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Reframing Pictures: Reading the Art of Appropriation

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Reframing *Pictures*: Reading the Art of Appropriation

Appropriation

In 1977, Douglas Crimp, a young art historian, critic, editor, and curator, organized a “modest group show”¹ titled *Pictures* at Artists Space in New York City. While the exhibition itself was small in scale, showing five emerging artists’ works in a second floor non-profit gallery in Tribeca, it nonetheless became known as a seminal moment in the identification and theorization of a new approach to making art, one that relied on semiotic theories about the nature of representation. This approach came to be called “appropriation.” Crimp brought together twenty-nine works in an extraordinary variety of media by Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith under the deceptively simple exhibition title “Pictures.” In part, it was precisely the conceptual challenge of unifying distinct artists’ practices under such a concise designation that enabled the idea to take hold. The conceit was to take their disparate works (sound art on vinyl records, wall relief sculptures, oil paintings, and so on) and convincingly create a conceptual matrix that bound them so tightly together that they appeared naturally unified. Crimp’s essay in the *Pictures* catalog specifies that:

The work of the five artists in this exhibition, and that of many other young artists as well, seems to be largely free of references to the conventions of modernist art, and instead turn to those of other art forms more directly concerned with representation—film and photography, most particularly—and even to the most debased of our cultural conventions—television and picture newspapers.²

In other words, Crimp’s curatorial matrix was the idea of “representation.”

However this initial framing of appropriation in Crimp's essay contained an ironic oversight; Crimp employed semiotics, which uses "language as the analytical paradigm for all other sign-systems,"³ to examine the work of artists directly concerned with representation, yet he ignored any text present in the artworks he discussed. While text is very clearly a form of representation, "since the structure of representation is identical with that of verbal language—a system of signs which always substitute for nonpresence,"⁴ writing is interestingly foreclosed from Crimp's list of "art forms more directly concerned with representation" (i.e. "film," "photography") enumerated above. Similarly the exemplary function of "television" and "picture newspapers" in the passage only further underscores the oversight, as both TV and print media consistently employ text to create the totality of their messages. Crimp's writing instead conflated "imagery" with "representation," both in his 1977 catalog essay, as well as his returns to the exhibition in "Pictures," in 1979, and "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," in 1980, essays he published in *October*, the art theory journal he edited at the time. These three essays all describe artworks with text components, both texts directly appropriating language from specific settings and generic texts appropriating cultural stereotypes more broadly, and none consider those linguistic-elements as representations in their own right, either for their unique aesthetic impact or their critical importance in the overall works, if they are even mentioned at all.

The most cursory look at appropriation's history belies the early and ongoing importance of text in its operations, which had existed as an artistic approach long before this contemporary version of it became so ubiquitous in western art. For example, what has been called "postmodern"⁵ or "analytical"⁶ appropriation has been traditionally

positioned as a direct inheritor of the mantle passed from the French Symbolist poets of the late 19th century to the Dada artists of the early 20th century to the French Surrealists and the radical collage practices of John Heartfield and Kurt Schwitters.⁷ And certainly the *mise-en-abyme* of André Gide, which Craig Owens, a peer of Crimp's at *October*, would later appropriate himself,⁸ is itself a reflection of the earlier artistic practices of manifold or mirrored representations going back to the Renaissance and before. Finally, the more immediate influence of conceptual art practices appropriating text for its paradigmatic or pedagogical potential, from the work of Joseph Kosuth to Lawrence Weiner to John Baldessari,⁹ is evident in the *Pictures* artists' interest in alternately underscoring or undermining the authority of text.

But despite the prominence of language in appropriations through art history, the works that became iconic of contemporary appropriation art's exploration of semiotic models of representation are most often appropriations using photographs, including the stoic "Marlboro Man" of Richard Prince, the sober sharecroppers in Sherrie Levine's re-photography of Walker Evans's works, and the Hitchcockian blondes of Cindy Sherman's self-portraiture. This elision of postmodern appropriation with imagery, and with the mechanics of photography specifically, is largely attributed to Crimp's "groundbreaking essay and exhibition... which defined the postmodern relationship to image production,"¹⁰ where Crimp asserted that the artworks that came to be defined by appropriation were all engaged in rethinking the political implications of how a "picture is not transparent to...a meaning."¹¹ And yet a picture, meaning what appears within a given frame, be it a wooden frame around a canvas, the plastic shell of a television, the white margin of a photograph, or the casement of a window, does not always show us

exclusively imagery; the “picture” in question very often includes representations in the form of text, moving or static, carefully designed or determined by default, central or marginal, and so on. Thus while Crimp’s work on how images operate in appropriation has been hugely influential, it is problematic that his idiosyncratic curatorial frame for *Pictures* has been so widely applied that “appropriation” has become narrowly defined by its use of imagery and photography in particular, a narrowness that ultimately limits discourse about the practice, restricting not only what content it is recognized to engage but also what politics it is therefore perceived to express. Indeed the only “photographs” included in *Pictures* appeared in a single Goldstein work, a triptych using excised figures from photojournalism presented on large blank backgrounds, while more than half of the *Pictures* works included text.

