

œuvres originales

Braco Dimitrijević

Bertrand Lavier

Louise Lawler

Sherrie Levine

Allan McCollum

Richard Prince

FONDS RÉGIONAL D'ART CONTEMPORAIN
DES PAYS DE LA LOIRE

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THE BIRTH OF THE VIEWER

DAVID DEITCHER

"The world is filled to suffocating. Man has placed his token on every stone. Every word, every image, is leased and mortgaged. We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash... The viewer is the tablet on which all the quotations that make up a painting are inscribed without any of them being lost. A painting's meaning lies not in its origin, but in its destination. The birth of the viewer must be at the cost of the painter."

Written Statement
Sherrie Levine 1981¹

When Sherrie Levine issued this statement, most of its readers could recognize that she had cribbed it almost entirely from Roland Barthes' influential essay, "The Death of the Author." Levine's statement figured as part of a lively debate that arose among artists and supportive critics in lower Manhattan when she, Richard Prince, Allan McCollum, Louise Lawler, and many others first exhibited the art for which they became known. In their works, critics saw the chance to define a truly post-modernist art. Up to this time, the term "postmodern" had been used indiscriminately to describe any pastiche of modern and premodern styles.

To an extent that was unprecedented in the history of American postwar visual culture, the terms of this debate were informed by European critical theory. This included structuralism, Frankfurt School critical philosophy, and more recent post-structuralist texts by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, among others. Although supporters and detractors of the new American art agreed on nothing else, they did agree on one point: with such work, the "death of the author," as foretold by the title of Barthes' 1968 essay, had found its visual fulfillment. Intent on challenging the conventions of an ossified late modernism, these artists and writers were content to take statements like Levine's at face value.

What else could be made of the work that Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince showed in a group exhibition in November 1980? Levine's contribution consisted of six copyprints of Edward Weston's well known photographs of his son Neil, nude, which she matted, framed, and exhibited as her own with the title, *After Edward Weston*. Prince also showed photographs of photographs. His triptychs represented recurring pictorial clichés that he had been isolating and appropriating from glossy magazines since 1977.

And where was the romantic figure of the creator in Louise Lawler's 1982 "solo" exhibition? In the first of two available spaces she showed an arrangement of works by other gallery artists. In the second she showed photographs of art, as it appears in museums, private collections and corporate headquarters.

Allan McCollum found a different way of demonstrating the foreclosure of conventional expression. Starting in 1978, he

produced small objects that simulated framed and matted pictures. At first he fashioned these "surrogates" from wood, painted each of them a different uniform color, and hung them on walls in clusters. A year later he was painting the outside edges of these decoys any credible "frame" color, while inside a painted field of white denoted "mat," and a smaller black rectangle signaled "image." By 1982 McCollum was casting scores of these surrogates in plaster, painting them by hand, and hanging them in ever more profuse arrangements. That same year he started taking pictures of pictures — "surrogates on location" — in which he tracked down and documented art whenever it appeared in the backgrounds of interior shots in magazines and on TV broadcasts.

Critics found that the importance of this art stemmed from its identification with the copy, with reproduction and the contingent fragment. This was, of course, the inverse of the way value had always been conferred in modernist art and culture. So crucial to the maintenance and organization of bourgeois culture was the privileging of originality, uniqueness, and autonomy, that the very real evidence of their opposites in modernist art was systematically suppressed in art history and criticism?

Many insightful observers of the new postmodernist art concerned themselves with testing its critical potential. Increasingly, they gauged the latter's success in terms of an ability to deconstruct art's institutional frame, and to resist assimilation and commodification by the art marketplace.² Given the cultural climate in which this debate took place, this is not hard to understand. At the dawn of the Reagan era, conservatives in and out of government were dedicated to rooting out all traces of '60s-derived cultural radicalism and social dissent. These forces ensured the continuing domination of American society by late capitalist social relations and "traditional family values." In the artworld, their allies did their best to reinforce the cult of (male) mastery, as was evident once again in monumental works by Neoexpressionist painters that threatened to obscure the literally self-effacing art of Levine, Prince, Lawler, McCollum et al. in turbulent clouds of well publicized brushwork.

