codes of beauty, lust and gender roles.

The bedrock for Sherman’s previous critically acclaimed series-- especially the *Untitled Film Stills* and *Centerfolds*-- was an innovative examination and deployment of

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<sup>9</sup> Laura Mulvey, “A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body,” in Régis Durand, ed., *Cindy Sherman* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 291.

<sup>10</sup> Cindy Sherman, in conversation with Noriko Fuku, “A Woman of Parts,” in *Art in America* June 1997: 79.

the stereotype. Judith Williamson, in her book *Consuming Passions*, discusses the force of this cultural coding as requiring the presence and acquiescence of a viewer to activate its representation. She writes, “[Cultural coding] force[s] upon the viewer that elision of image and identity which women experience all the time: as if a black dress made you *be* a femme fatale, whereas ‘femme fatale’ is precisely an image, it needs a viewer to function at all.”<sup>11</sup> Williamson’s claim regarding the activity of image decoding certainly applies to the *Untitled Film Stills*. It works to implicate the viewer-- the consumer-- in the process of attributing identity to representation (saying that the character in *Untitled #13* (1978) must be a schoolgirl because she *looks* like one), but in a way that is limiting and oppressive.

Because Sherman offers so many clues as to the lives and environments of these characters, it is not unreasonable that the viewer may venture to assume a heightened knowledge of the scene’s narrative; however, Sherman’s portrayals, in seventy different permutations, point to the ways in which stereotypes are in no way airtight. The same character appears in *Untitled #21* (1978), *Untitled #22* (1978) and *Untitled #23* (1978), but the deliberate cropping, positioning, placement within an environment, and expression (facial/physical) all show how these women can and do change, therefore refusing to be pinned down to any one reading.

In his essay “The Lady Vanishes,” Jean-Pierre Criqui attempts to forge a connection between all of Sherman’s pictures through the claim that they remain isolated and separate from each other, making them points along a career but destroying the idea of a continuum. He writes, “Cindy Sherman the artist made her work in her own image: each picture relates only to itself, and to the circumstances and processes of its creation.

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions* (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1986), 91.

The images never open a door onto some other life or inner world that predates or lies beyond the world of the picture.”<sup>12</sup> Criqui’s appraisal of Sherman’s work is not only reductionist, but it wholly negates the continuity found within series and between series. For example, *Untitled Film Stills* portrays the same character in the first five images. Sherman bases the *Rear Screen Projections* in the concept of extricating the subject from an artificial environment through the employment of the backdrop, and, as argued earlier, she binds together the *Centerfolds* through a determination to confront the viewer by using carefully composed visual fields and body language that engender ambivalence.

But even beyond these obvious examples, Criqui utterly misses the thrust of the *Disasters* series. The photographs present mystical landscapes fraught with anguish and suffering, in attempts to theoretically extend the visual field (making the viewer believe that these close croppings indicate an endlessness beyond the edges of the photograph) and to make specific claims about 1980s beauty and high-art culture. Sherman, in a rare look inside her work space for the BBC television show *Arena* in 1994, describes the impulse to create the *Disasters* as a direct reaction to the general critique of her career by collectors. She claims,

“There were other things that sort of made my work take this road, and that was the interest in incorporating the body parts as a substitute for myself. And also, just wanting to kind of challenge the audience more than I felt I had been, especially when my work first started being sold, and being popular-- I got very nervous about that, and wanted to make work that would almost be-- that would be a challenge for someone to want to hang above their sofa in their living room.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Pierre Criqui, “The Lady Vanishes,” in Régis Durand, ed., *Cindy Sherman* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 274.

<sup>13</sup> Cindy Sherman, in *Nobody's Here But Me: Cindy Sherman (Arena)*, dir. Mark Stokes, BBC Television / Cinécontact (1994).

Her impetus with the *Disasters* to confront and reject the notion of easy digestion in her earlier series is particularly notable, thereby explaining one of her main methods for producing this work. Criqui fails to grasp this aspect of the pictures, espousing instead a perspective rooted in his notion of a lack of sustained thickness between each image of Sherman's oeuvre.

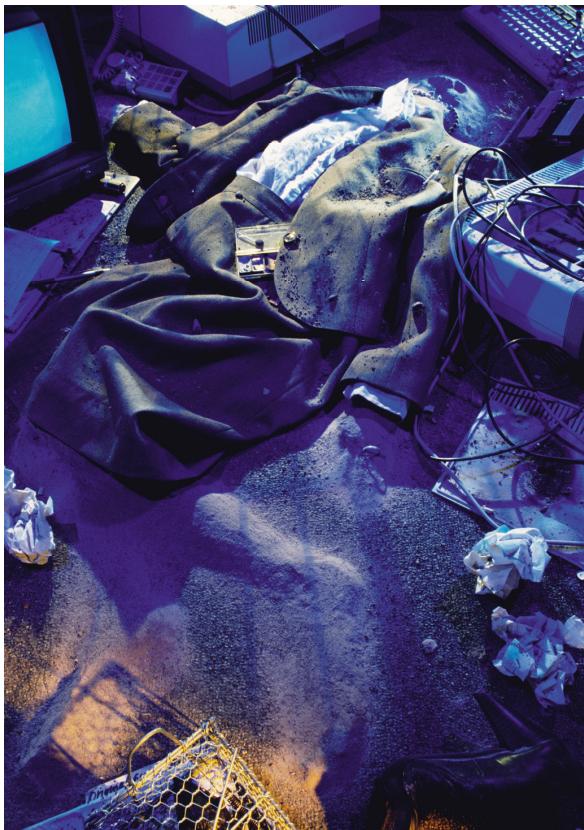
Laura Mulvey proposes a better way of positing the *Disasters*, which does not negate a continuity between series but still reads these pictures as a critical departure from a sole focus on the male gaze: "If the 'Centerfold' series conveyed, through pose and facial expression, the interiority of secret thoughts, now Sherman seems to personify the stuff of the unconscious itself. While the earlier interiority suggested soft, erotic reverie, these are materializations of anxiety and dread."<sup>14</sup> Mulvey's reading of the interior/exterior dichotomy remains absolutely essential in examining the *Disasters* series, and her interpretation of the images as depicting the unconscious is compelling.

The wrenching of inner desires into the realm of exteriority exposes cultural mandates of gender roles in fairly gruesome forms. For example, the vomit in *Untitled #175* (1987) symbolizes socially recognized beauty of the thin female figure, attained either through starvation or bulimia. While a certain level of ambiguity exists (Who is that figure reflected in the glasses? Where does this image take place? To whom does this vomit belong?), the display of human discharge, discarded food (mostly sugary desserts) and the sunglasses are much more revealing than the unaffected gaze of the *Centerfolds* characters. The explosion of human elements thought of as taboo (vomit, blood, urine, etc.) in Sherman's large-scale format grips the viewer, unveiling a new method at work in

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<sup>14</sup> Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body," in Régis Durand, ed., *Cindy Sherman* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 292.

this series-- an exploration of the power of feminine interiority as it relates to cultural expectations of woman-as-image.



**FIGURE 2.3**

**CINDY SHERMAN**

*Untitled (#168)*, 1987

color photograph

85 x 60 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

Of the *Disasters* photographs, *Untitled #168* (1987) (Figure 2.3), in particular, encapsulates a fascinating moment in which terror, humor, politics and representation intersect and erupt. Sherman injects the image with a post-apocalyptic air, as random scraps of paper, broken machinery, tangled wires, a blank television screen, clothes and wire netting litter the scene. Such debris locates this image within a business context, making it seem like a fantastical representation of the aftermath of an explosion in an office building. A woman's suit lies on the ground, arranged as if a body still occupies it - as though a human has almost melted away from the scene, leaving a woman's shape, but devoid of any corporeality to fill the clothes.

Rosalind Krauss, in her theorization of postmodern aesthetics, speaks to the importance of presence and absence using the semiotic framework of Charles Peirce. Krauss characterized 1970s art through the role of the index, defining indexicality, then, as pointing to-- indicating-- an utterance or performative action.<sup>15</sup> A footprint performs as an index, because it inextricably refers back to the shoe tied to it through causality. It is impossible to have created *that* footprint without a specific shoe, so the footprint acts as the index for *that* shoe. Applying Krauss' postmodern concept of the index to the *Disasters* proves quite appropriate for *Untitled #168*. If one looks further into the image, an imprint in the sand resembles a leg. The visual cues of a human index are undeniable-- taken alongside the predicament of the clothes, one cannot view this picture without wondering where the body resides or why it is no longer visible.

Because Krauss' concept of indexicality pervades so much of art historical writing in the late twentieth century, we feel it necessary to at least initially apply her theory to our analysis of the *Disasters* series. The imprint could point to a woman underneath the sand, or it could act as the physical displacement of the woman's body, yet Sherman offers no exact clues. Even so, these ideas do not answer the question as to Sherman's presence in this image. Because there is an index of a leg, as well as a visual absence of a body, decoding this dichotomy becomes increasingly complicated.

