



Pictures

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DOUGLAS CRIMP

Pictures was the title of an exhibition of the work of Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith, which I organized for Artists Space in the fall of 1977.¹ In choosing the word pictures for this show, I hoped to convey not only the work's most salient characteristic—recognizable images—but also and importantly the ambiguities it sustains. As is typical of what has come to be called postmodernism, this new work is not confined to any particular medium; instead, it makes use of photography, film, performance, as well as traditional modes of painting, drawing, and sculpture. Picture, used colloquially, is also nonspecific: a picture book might be a book of drawings or photographs, and in common speech a painting, drawing, or print is often called, simply, a picture. Equally important for my purposes, picture, in its verb form, can refer to a mental process as well as the production of an aesthetic object.

The following essay takes its point of departure from the catalogue text for Pictures; but it focuses on different issues and addresses an aesthetic phenomenon implicitly extending to many more artists than the original exhibition included. Indeed, although the examples discussed and illustrated here are very few, necessitated by the newness and relative obscurity of this work, I think it is safe to say that what I am outlining is a predominant sensibility among the current generation of younger artists, or at least of that group of artists who remain committed to radical innovation.

1. *Pictures*, New York, Committee for the Visual Arts, 1977. The exhibition subsequently traveled to the Allen Art Museum, Oberlin, the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, and the University of Colorado Museum, Boulder. I wish to thank Helene Winer, Director of Artists Space, on three counts: for inviting me to organize the Artists Space exhibition, thereby giving me the opportunity of seeing a wide variety of current work in studios; for steering me in the general direction of the work I have come to find so engaging; and, most particularly, for her commitment to showing the work of a group of young artists of major significance which would otherwise have remained publicly invisible.

Art and illusion, illusion and art
 Are you really here or is it only art?
 Am I really here or is it only art?
 —Laurie Anderson

In his famous attack against minimal sculpture, written in 1967, the critic Michael Fried predicted the demise of art as we then knew it, that is, the art of modernist abstract painting and sculpture. "*Art degenerates*," he warned us, "*as it approaches the condition of theatre*," theater being, according to Fried's argument, "*what lies between the arts*."² And indeed, over the past decade we have witnessed a radical break with that modernist tradition, effected precisely by a preoccupation with the "theatrical." The work that has laid most serious claim to our attention throughout the seventies *has* been situated between, or outside the individual arts, with the result that the integrity of the various mediums—those categories the exploration of whose essences and limits constituted the very project of modernism—has dispersed into meaninglessness.³ Moreover, if we are to agree with Fried that "*the concept of art itself . . . [is] meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts*," then we must assume that art, too, as an ontological category, has been put in question. What remain are just so many aesthetic activities, but judging from their current vitality we need no longer regret or wish to reclaim, as Fried did then, the shattered integrity of modernist painting and sculpture.

What then are these new aesthetic activities? Simply to enumerate a list of mediums to which "painters" and "sculptors" have increasingly turned—film, photography, video, performance—will not locate them precisely, since it is not merely a question of shifting from the conventions of one medium to those of another. The ease with which many artists managed, some ten years ago, to change mediums—from sculpture, say, to film (Serra, Morris, et al.) or from dance to film (Rainer)—or were willing to "corrupt" one medium with another—to present a work of sculpture, for example, in the form of a photograph (Smithson, Long)—or abjured any physical manifestation of the work (Barry, Weiner) makes it clear that the actual characteristics of the medium, per se, cannot any longer tell us much about an artist's activity.

But what disturbed Fried about minimalism, what constituted, for him, its theatricality, was not only its "perverse" location *between* painting and sculp-

2. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, V, 10 (Summer 1967), 21; reprinted in *Minimal Art: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Battcock, New York, E. P. Dutton, 1968, pp. 116-47. All subsequent quotations from Fried are from this article; the italics throughout are his.