Looking back a decade later one can see that the early discussion of postmodernist art resulted in a somewhat narrow reading of these artists' work. This is not to say that such art no longer substantiates Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author." On the contrary, it is to claim that its relation to this text goes beyond the rhetoric of its title to embrace its fundamentally emancipatory, humane view of culture as a social, rather than solitary, endeavour. It was in this sense that Barthes concluded his essay: "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."⁴

Barthes understood that only through the demise of this author/creator could a new, less passive readership come into being, one that he described in terms of "play, activity, production, practice."⁵ To engage in such active, playful

spectatorship is to demonstrate disrespect for authority. It was precisely such disrespect for author-ity that Sherrie Levine demonstrated when she pirated images protected by copyright law.⁶ At different times, in different ways, every artist in this show has exhibited a measure of disrespect for such authority in promoting the explicitly social culture that Barthes envisioned.

Even in the late 1960s, when Barthes was arguing for this sea change, artists in Europe and America were developing practices that were compatible with his point of view. One year after the publication of "The Death of the Author," Braco Dimitrijević stepped out into a Zagreb street to wave down a car and bid its driver, Kresimir Klika, inspect a white stain on the pavement. That splash resulted when Klika's car flattened a milk carton the artist had placed in its path. When Klika agreed that the splash qualified as art, he complied with the artist's wishes and signed the pavement. As photographed for posterity, this performative collaboration dramatized the role that the viewer plays in completing the work of art, while criticizing expressionist art and ideology in the process.

It was in the final years of the Abstract Expressionist domination of the artworld that Marcel Duchamp described artistic creation as a social relation, at opposite ends of which were two equally indispensable "poles": the artist and the viewer.⁷ The implications of this Duchampian insight have been lost on none of the artists in this show. Dimitrijević went on to develop a wide variety of artistic means to bridge the gap between artist and viewer, thereby addressing the implicitly hierarchical separation that Barthes identified.⁸

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, Dimitrijević created billboard-sized photographic posters, sculptural monuments, and plaques that were indistinguishable from the urban attributes they simulated. Yet his posters and monuments commemorated only the anonymous, compliant passersby that the artist collared in the streets of various cities. As a result they promoted a degree of critical consciousness or skepticism concerning sign systems that work in this culture to inspire trust in demagogues and multinational corporations, to impose retrospective order on the disorder of history, and confer value on the achievements of some people while ignoring those of others. Such work, which Dimitrijević has described in terms of its "posthistorical" situation, is not without its historical contradictions. The artist's capacity to effect a semblance of social parity through the transitory visibility of the passerby still depends upon the special sanction that artists possess.

The symbolic erosion of the gap between artist and viewer also informs Dimitrijević's later museum works. These works, collectively titled "Triptychos Post Historicus," consist of three elements: a painting from the museum collection to which the "Triptychos" will also belong; an utilitarian object associated with a person whose rank is commensurate with that of any passerby, and a "work" of nature. In a representative piece that he created in 1976 for the National Gallery in Berlin, Kandinsky's *Hornform* (1923) literally depends on the length of

timber it leans against. As Dimitrijević's tripartite title documents, a man named Franz Jede cut this support in 1976. Finally, a nearby apple completes the ensemble in one of many shrewd references to Kandinsky's dynamic geometry.

The sense of theatricality that pervades Dimitrijević's practice is an indispensable element in fostering a more active and reflexive spectatorship. Such a taste for theater is manifest in the attention all these artists pay to every aspect of installation, which sometimes approaches *mise en scène*. At a different level, several artists (Levine, Lawler, McCollum, Prince) explore an implicitly dramatic narrativity that results from the use of serial fragments.

If individual works in this exhibition appear to be little more than fragments, this is, in part, because they often figure as elements within a larger series. But the entire series is no more likely to satisfy the viewer's desire for resolution. Unlike modernists who aspire to the creation of self-sufficient works, postmodernists refuse to create art that satisfies the desire for consoling tokens of subjective coherence. Instead they create radically contingent works that stimulate the viewer's desire. In this way such art dispatches the amenable observer into provisional research, speculation, and interpretation of a kind that recalls the activism of Barthes' emancipated reader.