Hal Foster furthers Krauss's discussion by including his own explanation for this dual loss and recovery by using Lacanian theory in deciphering the motivations behind the *Disasters* series. He writes,

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<sup>15</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index, Part 2" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986). She writes, "By index I mean that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples." (pp. 211)

“At this point some images pass beyond the abject... a condition described by Bataille where significant form dissolves because the fundamental distinction between figure and ground, self and other, is lost, but also toward the *obscene*, where the object-gaze is presented *as if there were no scene to stage it, no frame of representation to contain it, no screen.*”<sup>16</sup>

Foster’s scrutiny of the transcendence of the body suggests that by 1986 Cindy Sherman had effectively collapsed the distinction between self and other by reducing the capacity for the object-gaze as inhabiting a space for the viewer. While Foster certainly offers an intriguing examination, his reliance on hyperbolic measures enacted to excise the object from the viewer’s gaze renders the argument unsound. In the *Disasters* series, Sherman undeniably removes the human referent, but in doing so, she opens up the space for alternative readings of her work that may be more difficult to digest-- concepts that verge towards anti-feminism, anti-culture and a glorification of disgust.

Instead of merely examining *Untitled #168* from the perspective of the removal of the body in exchange for the abject conditions of disaster-- whether flesh-related or not-- as a means to further fragment the gaze, we propose a secondary option for decoding this image. With the *Untitled Film Stills*, *Rear Screen Projections*, *Centerfolds* and *Fashion* series, Sherman attacks, engages and critiques the role of the viewer, the structures of stereotype, cultural coding and gendered recastings. The *Disasters* series, however, indicates a decisive shift away from object-based art that relies on the presence of a referent. Rather, Sherman positions the viewer to readily question the artistic hand in fabricating these scenes. Thus, the images have the ability to appear otherworldly-- as if they are visions of a domain that can exist without humans. This post-apocalyptic quality

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<sup>16</sup> Hal Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic” in Johanna Burton, ed., *Cindy Sherman* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 179.

heightens the dramatic nature of the pictures, turns them away from beauty and places them within the realm of grotesque misery.

The materials in *Untitled #168* point specifically to an office context that completely fills the visual field. The attire resembles that of a white-collar secretary. A preliminary reading might cast the inclusion of women's clothing as a mere byproduct of some undisclosed disaster involving office supplies; however, nothing in a Sherman tableau is an accident, as each image is meticulously planned and executed. How, then, can this be explicated, so as to draw out the implications of the arrangement and the objects themselves? Sherman crops the visual field, granting the capacity for extrapolation, but even so, the focus is on the garments. We believe the artist manipulates the human form, via the clothes, to emphasize a corporeal absence that is then used to make a fairly subversive anti-feminist statement about women's place in the work-force.

By locating the photograph in the context of the office, Cindy Sherman effectively draws the viewer into a suspension of disbelief in which woman (marked by the secretarial outfit) becomes incorporated into technological mayhem-- a seeming explosion of the interiority of a commercial building. In this way, Sherman implicates not the viewer, as she had done in previous series, but the female referent in the photograph as the cause for such devastation. Thus, *Untitled #168* acts as a veiled rejection of the second-wave feminist political agenda. By making the clothes the focal point of the photograph, Sherman accuses the working woman (as stereotype) of causing the wreckage, thereby denying the capabilities of women in the corporate work-force.

Even though our assertion contradicts other readings of the *Disasters* series, we endeavor to acknowledge the difference between Cindy Sherman as an anti-feminist and

the act of presenting an anti-feminist note in her work. Sherman's photographs remains relevant throughout the thirty-five years of her career due to the fact that she tackles difficult positions, whether political, emotional or psychological. Her change in the mid-1980s to create images which elevate aspects of mayhem, ugliness and fear shows her willingness to challenge not only cultural norms but critical and commercial interpretations of her work. Rejecting traditional conceptions of beauty, oscillating between convention and anti-convention, and injecting a sense of ambiguity into each photograph is for Sherman not atypical. By contradicting the aims of 1970s/1980s second-wave feminism, Sherman does not act to personally reject these aims, but rather attempts to strip the constrictions placed by reductive feminist critiques that refuse a broader inspiration for her oeuvre.

### **THE HOLLYWOOD/HAMPTONS (2000/2002) SERIES**

In “Suitable for Framing: The Critical Recasting of Cindy Sherman,” Abigail Solomon-Godeau traces the shifts in critical theory concerning Sherman’s work.<sup>17</sup> Her point in identifying these variations in analysis is to not choose a specific side; rather, she advocates a type of writing that includes discussions of gender, but does not rely on these as the only foundation for investigation. Her critique of those essentializing Sherman’s practice, across feminism and photography in general, especially resonates today.

Very little has been written about the *Hollywood/Hamptons* pictures of 2000-2002; however, we believe Solomon-Godeau’s critical appraisal, even though it comes

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<sup>17</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Suitable for Framing: the Critical Recasting of Cindy Sherman,” in Johanna Burton, ed., *Cindy Sherman* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 112-121.

from 1991, is an excellent starting point for an examination of this series. While her essay produced beneficial conclusions for establishing a system for seeing Sherman's work, there is one crucial element that was omitted. Solomon-Godeau advocates uncertainty of meaning in the photographs, but she does not promote the potential for gendered readings in Sherman's oeuvre that extend beyond, and sometimes away from, the assertions of second and third-wave feminism. To fully explore Sherman's twenty-first century work, we propose an investigation regarding the construction of female identity and agency that *does* allow for possible deviations from feminist discourse.

In a 2002 interview, Sherman describes making the *Hollywood/Hamptons* pictures in order to form a cast of "fallen actors: people who are working as secretaries, cleaners, or gardeners to make ends meet, but who are posing ... for casting pictures."<sup>18</sup> Certainly, the pictures generate an air of defeat; however, there appears to be much more at work than Sherman lets on, which is in no way surprising.<sup>19</sup> This is the first time since the *Fashion* series (1993-1994) that Sherman consistently uses her body as site of construction and visual reference, and rather than obscuring herself by employing shocking and disturbing outfits and scenarios, the 2000-2002 pictures come across initially as fairly demure.

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<sup>18</sup> Isabelle Graw, "No Make-Up (Interview) in *Cindy Sherman: Clowns* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002), quoted in Régis Durand "A Reading of Cindy Sherman's Works 1975-2006" in Régis Durand, ed., *Cindy Sherman* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 266.

<sup>19</sup> Sherman is usually quite reluctant to describe all of her intentions in making any work; rather, she prefers to leave the pictures to the viewer's imagination. Frequently she claims to not have much idea of what she is pursuing until after the fact: "It's hard to describe the way I work-- I work so intuitively I'm not... I oftentimes don't know what I'm going after until after it's shot, or after I've done several shots. And sometimes I don't know about what I've done until I read what somebody's written about it! So, it's hard for me to really analyze the work in that way." (Cindy Sherman, in *Nobody's Here But Me: Cindy Sherman*).

**FIGURE 2.4****CINDY SHERMAN***Untitled (#409)*, 2002

color photograph

54 x 36 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

While there are a few trademark Cindy Sherman moments that refer to her work in macabre, Neo-Surrealism and pornographic codes (the see-through shirt of *Untitled #409* revealing a giant areola, the prosthetic breasts in *Untitled #352*, the misplaced nipple on the figure of *Untitled #360*, etc.), the majority of these photographs make an impact through their carefully constructed make-up and costumes-- also a well-known convention in Sherman's oeuvre. However, the *Hollywood/Hamptons* mark the first moment where Sherman really delves into the effects of aging, even though these characters are middle-aged-- either around forty or pushing slightly past it. The most disturbing aspects of these images, though, manifest in their seemingly ready access to the viewer following a decade spent investigating explicit displays of sex through

prosthetics, dolls or mannequins. The initial calmness and ostensible normalcy in these pictures only heightens the irony of how deeply damaged these characters are.

*Untitled #409* (2002) depicts a woman dressed casually, wearing gardening gloves against a purple and red background. She seems bedraggled-- utterly exhausted. Even so, upon closer investigation many of the elements in the picture come across as puzzling. Her hair is perfectly coiffed, the gloves show no sign of dirt or previous use, her shirt is still completely white and her hat perches on top of her head in a way that seems to defy gravity. In no way does this woman look like someone hard at work in a garden, or actively pursuing *any* form of manual labor. The type of clothes she wears, the immaculate hair and the ease of her posture indicate a mid-to-upper class woman, who, while appearing domestic only reveals her masquerade. She seems completely out of place, with her pose looking especially staged-- as if modeling for a camera.

Two key elements at work in this photograph suggest a deeper despondency than the picture initially proposes. The make-up accentuates all of the faults in the character's face-- the lipstick plumps the lips to look like they have had cosmetic surgery, the vivid whiteness of the foundation gives her face a ghost-like quality and the brown tint around her eyes make them look worn out, exhausted and sorrowful. The utter lack of a discernible backdrop indicates the second disturbing point of this image. Instead of performing for the camera in an actual garden (or even a fabricated one), the only clue the photograph gives to this setting stems from the presence of the gloves.