3. This is not to say that there is not a great deal of art being produced today that can be categorized according to the integrity of its medium, only that that production has become thoroughly academic; take, for example, the glut of so-called pattern painting, a modernist-derived style that has not only been sanctioned with a style name, but has generated a critical commentary, and constituted an entire category of selection for the most recent Whitney Museum biennial exhibition.

ture,⁴ but also its “preoccupation with time—more precisely, with the *duration of experience*.” It was temporality that Fried considered “paradigmatically theatrical,” and therefore a threat to modernist abstraction. And in this, too, Fried’s fears were well founded. For if temporality was implicit in the way minimal sculpture was experienced, then it would be made thoroughly explicit—in fact the only possible manner of experience—for much of the art that followed. The mode that was thus to become exemplary during the seventies was performance—and not only that narrowly defined activity called performance art, but all those works that were constituted *in a situation* and *for a duration* by the artist or the spectator or both together. It can be said quite literally of the art of the seventies that “you had to be there.” For example, certain of the video installations of Peter Campus, Dan Graham, and Bruce Nauman, and more recently the sound installations of Laurie Anderson not only required the presence of the spectator to become activated, but were fundamentally concerned with that registration of presence as a means toward establishing meaning.⁵ What Fried demanded of art was what he called “presentness,” a transcendent condition (he referred to it as a state of “grace”) in which “*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*”; what he feared would replace that condition as a result of the sensibility he saw at work in minimalism—what *has* replaced it—is presence, the *sine qua non* of theater.

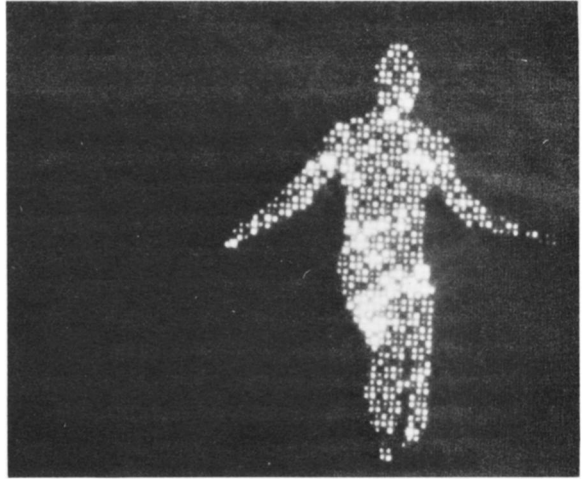
The presence before him was a presence.

—Henry James

An art whose strategies are thus grounded in the literal temporality and presence of theater has been the crucial formulating experience for a group of artists currently beginning to exhibit in New York. The extent to which this experience fully pervades their work is not, however, immediately apparent, for its theatrical dimensions have been transformed and, quite unexpectedly, reinvested in the pictorial image. If many of these artists can be said to have been apprenticed in the field of performance as it issued from minimalism, they have nevertheless begun to reverse its priorities, making of the literal situation and duration of the performed event a tableau whose presence and temporality are utterly psychologized; performance becomes just one of a number of ways of “staging” a picture. Thus the performances of Jack Goldstein do not, as had usually been the case, involve the artist’s performing the work, but rather the presentation of an event in such a manner and at such a distance that it is apprehended as representation—representation not, however, conceived as the *re*-presentation of that which is prior, but as the unavoidable condition of intelligibility of even that which is present.

4. Fried was referring to Donald Judd’s claim that “the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture,” made in his article “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook*, 8 (1964), 74–82.

5. Rosalind Krauss has discussed this issue in many of her recent essays, notably in “Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October*, 1 (Spring 1976), and “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” Parts 1 and 2, *October*, 3 (Spring 1977) and 4 (Fall 1977).

