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SHERRIE LEVINE



This page, left: View of "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984," 2009, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Below: View of "Pictures," 1977, Artists Space, New York. Opposite page, from top: **Hallwalls members, Buffalo, ca. 1975**, Courtesy Robert Longo. **David Salle, *Untitled*, 1973**, coffee labels on four black-and-white photographs, each 24 x 20". © 2009 David Salle/Licensed by WGA, New York.

Outside the Frame

MICHAEL LOBEL

Lobel, Michael. "Outside the Frame." *Artforum*. September 2009. Pp. 252 – 256.

ONE OF THE MORE CURIOUS SEQUELAE of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's staging of "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984," curated by Douglas Eklund, was the controversy surrounding the exclusion of Philip Smith from the show. Smith is one of five artists—the others were Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, and Robert Longo—whose work Douglas Crimp had included in the 1977 show at Artists Space in New York titled "Pictures." The event gave this group its name, in part, and has since been mythologized as a pivotal moment in postwar art. While those other four artists were represented by pieces in the Met show, Smith was not—and he merited only one mention in the catalogue, with no complementary reproduction of his work. In response, Crimp and other critics, including Barry Schwabsky in *The Nation* and Holland Cotter in the *New York Times*, raised the issue of Smith's absence, which in turn generated a flurry of postings by various art bloggers. While a seemingly minor episode, the debate offered insight into the difficulties of writing the history of recent art—particularly when the conflicting claims to that history are made so apparent.

This is hardly a unique set of circumstances. The voices raised to protest Smith's exclusion are reminiscent of a similar outcry that attended the staging of "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" in 2007, another large survey that attempted to categorize a set of recent artistic practices. At that time, too, questions arose about how and why certain artists were included but others left out. These sorts of questions take on a different cast in the case of the Met show, since it dealt with artists who often addressed issues of notoriety, fame, and celebrity as their primary subjects—whether in Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills," 1977–80, Michael Smith's performance and video riffs on television tropes, or Richard Prince's *Brooke Shields (Spiritual America)*, 1983 (which, by the way, seems to have been removed from view sometime during the first weeks of the exhibition).

Cotter directly addressed these historiographical problems a little over a month after the Met show's

opening. His *Times* article "Framing the Message of a Generation" was not a review proper, but rather a think piece that considered the show in relation to the New Museum's roughly contemporaneous "Younger than Jesus" survey, in that both exhibitions attempted to chart and define generational identities. Cotter expresses deep skepticism about

this generational model of art history—a skepticism I'm sure many of us share—but what is most striking about the generally negative viewpoint of his piece is how it diverges from the tone of his first review of the Met show, about a month or so earlier. His original assessment was positive, if not glowing, calling it "a winner."

What subsequently troubled Cotter was the way in which these exhibitions put the winnowing process of history on full view: "We can see history being written—recorded, edited, enhanced, invented—right before our eyes. It can be a disturbing sight." The rhetoric here seems somewhat overheated—



I, personally, would reserve the use of the term *disturbing* for heavier fare—and his view of the way in which history gets recorded is strangely contradictory. On one hand, the Met show is criticized for being too obedient to the historical record, so much so that “the show feels like . . . a slice of history hermetically sealed.” Yet at the same time, the critic’s ire is prompted by the revision and selection that the telling of history always incurs, leaving some people (and events) in and taking others out.