The *Hollywood/Hamptons* series marks the first time Sherman removes the background setting, injecting instead a digitally manipulated wash of color. This excision of realism (afforded by the backdrop) effectively unfastens the subject from a fabric of

existence, so every action she performs, or intends to perform, translates as unmotivated, banal and indecipherable. Thus, Sherman shifts the focus of the viewer from constructing narratives in and around these characters to concentrating solely on the body mapping of each woman. After the completion of this photographic rupture, Sherman's subjects appear deeply unhappy, lacking any authentic sense of purpose.

### **THE *COSMOPOLITANS* (2008) SERIES<sup>20</sup>**

Metro Pictures exhibited the *Cosmopolitan* pictures-- Cindy Sherman's latest offerings, from November 15 - December 23, 2008 at their Chelsea location in New York City. Comprising fourteen images, Sherman's photographs capture aging upper-class retired women in domestic settings.<sup>21</sup> There are a few smiling figures, but the majority of these women appear condescending in manner and attitude, with pursed lips, severely arched eyebrows and a penetrating gaze outward towards the viewer.

In *Untitled #465* (2008), Sherman photographs her subject from the side in profile, accentuating her thin frame, harsh angles and protruding shoulder bones. The face appears to be a completely different color from the rest of her skin, demonstrating a thick layer of caked-on pale foundation. The lipstick is applied conservatively, but the eyebrows are shaped exactly, seeming unnatural in their thinness. The lavish jewelry, perfectly coiffed hair and grand backdrop indicate considerable wealth-- a motif Sherman has very rarely explored. The redness of her eyes, though, may either be a sign of

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<sup>20</sup> Unlike Sherman's other photographic series, these images have not yet been given a title, so we offer "Cosmopolitans" as our own label.

<sup>21</sup> There are two anomalies in the series that feature women against unrecognizable digital backgrounds-- *Untitled #473* and *Untitled #467*.

irritation or the result of tears. Despite all of the attempts to cover blemishes and imperfections, the wrinkles of the woman's face show through the concealer.



**FIGURE 2.5**

**CINDY SHERMAN**  
*Untitled (#465)*, 2008  
 color photograph  
 64.5 x 58 inches (image)  
 163.8 x 147.3 cm  
 70 x 63.5 inches (frame)  
 177.8 x 161.3 cm  
**Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures**

Equivocation, as an attempt to obscure definitive readings of the image, is a key component of Sherman's early work; however, in the *Cosmopolitans* series, the lack of narrative clues from the characters' facial expressions registers as representing the malaise of aging and wealth. In his *Artforum* review of the show, David Frankel describes these women as depictions of art market elite-- the type of collectors interested in accumulating Sherman's work. He writes,

“Her newest cast of characters...are immediately recognizable, certainly to anyone on nodding terms with the trustee-and-collector layer of the art world. So horribly accurate do their portraits seem, in clothing, context, facial expression, body language, even physical build, that some may even be individuals, people Sherman has met or seen, but to understand them as types will do fine.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> David Frankel, “Cindy Sherman: Metro Pictures,” *Artforum* (February 2009), 186.

Frankel's return to stereotype as an ostensibly suitable framework for dissecting these images demonstrates the most conventional critical reading of a Cindy Sherman photograph. While the *Cosmopolitans* certainly invest in these social roles, the emphasis on aging and wealth opens Sherman's work to innovative interpretations, once again breaking the constrictive mold in which critics and art historians situate her and her work. Because she does not litter the backgrounds with props, Sherman forces the viewer to analyze the textures not only of these women's clothing, but more importantly their faces. While the *Hollywood/Hamptons* characters reveal an air of defeat and acceptance of their freakishness, the women in the *Cosmopolitans* are much less flamboyant and conspicuous; rather, their eyes, which gaze unrelentingly towards the viewer, convey a sense of resignation in their old age and renunciation of fear towards death.

In reviewing the show for *New York* magazine, Jerry Saltz makes an excellent point that is constructive and helps elucidate our own reading of the *Cosmopolitans*. He writes, "With the freakishness and parody turned down, Sherman finally seems vulnerable, someone going through some of what her characters are. Sherman no longer accuses or ridicules from the outside. Now she has joined her characters in this human comedy. After all these years she's one of us."<sup>23</sup> Saltz incorporates Sherman in her new cast of characters, naming her as both producer and object of these images. His perceptive claim about the decrease in parody and freakishness highlights a decisive shift in Sherman's practice, in order to complicate her art-making operations by implicating herself in each of these photographs. It is certainly clear that she is in no way the age of these women, but the grace and respect with which she treats them (which is only

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<sup>23</sup> Jerry Saltz, "Sherman's March of Time: The Original Chameleon Shows Her Characters' Aging-- And is Reborn," *New York*, 1 December 2008, 77.

tempered by heavy make-up) muddles a clichéd reading of a stock Sherman image.

Sherman challenges the viewer to renegotiate his or her expectations and means of investigation. By implicating herself in each of the *Cosmopolitans* characters, she opens herself up to criticism, debate and disparagement. Even so, this identification process allows Sherman the chance to diversify her work, because doubt brackets every single pose, facial expression and scene. Whereas it was easy to separate the subjects of each picture from our own existence, Saltz aptly dismisses exactly that in the *Cosmopolitans*-- “After all these years, she’s one of us.”

## CONCLUSION

In her essay, “Movies, Monstrosities and Masks: Twenty Years of Cindy Sherman,” Amada Cruz attempts to provide a conclusion to readings of Sherman’s oeuvre that is compact and agreeable in its straightforwardness:

“From the *Untitled Film Stills* to an actual film [*Office Killer*. 1997] and works that inspired it, Sherman’s career has come full circle. The myriad masks and guises she dons allow her to undergo transformations that explore the workings of representation. That Sherman uses herself or surrogates in all of her work is significant as we track her pursuit for a unified self-image, only to discover the futility of such a search. From her earliest pictures, Sherman has played to our desire. The allure of the Untitled Film Stills continues to her more recent images of disgust and horror, which she presents in full-color richness, attracting, and repulsing our gaze.”<sup>24</sup>

Cruz’s endeavor to wrap up Sherman’s artistic practice into neat categories is highly problematic. And more importantly, the concept that Sherman has returned “full circle” to the moment at which the *Untitled Film Stills* emerge is downright frustrating. While it

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<sup>24</sup> Amada Cruz, “Movies, Monstrosities and Masks: Twenty Years of Cindy Sherman,” in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc, 1997), 18.

may be easy to say she has come “full circle” because of her continual manipulation of female stereotypes, we propose that Cindy Sherman has effectively remained relevant because she *rejects* the full circle fallacy. Instead of remaking the same sort of image, she constantly alters her methods of attack. The works endure because they refuse to be confined in categories or essentialized readings. Using ambiguity and doubt, Sherman creates scenes in which she is both present and absent, causing the viewer to continually want more-- more background, more clues, more specifics. Even so, the withholding of narrative substance is exactly what drives Sherman’s photographs, so that the viewer feels both an insider and a total stranger to the figure person behind the mask.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **The Role of the Author**

*"The pictures I make are really ghosts of ghosts; their relationship to the original images is tertiary, i.e., three or four times removed... When I first started doing this work, I wanted to make a picture which contradicted itself. I wanted to put a picture on top of a picture so that there are times when both pictures disappear and other times when they're both manifest; that vibration is basically what the work's about for me-- that space in the middle where there's no picture."*

--Sherrie Levine (1985)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Jeanne Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine (Interview)," in Jeanne Siegel, ed., *Art Talk: The Early 80s* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1988), 247.

Sherrie Levine constantly examines the issue of authorship throughout every single one of her works. She produces art that is visually engaging and intellectually stimulating, yet fairly emotionally detached. The removal of her work from its referent--the original art object--engenders a level of unease, in which the viewer feels both privileged and disconnected to Levine's authorial presence. By selecting material solely from the history of Modernism, she acknowledges the unique contributions of each of her influences to art history; however, by recasting them, she injects her own artistic intention while still leaving enough space to stimulate new dialogues about the work itself.

In the years following the exhibitions of her *After* re-photographs, Levine shifts beyond photography while still working within a two-dimensional framework, employing a wide variety of media, such as watercolor, pencil, acrylic, oil and inkwash. Even so, she continues to draw from well-known male Modernists for source material. In her show "1917," held at Nature Morte Gallery in October of 1984, Levine juxtaposes her *After Egon Schiele* (1984) and *After Kasimir Malevich* (1984) watercolors together. These two artists represent rather divergent schools of Modernist painting. Malevich championed the Russian Constructivist movement, which favors strong geometric forms, harsh lines and abstract arrangements of shape. Schiele, on the other hand, painted human subjects, often nude, in a highly provocative style and with a coy, cool sensuality. Levine, in conversation with Constance Lewallen, describes her interest in these works because of their seemingly irrepressible disparities. She states,

"I showed the Schieles with the Malevichs. As I was doing them, I realized that they were contemporaneous. Both groups of works that I referred to were made

around 1917. I am interested in the idea of parallel realities—it was incredible to me that these two projects could be happening at the same time.”<sup>2</sup>

Even though almost seventy years separates Levine from Schiele and Malevich, by copying their work in watercolor and hanging them together, she establishes a triangular set of relationships, in which the presence of her authorial hand merges with the “parallel realities” of the two Modernist painters. Her show includes a sense of irony as well, because the only reasonable link in 1917 between Schiele and Malevich was their individually vanguard approach to painting. By placing them together in 1984, Levine reduces their differences into a single history of Modernism, while at the same time exposing this monolithic canon. It is an intriguing approach, as it mirrors the exact essentializing process enacted on the history of women artists in the twentieth century.