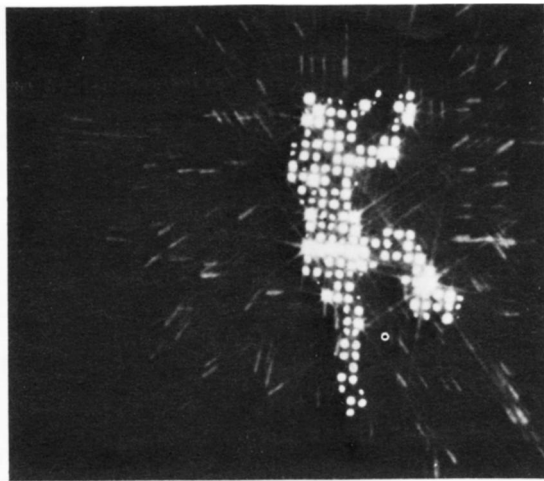
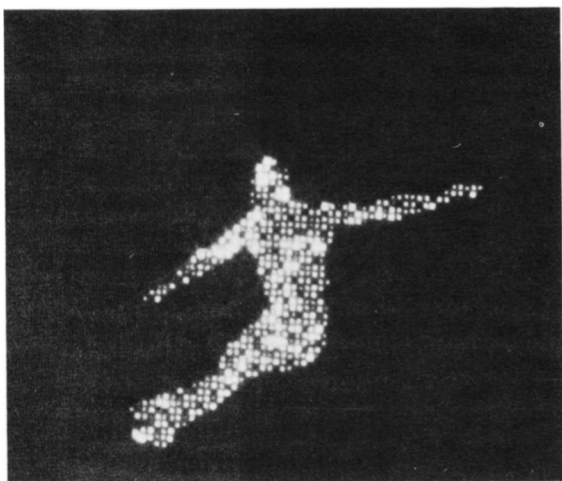


Jack Goldstein. Stills from *The Jump*. 1978.

Two years ago Goldstein presented *Two Fencers* at the Salle Patino in Geneva. Distanced some fifty feet from the audience, bathed in the dim red glow of a spotlight, accompanied by the sound of recorded music taken from Hollywood swashbuckler soundtracks, two men in fencing gear enacted their athletic routine.⁶ They appeared as if déjà vu, remote, spectral, yet just as certainly, present. Like the contortionist and gymnast of Goldstein's earlier performances, they were there, performing in the space of the spectators, but they nevertheless looked virtual, dematerialized, like the vivid but nebulous images of holograms. After one fencer had appeared to defeat the other, the spotlight went down, but the performance continued; left in darkness to listen to a replay of the background music, the audience would attempt to remember that image of fencing that had already appeared as if in memory. In this doubling by means of the mnemonic experience, the paradoxical mechanism by which memory functions is made apparent: the image is forgotten, replaced. (*Roget's Thesaurus* gives a child's definition of memory as "the thing I forget with.")

Goldstein's "actors" do not perform prescribed roles; they simply do what they would ordinarily do, professionally, just as the Hollywood-trained German shepherd growls and barks on cue in Goldstein's film *A German Shepherd*, and a ballerina descends from pointe in *A Ballet Shoe*, and a lion framed in a golden logo tosses his head and roars in *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*. These films show either simple, split-second gestures that are repeated with little or no difference, or slightly more extended actions that appear to exhaust themselves. Here, for example, is the scenario for *A Ballet Shoe*: the foot of a dancer in toe shoe is shown on pointe; a pair of hands comes in from either side of the film frame and unties the ribbon of the shoe; the dancer moves off pointe; the entire film lasts twenty-two seconds. The sense that its gesture is a complete one is therefore mitigated by its fragmented images (generating multiple psychological and topological reso-

6. Goldstein's phonograph records, intended both as independent works and, in some cases, as soundtracks for performances, are made by splicing together fragments, sometimes no longer than a few seconds, of sound from existing recordings, paralleling his use of stock footage to make films.



nances) and its truncated duration; the whole is but a fragment.

The impression of a completed action (one fencer defeats the other) combines with a structure of repetition (the match is one of constant attack and parry) so that no action is really brought to closure; the performance or film stops, but it cannot be said to end. In this respect the recent film entitled *The Jump* is exemplary. Shown as a loop, it is a potentially endless repetition of repetitions. A diver leaps, somersaults, plunges, and disintegrates. This happens very quickly, and then it happens again, and still a third time. The camera follows the courses of the three divers, framing them in tight close-up, so that their trajectories are not graphically discernable. Rather, each diver bursts like fireworks into the center of the frame and within a split second disappears.