This is precisely what happens in the art of Sherrie Levine when she selects images by masters of modern photography, copies them, and presents them as her own. Despite this extreme gestural economy, one should not conclude that the meaning and value of such works begins and ends in their ability to challenge modernist "originality," or to testify to the impossibility of creation in an image-glutted culture. To arrive at such a parochial conclusion is to restrict the meaning of such works as surely as the author/creator limits the ability of texts to signify. Her recent photographs "after" Karl Blossfeldt serve as a case in point. This series exemplifies the sense of "play" that Roland Barthes mentioned in describing the reader's interactive social relation with the text.

"Playing" must be understood... in all its polysemy: the text itself *plays* (like a door, like a machine with "play") and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game...⁹ Levine's model, Blossfeldt's *Urformen Der Kunst*, possesses just such a potential for play, which her mimetic gesture then redoubles. These "prototypes for art" are studies of plants that mimic forms in architecture and the decorative arts that imitate them in return. The Surrealists shared Levine's admiration for Blossfeldt's studies, in part because the mimicry they personify produced the kind of "convulsive beauty" that Surrealists prized. The ability of one object to open onto another, served as one of the principal tests that Surrealists used to discover evidence of resistant sign systems in the urban environment.¹⁰ From a postmodernist and feminist position, Levine's *After Karl Blossfeldt* reverses these terms. Her flawless imitations demonstrate, not the sameness that can result

despite difference, but the measure of difference that can be located within sameness.

A rather different sense of play invites the viewer to complete Bertrand Lavier's pictorial appropriations. In 1978, he produced a work for the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris that remains emblematic of his interest in the relationship of painting to more secular forms of productivity. Lavier set up a slide projector on a pedestal in a gallery at such a distance from the wall that, when turned on, it projected a "lifesize" image of a painting by Johan Barthold Jongkind onto the painting itself. The installation cast viewers into doubt as to what, precisely, they were seeing: where did the painting end and the projection begin? Lavier's installation dramatized the historical predicament of the late 20th century observer who gains access to Jongkind's 19th century proto-Impressionism principally through the depleting mediation of photomechanical reproduction.

This insight — central to Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" — has not deterred Lavier from making art that ironically addresses its principal terms. Not entirely ironic, his works play in the almost imperceptible space that Lavier opens up between original and the copy. In Dijon (1986) Lavier showed movies of paintings by Lichtenstein, Matisse, Malevich, and others in rooms where a half-dozen projectors were poised on pedestals. The placement of these projectors was determined by, among other things, the dimensions of the absent painting. The awareness of absence evoked by this installation recalls the central paradox of all painting: that it must testify to the absence it strives to overcome.

Lavier's concern with this absence took comic proportions in his *TV Paintings*, also shown in Dijon. In a horizontal row across a single wall, he installed seven TV monitors, showing phantom-like images of paintings by Fautrier, Yves Klein, Fontana and four others. In a reversal, this time he selected the paintings to fit the format and dimensions of the TV screens. Recently Lavier added another wrinkle to this farcical reflection on historical overdetermination and the alienating effects of reproductive technologies. He took slides of the images in the *TV Paintings*, and ordered cibachrome prints from each slide, which correspond to the scale of the original, increasingly remote painting and also to the TV screen it matches.

The vicissitudes of photographic regeneration are also central to the altogether darker works that Allan McCollum calls *Perpetual Photos*. These blow ups of "surrogates on location" show figures that have been vaporized by the sheer number of photomechanical generations that separate them from their sources. The uncertainty that results from looking at these works provokes uneasiness, impatience and suspense. To be in a room with them is to find oneself in precisely the situation that led to their degeneration in the first place. One wants to know more about these figures: about the body that has been distended

beyond recognition; about the landscape — or is it a body in a landscape?