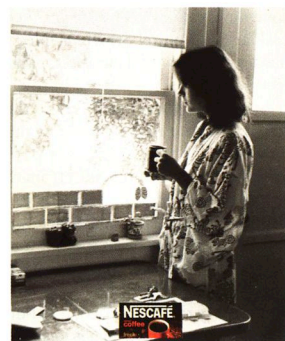
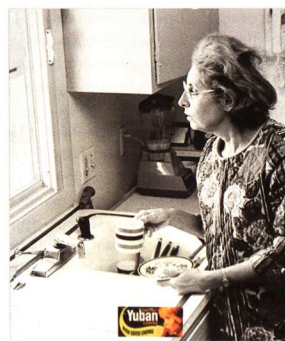
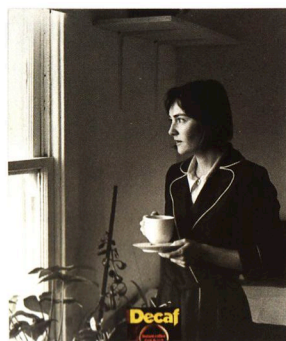
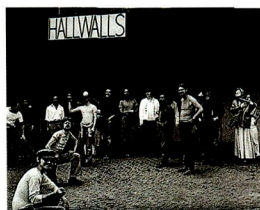
What rings hollow to me about this kind of objection, at least in relation to the Met show, is its failure to acknowledge that Philip Smith’s exclusion from the roster was more than balanced by the inclusion of a significant number of artists who were active in these circles but whose work has not been afforded significant critical attention since that time. Cotter slams the show as canonical, but if that’s the case, could someone please show me which canon includes the likes of Ericka Beckman, Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, and Paul McMahon? The presence of work by these artists has helped reshape a historical record that has been defined by a relatively small group of art writers and by the market. The Met show, particularly the first couple of galleries in the chronological scheme, contained a good number of unfamiliar works that revealed unexpected connections and correspondences. For example, a shared interest in line drawing tied together such disparate pieces as Goldstein’s *The Portrait of Père Tanguy*, 1974, Dwyer’s *Cardz*, 1980, and David Salle’s *We’ll Shake the Bag*, 1980. (And rather than fault the show for its exclusions, I think that the zeal for inclusiveness sometimes went a bit too far: The addition of small painted works from Clough’s early-’80s “C-Notes” series and of McMahon’s 1982 *Polkadot Paintings*, in the show’s penultimate gallery, seemed

rather forced—by this point, when many of the other Pictures artists had achieved a signature large-scale, slick style, Clough and McMahon had veered into other aesthetic terrain, and their later works consequently seemed out of place here.)

The exhibition also managed to reveal sides of well-known artists that have been lost in the shuffle. Hence the display of several early works by Levine demonstrated that she was working with a range of techniques and themes (collage, a combinatory approach to narrative, the mother-and-child dyad) that form an important backdrop to her later appropriationist practice. Similarly, the show gave us a much different view of Salle’s project, pushing back against the artist’s framing as a neo-expressionist painter in the ’80s and evincing his earlier engagement with a range of media including photocollage and installation (*Untitled*, 1973, four black-and-white photographs of women drinking coffee with a separate coffee label affixed to each photo, uncannily presages some of Prince’s fashion-model photos). The principle of inclusion even extended to archival materials. For a Met show, “The Pictures Generation” contained a surprisingly wide array of “non-art” ephemera—posters, magazines, period photographs—that augmented the historical record on view. The presence of these materials, and the show’s dense hang, certainly contributed to a time-capsule quality; this may be yet another reason, above and beyond its revisionist brief, that the exhibition prompted such strong historiographical reflections. It thus demonstrated another generational logic: In their engagement with advertising and mass media and their repeated ref-

erences to the family dramas of postwar suburbia, the assembled works can be identified as a form of “baby-boomer art.”

The exhibition, then, substantially revises our understanding of art in the period. One of the major effects is that it moves us away from viewing the 1977 “Pictures” show as the central, decisive instant in the formation of a collective approach—which is how many of the received readings of this moment have framed it. Such narratives follow a familiar (and simplistic) historical model, in which history is shaped primarily by singular events that bring about clear and readily identifiable shifts. Art history tends to embrace these episodic, punctual narratives, which often link the birth of art movements to pivotal exhibitions (whether Fauvism to the 1905 Salon d’Automne or the YBAs to “Freeze” in 1988). Eklund’s intention to push his account away from such a model is already evident in the show’s starting point, which sets things off several years prior to “Pictures” and instead illustrates how artistic developments tend to accrue incrementally, in fits and starts, with many quickly lost to history but significant nonetheless. Hence we are given a much more diffuse sense of the formation of “Pictures” practices, particularly via the disclosure that, well before 1977, many of these artists had begun establishing their own networks in centers outside New York City, such as Hallwalls in Buffalo, New York, and CalArts outside Los Angeles. What’s more, the emphasis on Crimp as the sole organizing force behind “Pictures” is also modified through a renewed awareness of the efforts of other curators and critics—particularly Helene