The Jump was made by rotoscoping stock super-8 footage of high dives and shooting the animation through a special-effects lens that dispersed the image into jewellike facets.⁷ The resultant image, sometimes recognizable as diver, sometimes amorphous, is a shimmering, red silhouette seen against a black field. Time is extremely compressed (the running time is twenty-six seconds) and yet extremely distended (shown as a loop, it plays endlessly). But the film's temporality as experienced does not reside in its actual duration, nor of course in anything like the synthetic time of narrative. Its temporal mode is the psychological one of *anticipation*. We wait for each dive, knowing more or less when it will appear, yet each time it startles us, and each time it disappears before we can really take satisfaction in it, so we wait for its next appearance; again we are startled and again it eludes us. In each of Goldstein's films, performances, photographs, and phonograph records, a psychologized temporality is instituted: foreboding, premonition, suspicion, anxiety.⁸ The psychological resonance of this work is not

7. Rotoscopy is a technique of tracing over live-action footage to make an animation.

8. Each of the artists discussed here might be said to work with the conventions of a particular genre; if that is the case, Goldstein's would be those of the disaster film. In the movie *Earthquake*, for example, the entire first third of the film is nothing but a narration about an impending earthquake; yet when it comes, we are taken completely by surprise.

that of the subject matter of his pictures, however, but of the way those pictures are presented, *staged*; that is, it is a function of their structure. Goldstein's manner of staging the image is perfectly exemplified by the technique used for *The Jump*, the technique of rotoscoping, a process that is both a trace(ing) and an effacement of the filmed image, a drawing that is simultaneously an erasure. And that is what any staging of the image must always be. The temporality of these pictures is not, then, a function of the nature of the medium as in itself temporal, but of the manner in which the picture is presented; it can obtain in a still picture as well as a moving one.

Here is a picture: It shows a young woman with close-cropped hair, wearing a suit and hat whose style is that of the 1950s. She looks the part of what was called, in that decade, a career girl, an impression that is perhaps cued, perhaps merely confirmed by the fact that she is surrounded by the office towers of the big city. But those skyscrapers play another role in this picture. They envelop and isolate the woman, reinforcing with their dark-shadowed, looming facades her obvious anxiety, as her eyes dart over her shoulder . . . at something perhaps lurking outside the frame of the picture. Is she, we wonder, being pursued?

But what is it, in fact, that makes this a picture of presentiment, of that which is impending? Is it the suspicious glance? Or can we locate the solicitation to read the picture as if it were fiction in a certain spatial dislocation—the jarring juxtaposition of close-up face with distant buildings—suggesting the cinematic artifice of rear-screen projection? Or is it the details of costume and makeup that might signal disguise? It is perhaps all of these, and yet more.

The picture in question is nothing other than a still photograph of/by the artist Cindy Sherman, one of a recent series in which she dresses in various costumes and poses in a variety of locations that convey highly suggestive though thoroughly ambiguous ambiances. We do not know what is happening in these pictures, but we know for sure that *something* is happening, and that something is a fictional narrative. We would never take these photographs for being anything but *staged*.

The still photograph is generally thought to announce itself as a direct transcription of the real precisely in its being a spatiotemporal fragment; or, on the contrary, it may attempt to transcend both space and time by contravening that very fragmentary quality.⁹ Sherman's photographs do neither of these. Like ordinary snapshots, they appear to be fragments; unlike those snapshots, their fragmentation is not that of the natural continuum, but of a syntagmatic sequence, that is, of a conventional, segmented temporality. They are like quotations from the sequence of frames that constitutes the narrative flow of film. Their sense of narrative is one of its simultaneous presence and absence, a narrative ambience stated but not fulfilled. In short, these are photographs whose

9. See, for example, Hollis Frampton, "Impromptus on Edward Weston: Everything in Its Place," *October*, 5 (Summer 1978), especially pp. 59–62.



Cindy Sherman. Untitled. 1978.