In subsequent years, Levine moves from drawing, photography and painting to sculpture. Instead of continuing to directly copy works of art, Levine adopts a new method of recasting when she begins making three-dimensional sculptural forms. What distinguishes the recast from the two-dimensional copy, though, is its heightened relationship to spatial dynamics. Her *Bachelors: After Marcel Duchamp*, 1989 (Figure 3.1) series provides an excellent example of this fresh approach. Rather than merely duplicate Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915-23), Levine selects specific elements of the work-- the bachelor figures-- and casts them in frosted glass.<sup>3</sup> Although quite enigmatic, Duchamp’s *Large Glass* enables the viewer to extract certain narrative elements from both its execution and title, thereby

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<sup>2</sup> Constance Lewallen, “Sherrie Levine: Interview” in *Journal of Contemporary Art* 6, no. 2 (1993): 59 - 83.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Duchamp, “Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp” Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 51, 53. and Rosalind Krauss, “Sherrie Levine: Bachelors” in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 182.

weaving a story of sexual desire, manipulation and power dynamics. By withdrawing the bachelors from their context, Sherrie Levine effectively excises the rich story and replaces it with cool, collected and ethereal sculptures, displayed on her own terms.



**FIGURE 3.1**

**SHERRIE LEVINE**  
 “Untitled (The Bachelors:  
*Livre de Grand Magasin*)  
 1989  
 Mixed Media  
 12 x 5 in (30.48 x 12.7 cm)  
 COURTESY:  
 SIMON LEE GALLERY

Rosalind Krauss analyzes Levine’s method by explaining that the artist offers practically no new insight for Duchamp’s original, but rather inhabits the role of the art historian.<sup>4</sup> Krauss writes, “To cast the bachelors in glass, and then to frost the glass, is therefore to add nothing, to create nothing. It is to accept Duchamp’s bachelors, his malic forms, readymade. It is to do nothing more than to occupy that historical position that can

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<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Krauss is not the only one to cast Sherrie Levine as art historian, and to thereby question the relevance of the artist title. This debate is often brought up in critical writings, reviews, and discussions about Levine and her work, most prominently in Howard Singerman’s article, “Sherrie Levine’s Art History.” (2002)

be called the Duchamp effect.<sup>5</sup> While Krauss certainly makes an astute claim in regards to the role of the Duchamp effect,<sup>6</sup> her sole reliance on just that theory hinders a further investigation into Sherrie Levine's *Bachelors* manipulations, because it strips Levine of agency. While she casts her forms according to Duchamp's intended medium (frosted glass), she inserts her own level of authorship into the work by determining which bachelors to cast, the scale of each object and the staging of display for each glass piece. Thus, Duchamp acts as point of origin, influence and collaborator of sorts, in that Levine employs his ideas and artistic desires in order to expand them to include the breadth of three-dimensional sculpture. Sherrie Levine does more than simply realize both Krauss' concept of the Duchamp effect and Marcel Duchamp's intentions for the bachelors-- she adds her own feminist presence to the series through her processes of selection and exhibition.

Moving from the *Bachelors* series to Duchamp's most celebrated work, *Fountain* (1917), Levine shifts her critique from a more curatorial-type reworking to a bold recasting process that imposes a stereotypically feminine presence to *Fountain*. Instead of merely producing an exact copy of the original, she chooses a contemporary urinal mold (not the same model as Duchamp's), covers over the porcelain with highly polished bronze and presents it without a visible signature.<sup>7</sup> One may claim that this is a slight betrayal of Duchamp's intentions, because Levine's *Fountain* (1996) (Figure 3.2) is

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Bachelors," *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 59.

<sup>6</sup> This is a fairly obscure idea Krauss proposes in her "Sherrie Levine: Bachelors" essay. It refers to the long list of proper names that informs the relationship of sculpture to the ready-made, as it is translated through the codes and motivations of desire and pleasure.

<sup>7</sup> Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) features the signature "R. Mutt, 1917."

explicitly *not* a ready-made. However, it is not a betrayal, but a reinterpretation, as Levine's work signals Duchamp's.

Her application of a shiny, smooth and glossed bronze surface generates a sensual impression and intensifies the curvilinear form of the urinal. Whereas Duchamp's original asserts an acute masculinity because of its relationship to the male phallus, Levine does not reject this reading but playfully heightens it. The lustrous exterior of her *Fountain* produces a level of desire, because Levine makes beautiful what was once unseemly. She confronts the conspicuous maleness of the work with a stereotypically coded femaleness through the jewel-like presence of the bronze.

The wall text Levine provides for *Fountain* further complicates the work by indicating certain plasticity in her conception of the author's role:

“I try to make art which celebrates doubt and uncertainty. Which provokes answers but doesn't give them. Which withholds absolute meaning by incorporating parasite meanings. Which suspends meaning while perpetually dispatching you toward interpretation, urging you beyond dogmatism, beyond doctrine, beyond ideology, beyond authority.”<sup>8</sup>

Whereas with the *Bachelors* Sherrie Levine attempts to offer an alternative view of a celebrated work from modernism's canon, with *Fountain* she opens up a liminal space fraught with tension as to the function of the author (through the implication of the ready-made), the art historical resonances of canonical work (the selection of Duchamp's most famous sculpture) and the male-dominated history of modernism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Label text for Sherrie Levine, “Fountain (after Marcel Duchamp: A. P.)” (1991), from the exhibition “Art in Our Time: 1950 to the Present,” Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, September 5, 1999 to September 2, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> In Sherrie Levine's text, “After Brancusi,” a part of the catalog for the “Newborn” show she co-authored with Ann Temkin, she describes her intentions for these sculptures as both motivated by desire for gallery presence (Singerman, 113) and “to maximize the historical references.” (Temkin/Levine, 7).



**FIGURE 3.2**

**SHERRIE LEVINE**

*Fountain: 5*, 1996

cast bronze

17 x 16 x 12 inches (42.5 x 40 x 30 cm)

Edition 5 of 6

SLE/P-9.5 Photo: Tom Powel

Phyllis Rosenzweig, curator emerita at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, conceives of Levine's oeuvre as timeless. Because it engages so many historical moments, while still coming across as smart and intuitive, Rosenzweig recognizes Levine's continual relevance.

"In the eighties, [Postmodernism] was really a rallying cry of 'Let's dissect this whole history of Modernism, this whole history of what we define as the important object-- the concept of the individual genius,' and I think that mission has been accomplished, so nobody had to preach that anymore... [in the late 90's the] work was even beyond that, because underneath everything artists want to make things, so it's really a strategy of how... And she allows you to recognize what she's working with. It has always seemed to me that her work was always a mixture of critique and homage in a very complex way, that the objects or images that she selects open up a lot of questions, like why the specific decision? And then there's often a multi-layered response to her work, and it's presented to you in such a way that it's startling and so you look at it-- she makes you look at things again."<sup>10</sup>

The process of forcing the viewer into the role of both the interrogator and the receiver allows Sherrie Levine to slow down the act of looking, thus opening up questions and evaluations of the work to the long string of historical references bound to those objects. As Rosenzweig notes, the source material is clear-- they are the images of Modern art, so dominant in the texts surrounding such history.

On the one hand, Levine's works may seem to act as a destabilizing force for the canonization of Modernist aesthetics-- her re-photographs from 1981 of famous Evans, Porter and Weston images are thinly veiled attacks on this exact process. On the other, they allow for a continual reappraisal of Modernist ideas, thus authorizing a critical recasting of such. By using sculpture as a way to give her work body, thickness and a definitive presence, she further asserts her artistic and authorial voice, but still retains a slightly irreverent attitude. And in 1999, she once again shifts her feminist commentary,

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<sup>10</sup> Phyllis Rosenzweig, Personal Interview, 16 February 2009.

in order to more openly embrace a potential collaboration with both living and non-living male artists who uphold Modernist aesthetics.

### ***SCULPTURE II (1993) AND SCULPTURE III (1993)***

In 1999, Sherrie Levine joins with sculptor Joost van Oss to recast two works, *Berlin Chair* (1923) and *Divan Table* (1923), by Dutch Modernist furniture designer and architect Gerrit Rietveld. Shown at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City, the exhibition marks Levine's first major collaboration with another living artist, thereby further obscuring the locus of authorship in her acts of appropriation.<sup>11</sup>

Levine and van Oss developed a professional relationship because of their shared interest in furniture-making, Modernist aesthetics and Donald Judd's writings and art works. Describing the beginning of their collaboration, Joost van Oss states: "I started making real furniture-- you know, in the same Rietveld/Judd tradition, which is actually the same reason why Judd made all of his furniture in Marfa. Sherrie came to see me, and she saw the furniture and she had the Rietveld history."<sup>12</sup> After four years of planning, designing and developing their ideas, the artists exhibited *Sculpture II* (1999) and *Sculpture III* (1999), each of which contain twenty-four versions of Rietveld's *Berlin Chair* and *Divan Table*.