McCollum's project contains a strongly performative aspect, one that recalls the compulsive photographic enlargements made by the character played by David Hemmings in Antonioni's *Blow Up*, as he searches for evidence of the crime he alone witnessed. McCollum tracks a very similar scenario, which pivots on an absent body. As Tzvetan Todorov has shown, such absences are central to the momentum of narrative. Resolve them, and narrative ceases. Like Antonioni's film, McCollum's *Perpetual Photos* are allegories of this paradoxically productive absence.¹¹

Since the late 1970s, Richard Prince has created an art of appropriated serial fragments that also promotes the viewer's narrative speculation. In producing his earliest photographs, Prince assumed a role not unlike that of a postmodernist private eye, who scans the two-dimensional world of magazine illustration for clues to the construction of the hyper-real. His early discoveries included evidence of the latter's implosive effects, such as the notion that when "sameness" is repeated it generates "difference." Prince provided evidence of this phenomenon in triptychs that show the same model striking the same pose, but differentiated by three different "looks." When, however, he isolated three distinct models with identical pose and style, he demonstrated the reverse: that when "difference" is repeated it engenders "sameness."

Like any good detective, Prince has assumed any number of disguises. This avoidance of a fixed identity — a staple of postmodernism — has been manifest in the range of Prince's vocations (photographer, writer, painter, gallerist, impresario, photo editor), in his pseudonymous and collaborative works (as "Fulton Ryder" or "John Dagg," respectively), and in the glut of "identities" that result from his promiscuous association with popular magazines that target consumers with specialized tastes. Since the mid-1980s Prince has arranged the imagery he appropriates from these sources in works he calls "gangs." He also evolved a deceptively simple serial formalism by pirating the format of the "gang" (and its suggestive name) from its strictly economical usage by commercial photo labs to develop a grid of images on a single print.

In a recent series he added to the complexity of these works by writing commentary on them with a felt-tipped pen. Each of these works registers three differently cropped and exposed versions of three purloined images. *Mother, Brother, Sister* (1990) shows a young woman on a motorcycle, an obese, naked woman pulling at her breasts, and a seated black youth in leather. As repeated in three rows, their order changing in each one, these images produce a rhythm that is less suggestive of poetic meter than of the endlessly repetitive combinations that typify melodramatic narrative.

Prince's inscriptions, which look like hastily written notes to the photo lab, or like the repetitive scribbling of a compulsive neurotic, include jokes, signatures, dates, and names. Several

of these handwritten notes are decipherable as references to Prince's earlier projects. This adds a nostalgic reflexivity to the series that is distinctly at odds with its raw photographic material. Contradicting the scores of fragments and repetitions that stimulate the viewer's desire for narrative elaboration and closure, this reflexivity hints that such closure can be found in the stable figure of the "author." But Prince's "author" is not the romantic creator of metaphorical works, and his presence here may only be a ruse. In an artworld where "dispersal" has become another convention, this reflexivity can function, paradoxically, to reestablish uncertainty and maintain the playfulness of the postmodernist text.

Reflexivity assumes the form of critical consciousness in the works of Louise Lawler. Since the beginning of the 1980s she has chronicled the function and fate of art. Her individual works and installations, which often find humor in the solemn rituals of art appreciation, instill in the viewer a similarly reflexive spectatorship. Although her art has taken the form of matchbooks and exhibition announcements, a night at the ballet or at movies "with no pictures," most often it consists of photographs.

Pollock and Soup Tureen (1984) is an appropriately lavish color picture that pinpoints the formal correspondences a collector has discovered between a bibelot and a fragment from a turbulent masterwork of postwar modernism. That Jackson Pollock adopted the scale and violence of such paintings in order to elude domestication is a truism of art history that lends Lawler's work a certain bite.

Six years later, Lawler found this painting in a more abject circumstance. In *Lot Number 22* (1990) she shows another fragment of the Pollock as it hung in a pre-sale exhibition at a New York auction house. Pinned to the wall at dead center, halfway between the corner of the Pollock on the right and the black guard who protects it on the left, is Lawler's exhibit "A": a printed card, bearing the Christies logo, which discloses the proper name of the creator and the "estimated value" that accrues to his work.