Robert Longo. Still from film for Sound Distance of a Good Man. 1978.

condition is that of the film still, that fragment “*whose existence never exceeds the fragment.*”¹⁰

The psychological shock that is registered in this very special kind of picture can best be understood when it appears in relation to normal film time as the syntagmatic disjunction of a freeze frame. The sudden abjuration of narrative time solicits a reading that must remain inside the picture but cannot escape the temporal mode of which it is a fragment. It is within this confusion of temporalities that Robert Longo's work is situated. The central image of his three-part tableau performance, *Sound Distance of a Good Man*, presented last year at Franklin Furnace, was a film, showing, with no motion at all (save for the flickering effect of light that is a constant feature of cinema) the upper torso of a man, body arched and head thrown back as if in convulsion. That posture, registering a quick, jerky motion, is contrasted, in this motionless picture, with the frozen immobility of the statue of a lion. As the film unwound it continued to show only this still image; the entire film consisted of nothing but a freeze frame. But if the film's image does not traverse any temporal distance other than that literal time of the performed events that framed it on either side, its composition followed a rather complex scenario. Longo's movie camera was trained on a photograph, or more precisely a photo-montage whose separate elements were excerpted from a series of photographs, duplicate versions of the same shot. That shot showed a man dressed and posed in imitation of a sculpted aluminum relief that Longo had exhibited earlier that year. The relief was, in turn, quoted from a newspaper reproduction of a fragment of a film still taken from *The American Soldier*, a film by Fassbinder.

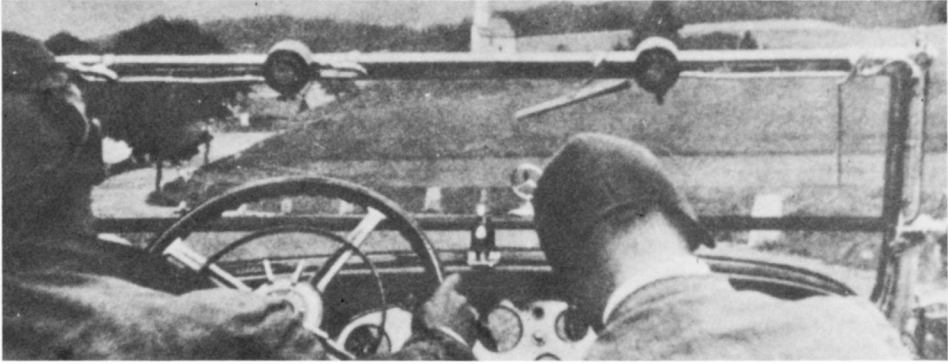
The “scenario” of this film, the scenario just described, the spiral of fragmentation, excerptation, quotation that moves from film still to still film is, of course, absent from the film that the spectators of *Sound Distance of a Good Man* watched. But what, if not that absent scenario, can account for the particular presence of that moving still image?

Such an elaborate manipulation of the image does not really transform it; it fetishizes it. The picture is an object of desire, the desire for the signification that is known to be absent. The expression of that desire to make the picture yield a reality that it pretends to contain is the subject of the work of Troy Brauntuch. But, it must be emphasized, his is no private obsession. It is an obsession that is in the very nature of our relationship to pictures. Brauntuch therefore uses pictures

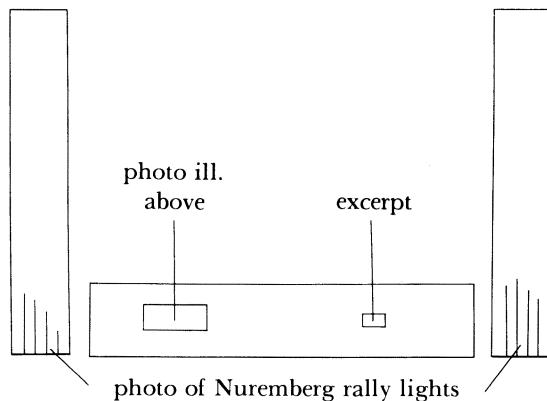
10. Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 67. The appearance of the film still as an object of particular fascination in recent artistic practice is so frequent as to call for a theoretical explanation. Both Sherman's and Robert Longo's works actually resemble this odd artifact, as does that of John Mendelsohn, James Birrell, among others. Moreover, many of its characteristics as discussed by Barthes are relevant to the concerns of all the work discussed here. In this context, it is also interesting to note that the performances of Philip Smith were called by him “extruded cinema” and had such revealing titles as *Still Stories*, *Partial Biography*, and *Relinquish Control*. They consisted of multiple projections of 35-mm. slides in a sequence and functioned as deconstructions of cinematic narrative.

whose subject matter is, from a humanist point of view, the most loaded, most charged with meaning, but which are revealed in his work to be utterly opaque.