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This page, above: Nancy Dwyer, *Cardz* (details), 1980, twenty-six custom-cut, laminated silk screens on leatherette paper, each 6 3/4 x 3 3/4". Below: Philip Smith, *Bring*, 1977, oil pastel and pencil on paper, 100 x 62". Opposite page, from top: Vincent Gagliostro of *act up*, *Enjoy AZT*, 1993, screenprint, 22 x 21 1/4". Sarah Charlesworth, *April 21, 1978* (details), forty-five black-and-white direct-positive prints, each 22 x 16". From the series "Modern History," 1978.

Winer, who had known Crimp for several years and who, as director of Artists Space, had a hand in the show as well. Eklund's catalogue does important work in bringing attention to Winer's impact on the scene, especially in her earlier stint as director of the Pomona College Art Gallery, where she was deeply engaged with the presentation of new art in Southern California—whether that of a later "Pictures" artist like Goldstein or of Joe Goode, Allen Ruppersberg, and Bas Jan Ader.

YET THE MATTER OF OMISSION remains. Smith's contribution to "Pictures" in 1977 consisted of several large oil-pastel drawings filled with disparate images—a girl with a parakeet, parachutists, architectural interiors—arrayed in roughly horizontal registers. The borrowed feel of the imagery and the lack of clear narrative related them to the other works in that show. For his part, Eklund has explained Smith's exclusion from the Met exhibition as an aesthetic judgment. Some have taken issue with that stance, although it merely echoes Crimp's substitution of Sherman for Smith in a revised version of the "Pictures" catalogue essay published in the journal *October* in 1979. It's likely that Smith's more visibly medium-based, hand-drawn approach no longer fit Crimp's articulation of postmodernism.

Indeed, Crimp had his own thoughts about Smith's absence from the Met show. When interviewed by arts journalist Lee Rosenbaum (who posts under the *nom de blog* CultureGrrl) in April, Crimp opined: "He was not so much of the group, of the social world, of the people who formulated this. He's gay and this [the Met's show] is a very straight configuration of artists. I don't know what's happened to him, career-wise. It's a slightly touchy subject: I think Philip is upset, reasonably." This recourse to Smith's sexuality as a possible explanation for his exclusion seems to me rather unconvincing. Yet it does raise an interesting—and unexplored—issue: There were, in fact, a number of gay men who actively participated in these circles, but their engagement tended more toward criticism and curating—which is why their presence isn't deeply felt in the exhibition proper (although it's more evident in the catalogue). Foremost among that group would be none other than Crimp himself, along with Craig Owens, who like Crimp was affiliated with *October*

and became a vigorous proponent of the postmodernist idiom in which he saw many of these artists working. That list would also include some less familiar names: Joe Bishop, who was trained as an artist but also curated the underrecognized 1979



exhibition "Imitation of Life" at the Joseloff Gallery of the Hartford Art School, which included work by Levine, Prince, and Salle as well as Richard Artschwager, Nan Goldin, and James Welling; or Marvin Heiferman, who organized another significant early exhibition, "Pictures: Photographs" at Castelli Graphics in 1979; or critic Paul Taylor, who, although he arrived in New York from his native Australia relatively late—in 1984—lent an important voice to the dialogue about this art, particularly in mid-'80s interviews with central figures in the milieu.