Was the concept of art as "property" on Lawler's mind when, in 1982, she began taking photographs of Degas' *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* in various casts wherever she encountered them? Suggesting this might be so, in 1990 Lawler took such a photograph and installed it at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts beside the question, "Is She Ours?" But perhaps it was philosophical reflection that led Lawler to print this question and hang this photograph directly on a portion of wall that is painted a pale green to match the wall against which Degas' sculpture is seen in another gallery of the same museum. Perhaps only one thing here is truly certain: to pose such an enigmatic question is to engage the viewer directly in speculation.

Even so simple a question can be read in more ways than one. It can, for example, be pronounced with a disdainful, superiority that recalls the comments of viewers who were present in 1881 when Degas' *Little Dancer* was first shown. To those observers, the proportions of this figure instantly marked her as a potentially criminal, sub-bourgeois member of French society.¹²

In 1989 Lawler placed another photograph of Degas' *Little Dancer* at the bottom of one of a series of paperweights. Since paperweights are like large lenses, looking through them to the images they contain can make one acutely aware of one's voyeurism. Lawler's photograph shows a version of Degas' sculpture in its glass case at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. That case stands before a second, larger one that is filled with innumerable Degas bronzes of women from the same class as his *Little Dancer*. Both boxes are enclosed inside the much larger glass case that is Roche Dinkeloo & Associates' design for the Andre Meyer Gallery. The resulting image — a luminous maze of figures and reflective grids — describes the cool distancing gaze that plays so great a role in the institutional confinement of art. But it also implies that the aesthetic gaze is related to the clinical observation of women like those that served as Degas' models, and led to their confinement as well.

It was not by chance alone that Lawler chose the form of the paperweight — an example of the "minor" arts — to address such major issues. In much of her work she has transposed supposedly secondary accoutrements of display to the primary focus of her art. In doing so she finds highly symbolic ways to disclose the exercise of power throughout visual culture, and to make visible that which power consigns to the margins. This recalls a statement in Barthes' "The Death of the Author," one that can serve as a fitting coda to this essay.

"We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the anti-phrastical recriminations of good society in favor of the very things it sets aside, ignores, smother, or destroys..."¹³

I suspect that when Barthes wrote these lines in 1968, he intended that they be read in their broadest sense, to refer not just to marginal cultural practices but to the individuals whose experiences they represent.

In many ways, with varying degrees of commitment and advocacy, the artists in this exhibition have all identified with what modernist culture has systematically suppressed. By fashioning art from copies, repetitions and fragments, these artists act more like spectators than traditional creators. Similarly, their works have provoked viewers to respond less like passive consumers than cultural producers. Yet we still live in societies that continue to "set aside, ignore, smother, and destroy" whatever deviates from the norm. Until this changes, the emancipatory significance of the viewer's birth will remain most of all a stimulating, often pleasurable model of alternative social relations in the still symbolic arena of art.

1. Sherrie Levine, "Five Comments," in Brian Wallis ed., *Blasted Allegories* (New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), p. 92.
2. See Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant Garde: A Postmodern Repetition," in Brian Wallis ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 13-29.
3. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh observed of Levine's art: "The risk of Levine's position is that it might function ultimately in secret alliance with the static conditions of social life as they are reflected in an art practice *that is concerned only with the work's commodity structure and the innovation of its product language.* (italics added)" See "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* (September 1982), pp. 48-9.
4. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148.
5. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *Ibid.*, p. 162.
6. "The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work: literary science therefore teaches respect for the manuscript and the author's declared intentions, while society asserts the legality of the relation of author to work (the "*droit d'auteur*" or "copyright," in fact of recent date since it was only really legalized at the time of the French Revolution."
7. Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in Michel Sanouillet, Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 138.
8. "...the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice. The distance separating reading from writing is historical." Barthes, *op. cit.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. See Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985) p. 112ff.
11. See Tzvetan Todorov, "The Secret of Narrative," in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 143-178.
12. See Dr Anthea Callen, "Anatomy and Physiology: Degas' Little Dancer of Fourteen Years," in *Degas Images of Women* (Liverpool, Tate Gallery, p. 10ff.
13. "The Death of the Author," p. 148.