Here is a picture:



It appeared as an illustration to the memoirs of Albert Speer with the caption "Hitler asleep in his Mercedes, 1934."¹¹ Brauntuch has reproduced it as the central image of a recent three-part photographic print. The degree to which the image is fetishized by its presentation absolutely prevents its re-presentation; itself photographic, Brauntuch's work cannot in turn be photographically reproduced. Its exacting treatment of the most minute details and qualities of scale, color, framing, relationships of part to part would be completely lost outside the presence of the work as object. The above photograph, for example, is enlarged to a width of eighteen inches, thereby making its halftone screen visible, and printed on the left-hand side of a seven-foot long bloodred field. To the right of this picture is a further enlarged excerpt of it showing the building in the distance seen just above the windshield of the Mercedes. The panel on which these two images appear is flanked by two other panels positioned vertically, so that the ensemble of photographs looks diagrammatically like this:



The two vertical panels are blown up photographs, as well, although they are too abstracted to read as such. They are, in fact, reproductions of a fragment of a photograph of the Nuremberg rally lights shining in parallel streaks against the vast expanse of darkness. They are, of course, no more recognizable than the right-hand figure in the above photograph is recognizable as Hitler, nor do they divulge anything of the history they are meant to illustrate.

Reproduced in one book after another about the holocaust, already excerpted, enlarged, cropped, the images Brauntuch uses are so opaque and fragmentary as to be utterly mute regarding their supposed subject. And indeed the most opaque of all are the drawings by Hitler himself.¹² What could be less revealing of the pathology of their creator than his perfectly conventional drawings? Every operation to which Brauntuch subjects these pictures represents the duration of a fascinated, perplexed gaze, whose desire is that they disclose their secrets; but the result is only to make the pictures all the more picturelike, to fix forever in an elegant object our distance from the history that produced these images. That distance is all that these pictures signify.

Although the manipulations to which Sherrie Levine subjects her pictures are far less obsessive than Brauntuch's, her subject is the same: the distance that separates us from what those pictures simultaneously proffer and withhold and the desire that is thereby set in motion. Drawn to pictures whose status is that of cultural myth, Levine discloses that status and its psychological resonances through the imposition of very simple strategies. In a recent tripartite series, for example, Levine cropped three photographs of a mother and child according to the emblematic silhouettes of Presidents Washington, Lincoln, and Kennedy. The currency of the myths with which Levine deals is exemplified by those profiles, taken as they are from the faces of coins; the photographs are cut out of a fashion magazine. The confrontation of the two images is structured in such a way that they must be read *through* each other: the profile of Kennedy *delineates* the picture of mother and child, which in turn *fills in* the Kennedy emblem. These pictures have no autonomous power of signification (pictures do not signify what they picture); they are provided with signification by the manner in which they are presented (on the faces of coins, in the pages of fashion magazines). Levine steals them away from their usual place in our culture and subverts their mythologies.

11. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, New York, Macmillan, 1970, ill. following p. 166. It was of course Walter Benjamin, a victim of the very history this memoir would recount, who asked, "Is it not the task of the photographer—descendent of the augurs and the haruspices—to uncover guilt and name the guilty in his pictures?" But then he added, "'The illiterate of the future', it has been said, 'will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a photograph'. But must we not also count as illiterate the photographer who cannot read his own pictures? Will not the caption become the most important component of the shot?" ("A Short History of Photography," *Screen*, Spring 1972, 24).