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<sup>11</sup> This is not the first collaboration in Levine's career; however, previous joint projects were never as major in scale as Levine and van Oss' in 1999. For other examples of Levine working together with other artists, see Constance Lewallen, "Sherrie Levine" in *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Vol. 6 No. 2 (1993) 59-83.

<sup>12</sup> Joost van Oss, in conversation with the authors, February 17, 2009.



**SHERRIE LEVINE**

*Sculpture II*, 1999

rolled steel

each: 24 x 20 x 20 inches (60 x 50 x 50 cm) overall (as installed): 138 x 218 inches (345 x 545 cm)  
Set 1(24) SLE-17

**FIGURE 3.3**



**SHERRIE LEVINE**

*Sculpture III*, 1999

rolled steel

each: 42 x 30 x 23 inches (106 x 76 x 59 cm) overall (as installed): 202 1/2 x 250 3/4 in (506.2 x 626.8 cm)  
Set 1(24) SLE-20

**FIGURE 3.4**

Reconsidering the Modernist implications of the design, the artists offer their own interpretation that simultaneously critiques and pays homage to the originals. Instead of simply copying Rietveld's furniture, Levine and van Oss modify, recontextualize and recast the works. By changing the medium's material, imposing symmetry, repeating the form twenty-four times, and situating the work within the high-art gallery space, the artists insert their own authorial presence. Although they abandon some aspects of the 1923 originals, the artists engage in a diachronic form of artistic cooperation, while still retaining the Dutch modernist's voice.

Levine and van Oss construct forty-eight individual pieces for this exhibition-- twenty-four recasts of *Divan Table* and twenty-four of *Berlin Chair*, all executed at Rietveld's original scale. The set of tables, arranged in a four by six grid, comprise *Sculpture II*, and the chairs *Sculpture III*. Consequently, one of their "works" is in fact a combination of twenty-four recasts of Rietveld's furniture. For the show, they present *II* and *III* on opposite sides of the room, with a wide aisle separating the two works.

An important aspect of Levine and van Oss' appropriation tactic is a manipulation of symmetry. Rietveld's *Berlin Chair* features a right-handed arm rest; however, *Sculpture III* is left-handed. Howard Singerman suggests this division as a process of enhancing the originals, rather than opposing them. He writes, "The Berlin maquette was right-handed, those of Levine and van Oss in steel-- and in monotonous repetition-- at Paula Copper, left-handed, by way of complement, one might say, or supplement."<sup>13</sup> When placed side-by-side, *Berlin Chair* and *Sculpture III* produce mirror images of each other. What is striking, then, is how Rietveld's chair is *asymmetrical*, announcing its relationship to the De Stijl movement of the early twentieth century. In Levine and van

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<sup>13</sup> Singerman, 117.

Oss' recasting in 1999, the asymmetry becomes symmetry through doubling and the production of a mirror image. However, this imposed visual balance is only detectable through a prior knowledge of the original, since the 1923 and 1999 works are not placed alongside each other. Therefore, this point of collaboration is purely intellectual-- by retaining Rietveld's prototypical design Levine and van Oss respect its ingenuity, but through symmetry destabilize De Stijl theoretical principles.

Rietveld, a Dutch Modernist and architect, was an active participant in the De Stijl, or neoplastic, movement and became famous for his interplay of line, plane and space within architectural constructions.<sup>14</sup> De Stijl artists explored the relationships between architecture, design, spacial harmony and geometric order. They advocated strict form over organic shapes and favored strong horizontal and vertical lines, areas of primary colors and bold monochromes.<sup>15</sup> Another key aspect of De Stijl style, and the one Levine and van Oss challenge, is an emphasis on asymmetry and contrast, seen as a "new harmony" in visual art.<sup>16</sup> In making *Sculpture III* right-handed, the artists playfully reverse De Stijl's innovative concept of asymmetrical harmony by enforcing an intellectual balance between their work and Rietveld's.

This symmetrical realignment of *Sculpture II/III* and *Divan Table/Berlin Chair* is further exacerbated by the artists' serialization process. Recasting the 1923 originals twenty-four times and placing them in a grid formation ostensibly removes their utilitarian purpose. However, the functional presence of Rietveld's tables and chairs does

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Wilk, "Gerrit Rietveld: Paris, Centre Pompidou," in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol.135, No. 1086 (Sept., 1993), pp. 652.

<sup>15</sup> H. Henkels, "Neo-plasticism." Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online. 23 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy.wm.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T061694>>.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 190.

not disappear; Levine and van Oss simply displace it. Using serial reproduction forces the objects out of the realm of furniture and into the realm of sculpture. Consequently, this method distances the viewer from reading *Sculpture II* and *III* as a sum of their individual parts. Instead, function no longer matters because Levine and van Oss recode Rietveld's originals as two single works of art-- to be looked at, but not operated.

In order to comprehend this shift from furniture to sculpture, we must investigate the ways in which Levine and van Oss physically change the material substance and surface of Rietveld's design. In her essay accompanying this exhibition, Catherine Ingraham points to their substitution of steel for wood as integral to their reinterpretation of the Dutch artist: "Chairs, according to Rietveld's treatise, should be made of flexible material — tubular metal (not rolled steel, which is the material Levine and van Oss are using), wood, cane, leather, plush— in order to accommodate the constantly mobile posture of a seated human body."<sup>17</sup> According to Joost van Oss, Sherrie Levine was fully aware of Rietveld's aesthetic convictions before their collaboration even began.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the selection of steel in place of wood is not random; rather, Levine consciously and deliberately modifies the material in order to alter the functional coding of the original table and chair.

The use of steel provides greater weight to the object than does wood. Rietveld's purpose in employing wood was to link its physical flexibility with the mobility of the human figure, paralleling form with function. By changing the material and making the objects appear more solid, Levine and van Oss visually inflate the density of each chair and table without increasing its actual size. The motivation, then, is to present the objects

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<sup>17</sup> Catherine Ingraham, *Sherrie Levine/Joost Van Oss* (New York: Paula Cooper Gallery, 1999), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Joost van Oss, in conversation with the authors, February 17, 2009.

as more like sculpture than furniture. According to Joost van Oss, “If you make a table or chair out of steel, it is really a sculpture-- it’s not a table or chair anymore.”<sup>19</sup>

Another break from Rietveld’s intention is the removal of the painted surface in *Sculpture II* and *III*. Ingraham writes, “Each piece was painted experimentally, in contrasting colors in order to elide, or at least suggestively mark, the moment that the chair and table begin to lose a certain furniture-like autonomy and slide into the more general category of ‘spatial object.’”<sup>20</sup> Color is integral in the realization of De Stijl design, as the application of pigment works to defy the thickness of an entity:

“The brightly colored planes of [Rietveld’s Schröder House] interpenetrate in a manner indebted to Cubism and Futurism, seemingly unattached to a solid volume. Rather, a sense of weightless openness pervades the structure. The contrasting bold primary colors also add to this effect, as certain details, such as the yellow steel post that supports one corner of the front balcony, seem almost detached from the overall building.”<sup>21</sup>

By stripping the table and chair’s painted surface, Levine and van Oss reverse this effect of weightlessness, making *Sculpture II* and *III* appear heavier and more solid. This action is further heightened by the serialization process, causing every individual recast to seem even more dense than it would isolated outside of the grid.

Levine and van Oss’ last method in modifying Rietveld’s originals is the recontextualization of the work. By removing the objects from the Schröder House (Rietveld’s intended site for *Divan Table* and *Berlin Chair*) and reinserting them into the high-art gallery space, the artists create a sense of aloofness and detachment. Given the nature of their collaboration (which began due to a shared interest in Donald Judd), the

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<sup>19</sup> Joost van Oss, in conversation with the authors, February 17, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Ingraham, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Eskilson, 190.

actual placement of these works is paramount. According to Judd, art should not be shown in the white-cubed structure of institutions:

“This is art seen in a commercial situation, not as it should be seen. The lighting is always bad, created by spotlights so that the work will look precious, the saleable jewel. My guess is that this appearance began in the exhibitions of the Museum of Modern Art and was adopted by the galleries and spread by the later museums.”<sup>22</sup>

Judd’s assertion is problematic in relation to Levine and van Oss’ practice. Their placement of *Sculpture II* and *III* seems a direct contradiction to Judd’s stance. By engaging this type of gallery space that Judd criticizes, the artists are not actually deferring to high-art exhibition codes; rather, they use the space to expose the unnaturalness of their operation. Repeating each chair and table twenty-four times, putting them in a grid format and displaying them at Paula Cooper produces the illusion of their high-art status. This undertaking ostensibly opposes Judd and Rietveld, but by revealing its pretension actually aligns with them. Therefore, Levine and van Oss’ recontextualization tactic is really a form of homage.