The names of Owens, Bishop, and Taylor—all of whom died of AIDS—remind us of a powerful loss experienced by this generation, one that may have signaled something of an endpoint. Although the AIDS crisis warrants only one mention in the Met's

catalogue and appears to have had no place at all in the various discussions of the show's exclusions, it is, I think, an important historical factor to consider as marking the limits of a particular artistic sensibility. The media savvy of Pictures art certainly had an impact on AIDS protest graphics—note the echoes of Barbara Kruger in the work of collectives such as Gran Fury and the Silence = Death project—yet the latter often rejected the cool, ironic detachment of Pictures work in favor of direct activism and topical political messages. Moreover, the artistic focus on abjection and the body in the wake of AIDS—think Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Kiki Smith—impacted Pictures art, most clearly in Sherman's "bulimic" images of the late '80s. Could it be, then, that the widespread critical attention to one artist's absence from the Met show might be signaling a recognition, on some level, of this broader generational loss?

Now, this is about the point I expected to wrap things up. But in the midst of writing this piece, I realized that something was missing; while reflecting so much on Smith's absence from the show, I had neglected to get his take on the issue—in a way, I was merely reiterating his exclusion. (In fact, it seems that no one—not even the critics and bloggers who had bemoaned his absence—had bothered to contact him either.) And when I did speak with him about the issue, Smith raised some reasonable objections: First, if the show was meant as a comprehensive historical survey, how could one explain the decision to include only four of the five original "Pictures" artists? Smith reiterated his affinity with the other artists of this so-called Pictures generation, as evidenced, for example, by a 1975 slide-show performance—held at Artists Space, no less—that relied on both found images and found sounds. He

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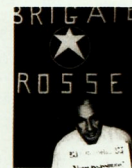
challenged the notion that there was a clearly defined, cohesive grouping or movement at the time ("I think this is sort of hindsight mythology. It's not like everybody moved in a pack back then. Was Richard Prince hanging out with Sherrie Levine every day? I don't think so"). And he was puzzled by the suggestion of sexuality as a potential explanation ("This is the first time I've ever read about me being a gay artist—this is news to me").

My conversation with Smith made it clear how quickly (and rather uncritically) I had constructed my own narrative about this episode—and how quickly it could be challenged or even overturned. These difficulties are inherent in treating contemporary art in historical terms, particularly with respect to the dialogue that ensues between curator or scholar and artist. For one, the commitment to the artist's voice (one often claimed by contemporary curators) can very easily come into conflict with a commitment to history. What does one do, for instance, when the historical record contradicts the artist's own account? Further, any attempt to write history necessarily involves exclusion, categorization, a certain amount of contingency. So in the case of the Met show, I see both sides of the issue. I identify with Eklund, tasked with the job of historical revision, who had to make difficult—and inevitably controversial—choices about inclusions and exclusions, who had to draw lines, to define things. But on the other hand, I understand Smith's viewpoint: He's in a particularly good position to ask questions about how those sorts of decisions get made, to call attention to how subjective they may be. The writing of history always involves such choices and negotiations, but they become that much more evident when the subjects about whom one is writing are able to talk back—to harangue, to scold, to offer up their own counternarratives.

The Met, of course, is an institution that has the heavy weight of history behind it (hence Longo's signature figures, hung in the museum's Great Hall, couldn't help but echo the ancient Greek friezes a few steps away). No wonder the issue of historiography became so pressing with this exhibition. But there is one final issue that strikes me as significant. Although Pictures art's embrace of advertising and mass-media forms—like that of Pop before it—tends to convince us of its clear engagement with the new, it retains a significantly historical dimension. This was evident throughout the Met show: in Kruger's use of period stock photographs, in Laurie Simmons's cache of '50s and '60s toys in her signa-

ture dollhouse images, in Levine's silhouette evocations of the "fathers of our country," and in Sarah Charlesworth's newspaper appropriations, aptly titled "Modern History," begun in 1977, to name but a few. And though this art's postmodernist champions tended to see such references as symptoms of ahistorical pastiche or irony, that diagnosis may have been made too quickly—particularly since this was a generation that has proved to be so concerned with its place in the historical narrative. These artists were engaged in various reflections on the past even before they became, in turn, the objects of historical scrutiny. □

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