12. Brauntuch has used these drawings, which have been extensively published, in several of his works. Perhaps even more surprising than the banality of Hitler's drawings is that of the art produced inside the concentration camps; see *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps, 1940–45*, New York, Jewish Museum, 1978.



Shown as a slide projection last February at the Kitchen, the mother-and-child/Kennedy picture was magnified to a height of eight feet and diffused through a stream of light. This presentation of the image gave it a commanding, theatrical presence. But what was the *medium* of that presence and thus of the work? Light? A 35-mm. slide? A cut-out picture from a magazine? Or is the medium of this work perhaps its reproduction here in this journal? And if it is impossible to locate the physical medium of the work, can we then locate the *original* artwork?¹³

At the beginning of this essay, I said that it was due precisely to this kind of abandonment of the artistic medium *as such* that we had witnessed a break with modernism, or more precisely with what was espoused as modernism by Michael Fried. Fried's is, however, a very particular and partisan conception of modernism, one that does not, for example, allow for the inclusion of cinema ("cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a *modernist* art") or for the preeminently theatrical painting of surrealism. The work I have attempted to introduce here is related to a modernism conceived differently, whose roots are in the symbolist aesthetic announced by Mallarmé,¹⁴ which includes works whose dimension is literally or metaphorically temporal, and which does not seek the transcendence of the material condition of the signs through which meaning is generated.

Nevertheless, it remains useful to consider recent work as having effected a break with modernism and therefore as postmodernist. But if *postmodernism* is to have theoretical value, it cannot be used merely as another chronological term; rather it must disclose the particular nature of a breach with modernism.¹⁵ It is in this sense that the radically new approach to mediums is important. If it had been characteristic of the formal descriptions of modernist art that they were topographical, that they mapped the surfaces of artworks in order to determine their structures, then it has now become necessary to think of description as a stratigraphic activity. Those processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging that constitute the strategies of the work I have been discussing necessitate uncovering strata of representation. Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture.

A theoretical understanding of postmodernism will also betray all those attempts to prolong the life of outmoded forms. Here, in brief, is an example,

13. Levine initially intended that the three parts of the work take three different forms for the purposes of this exhibition: the Kennedy silhouette as a slide projection in the gallery, the Lincoln as a postcard announcement, and the Washington as a poster, thus emphasizing the work's ambiguous relationship to its medium. Only the first two parts were executed, however.

14. For a discussion of this aesthetic in relation to a pictorial medium, see my essay "Positive/Negative: a Note on Degas's Photographs," *October*, 5 (Summer 1978), 89-100.

15. There is a danger in the notion of postmodernism which we begin to see articulated, that which sees postmodernism as pluralism, and which wishes to deny the possibility that art can any longer achieve a radicalism or avant-gardism. Such an argument speaks of the "failure of modernism" in an attempt to institute a new humanism.

chosen because of its superficial resemblance to the pictures discussed here: The Whitney Museum recently mounted an exhibition entitled *New Image Painting*, a show of work whose diversity of quality, intention, and meaning was hidden by its being forced into conjunction for what was, in most cases, its least important characteristic: recognizable images. What was, in fact, most essential about all of the work was its attempt to preserve the integrity of *painting*. So, for example, included were Susan Rothenberg's paintings in which rather abstracted images of horses appear. For the way they function in her painted surfaces, however, those horses might just as well be grids. "The interest in the horse," she explains, "is because it divides right."¹⁶ The most successful painting in the exhibition was one by Robert Moskowitz called *The Swimmer*, in which the blue expanse from which the figure of a stroking swimmer emerges is forced into an unresolvable double reading as both painted field and water. And the painting thus shares in that kind of irony toward the medium that we recognize precisely as modernist.

New Image Painting is typical of recent museum exhibitions in its complicity with that art which strains to preserve the modernist aesthetic categories which museums themselves have institutionalized: it is not, after all, by chance that the era of modernism coincides with the era of the museum. So if we now have to look for aesthetic activities in so-called alternative spaces, outside the museum, that is because those activities, those *pictures*, pose questions that are postmodernist.

16. In Richard Marshall, *New Image Painting*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978, p. 56.