## CONCLUSION

Levine and van Oss’ operations in making *Sculpture II* and *III* indicate how they are able to critique, venerate and work in collaboration with their historical influences. Howard Singerman describes this form of engagement:

“The gallery... seems to me crowded with presences, with the names and narrative substances of references and collaborators, as though they were aspects of the work... the historical or discursive counterparts of three-dimensional

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<sup>22</sup> Donald Judd, in Singerman, “Sherrie Levine’s Art History,” 119.

viewing. Certainly Rietveld was there in the gallery; these works are *about* Rietveld, in a way that the photographs after Evans were *not* about him.”<sup>23</sup>

Rather than a flagrant attack on the canonization process of modernism, as shown in the *After* re-photographs, *Sculpture II* and *III* engenders a balanced conversation between male and female artists. Levine and van Oss rewrite certain aspects of *Divan Table* and *Berlin Chair*, and in doing so re-open Rietveld’s work to new interpretations. This approach is neither outwardly nor militantly feminist, but that’s the goal-- Levine demonstrates how a woman artist can acknowledge the significance of their male counterparts without being defined through men.

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<sup>23</sup> Singerman, 114.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Spatial Constructions and Manipulations**

*“You know, the bottom line is, ‘How can I be the most effective?’ And it’s a conflation of issues of meaning. How meaning is made through the visual, through sounds, through still and moving pictures. There is no recipe, you just try and see what works.”*

-- Barbara Kruger [1999]<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Lynne Tillman, “Barbara Kruger (Interview)” in Ann Goldstein, ed., *Barbara Kruger [Thinking of You]* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1999), 192.

Barbara Kruger takes issue with the spaces of cultural institutions and networks regarding their transmission of social coding. By exposing each of these places' implicit (and oftentimes invisible) power structures, she attempts to raise awareness of these processes while also condemning them. In this chapter, we examine Kruger's foray into public art-- art that engages its social surroundings and whose conveyance is contingent upon these systems of meaning. We look specifically at her 1991 exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery in New York City, in which Kruger employs installation conventions to aggressively attack the viewers' comfort in the act of looking, as well as aiming to destabilize their reigning moral ideologies. Kruger favors a language in her textual slogans that emphasizes collective experience, which simultaneously decentralizes her voice, renegotiates the role of the author and functions as an active agent of change.

Integral to her method are the operations of artistic distribution. Kruger places her photomontages on matchbooks, t-shirts, bags, billboards, ads, postcards, posters and urban transportation shelters, to name but a few examples. While these objects offer her the chance to diversify her dispersal method, there is a clear shift in the late 1980s when Kruger redeploys her photomontages in installation-driven exhibitions. Starting in 1989, Kruger uses well-known gallery spaces across the United States to position her work within the contexts of architectural and commercial space. Using her all-out approach of words mixed with text and stark color (or lack thereof, as the case may be), she maintains the visual signature she developed in 1981.

In three different shows from Chicago to Los Angeles and New York, Kruger transforms prominent galleries into spaces of unrestrained, open-faced hostility (Figures

4.1, 4.2 and 4.3).<sup>2</sup> She covers all the architectural cube's surfaces with something-- text, image, and/or color. These imposed elements blatantly announce their spatial novelty, while at the same time create an impression of a certain cohesive fullness because of their streamlined visual appearance.

On the floors and ceilings are giant blocks of white text, in Kruger's characteristic Futura Bold Italic font, superimposed on a blood-red painted background. Along the walls are photomontages juxtaposing colossal-sized images with elephantine text stretching from floor to ceiling. What had been a scrupulously clean, spare, white-washed gallery of high-art becomes an acrimonious arena of resistance.

Each element from these shows is more antagonistic and confrontational than Kruger's previous works because of the installation's size and enclosed space. The giant blocks of color and text are interrupted, bracketed and informed by the enormous images of screaming children, a giant baby sucking on a elongated bottle of milk, a man with a steel door providing locked access to his brain and a naked woman wearing a gas mask propped up on a cross, making her into an S&M inspired pornographic Mary Magdalene cum Jesus Christ. The words' malicious intent, the red paint's pervasive and vitriolic look, the images' brutal implications and the installation design all endeavor to paralyze, overwhelm and cripple the viewer. There really is not a way to escape the message Barbara Kruger lays out with unabashed firmness-- one cannot leave the Mary Boone Gallery without feeling somewhat violated.

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<sup>2</sup> There was a difference in the design of each gallery, with the Fred Hoffman Gallery in Los Angeles (1989) including only giant floor text and then the small Money/Power works from the 1980s distributed sparingly across the wall. The culmination of this project was the Mary Boone Gallery in New York City (1991) that encompassed the all-over-ness described in this chapter.



## FIGURE 4.1

# BARBARA KRUGER

## Installation:

Mary Boone Gallery

417 West E

New York

January 1991.

COURT



## FIGURE 4.2

BARBARA KRUGER

## Installation:

Mary Boone Gallery

417 West Broad

New York

January



**FIGURE 4.3**

### **BARBARA KRUGER**

Installation:

Mary Boone Gallery

417 West Broadway

New York

January 1991.

COURTESY: MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK

The visual aspect of these exhibitions is clearly arresting; however, the tone of Kruger's text is even more conspicuous in its reproof. The words across the floor read "All that seemed beneath you is speaking to you now. All that seemed deaf hears you. All that seemed dumb knows what's on your mind. All that seemed blind sees through you. All that seemed silent is putting the words right into your mouth." In this collection of phrases, Kruger uses the linguistic opposition between speaker and subject. Her words apply a solidified binary between the collective "you" and the implied omniscient narrator. However, even this dichotomous relationship is problematic. If Kruger is the one who actively makes the art, does that mean she also is the one dictating the words? Is she the one speaking to "you," the viewer? Where does Kruger end and this omnipresent and formless voice begin? According to Craig Owens, who wrote extensively on the role of postmodernism, gender politics, and sexuality in art, Kruger uses language to inscribe positionality, which in turn exposes stereotypes as concepts with ideological ramifications:

"Kruger's work, then, is concerned not with action, but with the stereotype's transformation of action into gesture... The personal pronouns 'I/we' and 'you,' which do not designate objects that exist independently of discourse, but manifest the subject positions of partners in a conversation."<sup>3</sup>

The employment of deictic designations brings Kruger in direct contact with the spectator, and forces a relationship between the two that produces uneasiness and anxiety. This association is heightened by the positioning of text across all planes of the exhibition space, making these rooms suffocating and claustrophobic.

Kruger is known for engaging systems of representation in order to illuminate their specific conventions-- she works primarily with linguistic and pictorial systems--

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<sup>3</sup> Craig Owens, "The Medusa Effect, or, the Spectacular Ruse," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 192.

and does so in order to expose their dynamics of power and oppression. Rosalyn Deutsche, in describing these installation exhibitions, demonstrates this trend in Kruger's work, focusing on the manipulation of architectural space:

“Integrated with the gallery’s literal ground and thus merging linguistic and non-linguistic systems of representation, the words pointed to the violence inherent in a discourse of grounds, a discourse through which space consolidates its identity by disavowing its status as a representation, by making its exterior disappear.”<sup>4</sup>

Deutsche shows the discrepancies between architectural ideology (as “disavowing its status as a representation”) and Kruger’s attempts to unveil cultural beliefs through spatial manipulation. It is exactly within this tension that the Chicago, Los Angeles and New York installations function so impressively. They mark the first moment in Kruger’s career where she fully engages all aspects of architectural codings. Instead of inserting a single photomontage into a public area (such as on a billboard or as a poster), at Mary Boone Kruger fabricates an enclosed field that is open to the public but operates as a private sphere. Thus, Kruger’s curatorial approach of selecting exactly what images and texts to use within a specific space delineates her attempt to expose reigning ideologies while removing the traditional look of a high-art gallery.

In her work, Kruger has never shied away from employing critical theory; rather, she often adopts much of the language of twentieth-century philosophical, linguistic and ideological theorists. Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu have all featured prominently in Kruger’s photomontages since 1981.<sup>5</sup> Kate Linker follows

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<sup>4</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, “Breaking Ground: Barbara Kruger’s Spatial Practice” in Ann Golstein, ed. *Barbara Kruger [Thinking of You]* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 80.

<sup>5</sup> Carol Squiers, “‘Who Laughs Last?’: The Photographs of Barbara Kruger,” in Ann Golstein, ed. *Barbara Kruger [Thinking of You]* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 141.

Kruger's early work as it relates to issues of subject definition vis-a-vis social, political and economic forces. She writes,

“To Kruger, power is not localized in specific institutions but is dispersed through a multiplicity of sites, operating in the range of discursive procedures that govern sexuality, morality, the family, education and so on. Conceived in this manner, power cannot be centralized; rather, it is diffuse, decentralized, and, in consequence, anonymous: it exists less as a ‘body’ than as a network of relations unifying social apparatuses and institutions.”<sup>6</sup>

Linker's emphasis on power as pervasive, rejecting categories and built into shifting relationships that reinforce social norms and structures is essential in further investigating the power of rhetoric in Kruger's work. This view of power is reminiscent of Foucault, who theorized power as existing through discourse and the social reproduction.<sup>7</sup> As Linker states, Kruger applies Foucault's point but shifts its emphasis, placing stress on the role of the stereotype and the pose as methods for power construction. Kruger's version of Foucault's theory takes into account the role of consumerism, economics and gender roles in an ever-shifting aggregate of social realities, while providing visual examples of their cultural manifestations.

How is this, then, played out in Kruger's oeuvre? In works such as *Untitled (We have received orders not to move)*, (1982) (Figure 4.4) *Untitled (I am your reservoir of poses)*, (1983) (Figure 4.5) *Untitled (Your comfort is my silence)*, (1981) (Figure 1.6) *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, (1981) (Figure 4.6) and *Untitled (We construct the chorus of missing persons)* (1983), the textual moments invoke (or suggest) the pivotal words of current critical theory, such as “orders/silence” (Foucault), “pose” (Roland Barthes), “gaze” (Laura Mulvey), and “missing persons” (Bourdieu).

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<sup>6</sup> Kate Linker, *Love For Sale: The Words and Pictures of Barbara Kruger* (Harry Abrams, Inc: New York, 1990), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

However, they also, in many ways, act as captions. It is impossible to read Kruger's photomontages without evaluating her rhetorical influences on the textual discourse and codings of the image.

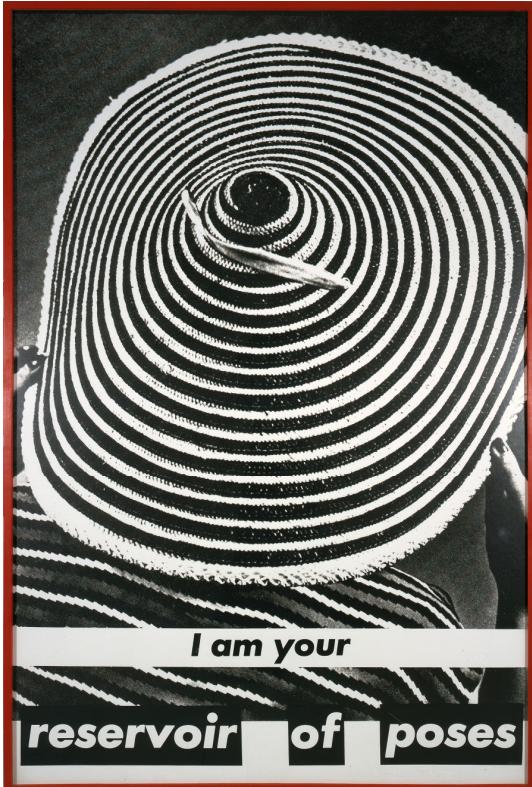


**FIGURE 4.4**

**BARBARA KRUGER**

“Untitled” (We have received  
orders not to move)  
72” by 48” (183 cm by 122 cm)  
photograph  
1982

PHOTO COURTESY: MARY BOONE  
GALLERY, NEW YORK.  
(MBG#1094)



**FIGURE 4.5**

**BARBARA KRUGER**

“Untitled” (I am your reservoir of poses)  
73” by 48” (185 cm by 122 cm)  
photograph  
1983  
PHOTO COURTESY: MARY BOONE  
GALLERY, NEW YORK.  
(MBG#729)



**FIGURE 4.6**

**BARBARA KRUGER**

“Untitled” (Your gaze hits the side of my face)  
55” by 41” (140 cm by 104 cm)  
photograph  
1981  
PHOTO COURTESY: MARY BOONE  
GALLERY, NEW YORK.  
(MBG#729)

## A SHIFT IN DISCOURSE

While Barbara Kruger applies postmodern theoretical discourse in her photomontages, we maintain that this practice does not limit her to specific modes of representation or outdated cultural systems. Instead, Kruger's redistribution of her work in different social spaces throughout her career continually re-informs her art, providing a certain contingency of meaning to her texts and images that changes with cultural fluctuations. Thus, we believe it is prudent and imperative to reposition her work alongside contemporary shifts in feminist discourse, thereby investigating the potential divergences and/or similarities with the tenets of these debates.

Cornelia Butler, in her opening essay for *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*,<sup>8</sup> describes the difficulty in succinctly defining the feminist art movement, as well as the implicit complications within this clarification process due to the lack of a single voice--a master narrative to bind everything together. She writes,

“I want to invoke bell hooks’ proposal to resignify the term ‘feminist movement,’ to deliver it from its nomenclatorial fixity and reconnect it to the verb ‘to move’-- which all the restless possibility that word connotes... Whereas art movements traditionally defined by charismatic individuals tended to be explicated and debated through manifestos and other writings, feminism is a relatively open-ended system that has, throughout its history of engagement with visual art, sustained an unprecedented degree of internal critique and contained wildly divergent political ideologies and practices... The artists in this exhibition contributed to the movement and development of feminism in art, if only by reinforcing two central tenets: the personal is political, and all representation is political.”<sup>9</sup>

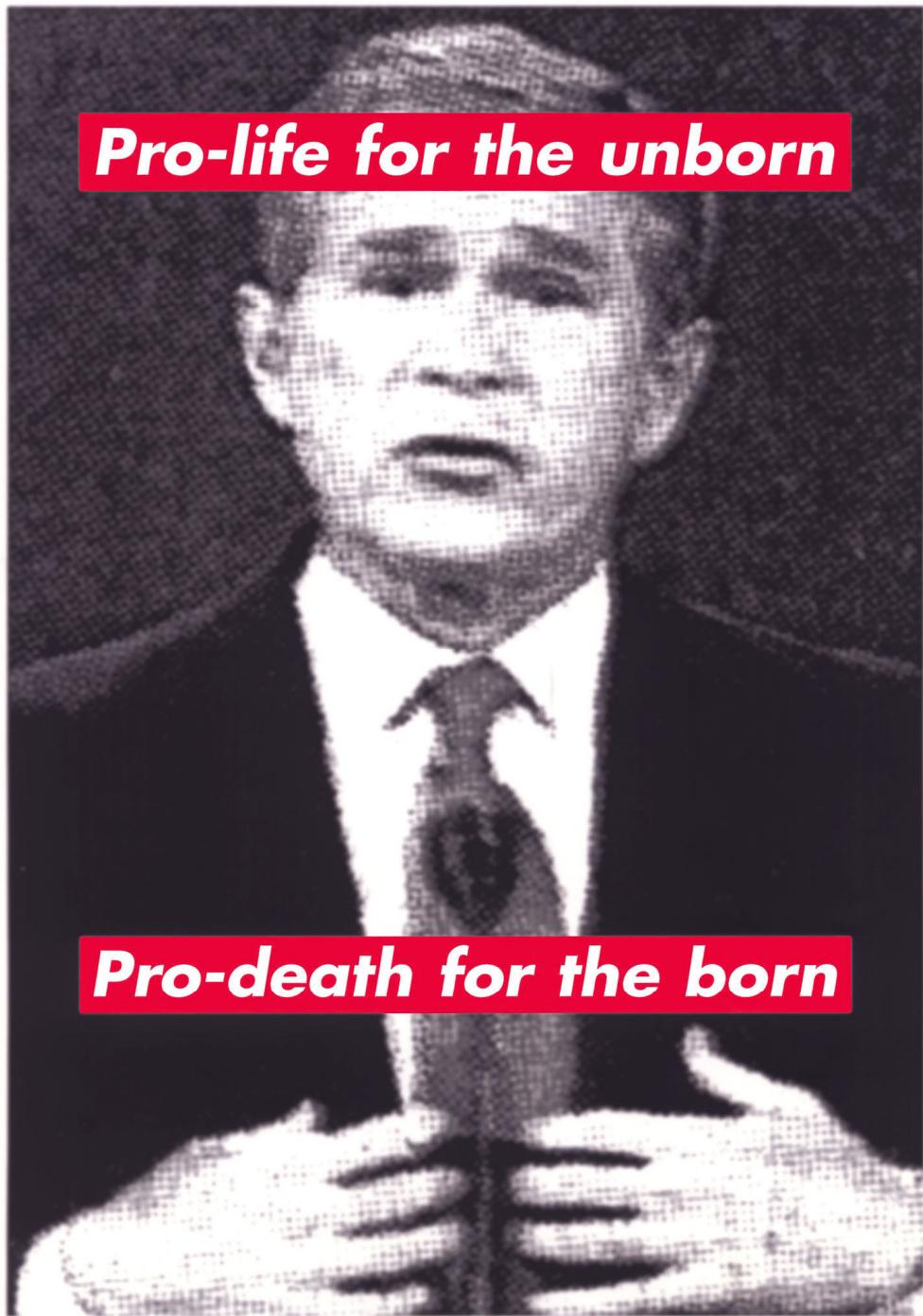
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<sup>8</sup> Cornelia Butler curated *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*-- “a comprehensive, historical exhibition [meant to] examine the international foundations and legacy of feminist art”-- for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, March 4 - July 16, 2007. (Source: “Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” Museum of Contemporary Art, <http://www.moca.org/wack/?cat=2>)

<sup>9</sup> Cornelia Butler, “Art and Feminism: An Ideology of Shifting Criteria,” in Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed., *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA 2007), 15.

Butler's emphasis on the shifting criteria for a definitive ideology of and for the feminist art movement underscores the difficulties of bracketing such an expansive and varied array of female voices. However, her assertion at the end of this passage is indicative of an attempt to provide at least some sense of cohesion in the approach to characterizing the notion of the feminist voice. In many ways, Butler's curatorial decisions mirror the reconceptualization of feminism in art today, for it rests within the tension inherent in classification-- in disallowing the construction of a master narrative to speak to everyone's needs and desires. Rather, the friction created by both convergent *and* divergent practices, which are thus labeled as uniquely feminist, opens up the field to include voices that do not reduce to essentials or utopias, but instead are given the space to exist for themselves-- to speak unhindered.

Butler's assertion of the two major principles that underpin *Wack!*-- the personal is political, and all representation is political-- seems almost a perfect fit with the work of Barbara Kruger (who, interestingly enough, was *not* included in Butler's exhibition). From as early as her picture collages in the late 1970s through her most recent film installations, billboards and photomontages, Kruger unabashedly and purposefully investigates the ways in which the personal is in every way political. A blatant example of this would be her work, *Untitled (Pro-life for the unborn / Pro-Death for the born)* (2004) (Figure 4.8) with an image of George W. Bush in black-and-white. She merges the issue of reproductive rights with the reigning figure (Bush) of outright hostility towards the pro-choice movement. The work's tone conveys enmity, issuing what sounds like a cold, heartless edict, and seeming to flatten the image into a singular purpose.



**BARBARA KRUGER**

“Untitled” (Pro-life for the unborn/Pro-death for the born)

30” by 21” (76 cm by 53 cm)

photograph

2000/2004

COURTESY: MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

(MBG#8952)

**FIGURE 4.7**

Kruger spares nothing and no one. Certainly, she has definite political thoughts and opinions, but her artistic modes of attack are meant to indict the cultural processes through stereotype. Thus, her hostility toward George W. Bush can be read as such, but seeing it within the context of Kruger's oeuvre makes one realize that it is just another iteration of an attempt to expose the political and reinsert it into the realm of the personal.

Barbara Kruger's photomontages are aggressive, concise, beautiful and hard to digest. An essential point in her practice is allowing for her works to be translated into other languages, so that her varied audiences (though mostly Western) are hopefully able to grasp her economy of phrase. While her images certainly resonate within the gallery space, they transform and open to new interpretations when placed outside of the conventional art institution. By repositioning her work in the public sphere, Kruger takes issue with dominant ideologies by radically reconstructing space, thereby exposing stereotypes and social politics. Rosalyn Deutsche explores this issue of spatial development in her reading of Kruger's practices. She writes,

“Kruger breaks the silence. Calling attention to the acts of exclusion required to produce space-- to enclose something within a boundary-- she challenges the conception that space is a closed interior, whose limits are fixed by a pre-given ground. Rather, limits are marked off and space constructed as a coherent inside by a gesture of refusal, that is, by setting something aside. The operation of dividing an inside and an outside-- an operation of power-- makes space possible.”<sup>10</sup>

By thwarting high-art customs for exhibiting work, Deutsche highlights the ways in which Kruger challenges pervasive social stereotypes and political dynamics by entering the realm of the “external.” By placing photomontages on bus shelters, billboards in ghettos, or along highways, Kruger also seeks to infiltrate even the seemingly most sordid areas of urban culture.

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<sup>10</sup> Deutsche, 77.

Even though Kruger is known for varying her artistic deployment methods, she also tackles distinct demographics as well. In 1998, she exhibited on the side of the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York-- an area known for its rich residents. She used banners along the facade of the building that read “MONEY” and “TASTE,” along the top of the building was “YOU BELONG HERE,” and across the street’s sidewalk fences were “BRILLIANT,” “MEMORABLE,” and “RIDICULOUS.” Katherine Dieckmann examines Kruger’s motives in accosting a specific demographic of people-- the wealthy:

“Kruger told a local newspaper, *The East Hampton Star*, that she hoped her installation might ‘promote doubt.’ This is, of course, rarely the intention of an artist summering in the Hamptons. Her Parrish show not only questioned how formal institutions tend to appeal to elite and self-congratulatory audiences, but how artists often mold themselves to the kind of monied culture that supports their work... Kruger’s Parrish piece was a witty act of dissension from prevailing social norms.”<sup>11</sup>

Dieckmann posits the Parrish installation against the quintessential Southampton resident; however, her reliance on Kruger’s attempt to destabilize the elite fails to encompass the wide range of the artist’s processes of social critique. Kruger pushes her work into the highest and lowest socioeconomic areas of culture in order to extend across classes, in order to investigate all forms of socially reproduced stereotypes, gendered roles and politicized bodies.

In 2008, West of Rome, a contemporary art projects venture based in Los Angeles, CA, grouped Barbara Kruger with Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman and Louise Lawler in their *Women in the City* public art exhibition. The show took place across Los Angeles in February, featuring works by these artists on billboards, giant projections,

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<sup>11</sup> Katherine Dieckmann, “Barbara Kruger, Gal of the People” in Ann Golstein, ed. *Barbara Kruger [Thinking of You]* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 170.

posters, stickers, marquees and jumbotrons, and through the mediums of video, photography, collage and sound. The purpose of the exhibition was to gather four women who purportedly spearheaded the feminist art movement of the 1980s and bring them back into the context of the urban street sphere. The press release for the show reads,

“One of the fundamental achievements of the historical feminist movement was the appropriation of the streets: thousands of women were invading the cities of the western world fighting for their rights. Now that those rights have been asserted and women have begun to fully permeate and influence politics, culture and the art system, “Women in the City” can showcase the art of women in empowered position.”<sup>12</sup>

It is certainly an intriguing concept-- assemble together four women who have been culturally established and accepted into the American high art canon, and re-deploy them in a form of cohesive theatricality.

Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger are not strangers to this form of artistic circulation. Holzer is well-known for her *Truisms*, which she projected upon a giant LED screen in Times Square in 1982. While Holzer works with the medium of words, and often on a grand-scale, she, like Kruger, ventured into mass marketing through t-shirts, stickers, benches, etc. to spread her texts. However, unlike Holzer and Kruger, the work of Cindy Sherman and Louise Lawler, while sometimes in the form of large-scale photographs, usually does not inhabit such a conspicuous space. This exhibition, though, shifts their usual tactics of displaying their art. Instead of an 8 in x10 in black-and-white photograph, they present Sherman’s *Untitled Films Stills* as giant billboards. Lawler did not broadcast her conceptual sound works from the late 1970s through websites, libraries or big theaters, but for this show, West of Rome scattered her work throughout the city, using these arenas of presentation.

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<sup>12</sup> West of Rome, “Women in the City (Press Release),” <http://www.womeninthecity.org>.

The *Women in the City* exhibition challenges not only the preconceived notions we as a public hold about these artists, but also provides a new purpose in grouping these four women together. Instead of merely explicating the history of art through the museum context, the spreading of their artworks to the Los Angeles streets exposes the variety in these feminist sentiments, which, according to West of Rome, had been reduced to a singular account. West of Rome helps re-write the history of feminism in art that Cornelia Butler and bell hooks espouse. By scattering the works throughout the city, the curators impart the notion that disagreement, a multiplicity in production practices and division between intended audiences is essential for a twenty-first century premise of feminist art.

## **CONCLUSION**

While Barbara Kruger is famous for the photomontages that she began in 1981, her endeavors in the public sphere through spatial manipulations and reconstructions further her art-making practice. While she often relies on pronouns in her texts-- claiming things such as “Your comfort is my silence” and “We don’t need another hero”-- the fact is that Kruger is not only embodying the female voice; rather, she is producing it. Kruger does not apologize or temper her language. She in no way backs down in the face of opposition. And most importantly, while she is aggressive, bellicose and loud, she acts in a way that allows for a multiplicity of female voices by remaining slightly ambiguous regarding the locus of the author. But it is Kruger’s intention to inspire social anxiety in order to re-broker social categories, cultural beliefs, roles and stereotypes. As she said to

Lynne Tillmann in 1999, “I use[d] the phrase ‘Doubt tempers belief with sanity.’ The notion of belief is tricky, because left to its own devices it can court a kind of surety, an unquestioning allegiance that fears doubt and destroys difference. I prefer belief in smaller doses, in degrees and increments. It becomes a lot less scary and avoids the binary ‘us-vs.-them’-isms, which define our lives in both a local and global level.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Tillmann, 191.

## CONCLUSION

The works of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger are remarkably varied, engaging a breadth of human experience, both male and female. Instead of trying to limit their array of art-making practices and methods of distribution into compact categories, we reevaluate their operations using feminist discourse that enables a range of interpretations. By focusing on specific examples from each oeuvre, we propose a chronology that allows for each artist to alter, expand, and potentially move outside feminist dialogues. The point of grouping these women artists together is not to essentialize-- not to reduce their individual impacts into a tight synthesis, but to show the wide scope of feminist statements since the 1980s.

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