This essay will look again at some of that text visible in the *Pictures* artworks, in order to reassess both Crimp’s initial descriptions of these seminal appropriation works as well as the subsequent characterization of appropriative practices by Crimp and his peers at *October*. I will conclude by reflecting on the political consequences of reframing appropriation in order to place text at the center of its critique of representation, briefly considering three contemporary artists’ practices that appropriate text for diverse ends. Thus while this essay opens with a retrospective look, it turns, in conclusion, to look forward at the contemporary moment, asking what we gain when we keep text *also* in view, in order to begin to reflect on what is at stake in these framings and re-framings over time.

Pictures

The works of the five artists included in the *Pictures* exhibition varied in just about every conceivable way. Sherrie Levine's *Sons and Lovers* (1976-1977), a suite of thirty-two tempera on graph paper paintings depicting paired silhouetted profiles in alternating sizes, is titled after the 1913 D. H. Lawrence novel of the same name. The profiles include the recognizable busts of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy, and the heads of the anonymous figures of a woman, a Janus-form with male and female faces, a dog, etc. The drawings are mounted directly on the wall behind glass, unmatted and unframed, leaving the papers' "Hi-Art Li-Nup Bristol" branded margins exposed, a detail Crimp does not mention in his discussion of Levine's work, even as he refers to the "drama" produced by her "dumb repetition of images."¹² And yet it is precisely the papers' recurring grids and labels that form the unchanging, textual frame-of-reference that underscores the iterative nature of the mute silhouettes and their progression of relationships. Levine's work, like Lawrence's, diagrams "a nearly-perfect melodrama: claustrophobic, suffocating, family-bound, with a set of psychologically predetermined and reenacted roles."¹³ *Sons and Lovers* enacts this narrative through the serial, a seriality made explicit by the punctuating recurrence of "Hi-Art Li-Nup Bristol," throughout the "family" melodrama.

Crimp's curatorial essay also includes a discussion of Sherrie Levine's "recently published" book, *Untitled* (1977), a loose-leaf folio consisting of rearrangeable facing pages each featuring one word (fig. 1). "On one set are printed the names of rooms in a house...while on the other are printed the names of family members....Each of us, needless to say, has the story to complete that book."¹⁴ Crimp again glosses over the aesthetic details of the physical work, in this case the stark black-on-white lithographic

prints of the text, centered exactly in each of the pages, in a serified, capitalized typeface. Crimp also ignores that each print in the series appears on what looks like personalized stationery, with “SHERRIE LEVINE,” “NEW YORK CITY,” and “1977” printed centered at the foot of each page. These dual texts, the variable, generic places and people of the book’s pages, and the repeated, specific identifier of the artist in her time and place, sets up an assertion of mastery by the artist over every possible variant within this crucially all-encompassing narrative. In acknowledging the centrality of these specific, textual details in this work Levine becomes, as in her *Sons and Lovers* work, the omniscient narrator over all domestic dramas circumscribed by the series, a specificity that overwhelms the agency Crimp asserts for “each of us,” and instead reassigns authorship, in all cases, to the artist.

Longo’s four “picture objects”¹⁵ included in the exhibition consisted of cast aluminum wall reliefs. Two of his sculptures appeared in dialogue with Hollywood narratives through their filmic titles and direct quotation from specific movie sources. For example, “*the American Soldier and the Quiet Schoolboy*” (1977) invokes a long chain of filmic associations from both its form (based on a still showing the assassination of the titular character of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s 1970 film *The American Soldier*) and from its textual or meta-textual associations. Vera Dika writes:

While knowledge of Fassbinder’s film is not necessary for the appreciation of Longo’s *The American Soldier and the Quiet Schoolboy*, an understanding of it adds to the resonance of Longo’s selection of images...Fassbinder’s *The American Soldier* was in some ways a ‘remake’ of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless*, as *Breathless* itself was a kind of ‘remake’ of Howard Hawk’s *Scarface* or *The*

Big Sleep. In representing the single image from the last sequence of *The American Soldier*, Longo encourages a series of references. The arching figure itself may recall Michel Poiccard, the lead character of *Breathless*, shot in the back at the end of the film, or, before that, countless American gangsters shot in cold blood and left to die on the city streets.¹⁶

This densely referential image points not only to Longo's act of appropriation but also Hollywood's own recycling of visual tropes and clichés, alluding to the narrative overlaps and appropriations inherent in the contemporary culture from which the *Pictures* artists emerged. This cinematic frame serves to further highlight the presence of language in *Pictures* as it returns the viewer's attention to text in the form of the scripted narrative arc and the inherently linguistic mechanisms that define the movement of films.

But the sources Longo's works appropriate are not exclusively cinematic, or even necessarily visual. Two of his works in the exhibition are titled after a 1976 Billy Joel pop song and the opening line of Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, respectively. "*Say good-bye to Hollywood,*" *true measure, true star, in every living room of every house of every family across the nation* (1977) cryptically presents what looks like a greyhound snoozing on an area rug, presented on a low plinth. *Opening Scene: "a screaming comes across the sky"* (1977) is a relief of a figure walking in a blank, flat void. While the titles of all artworks are of course texts in themselves, my argument about the frequent, overlooked presence of text in appropriation takes the text's visual presence within the frame of the artwork as a qualifying criterion for consideration here; that said, this recurrent invocation of other texts outside the physical work but within its

meta-textual details, as in the cases of Levine and Longo, serves as a significant clue to the importance of language and text to the *Pictures* artists more generally.

Longo's sculptures often emerged out of his "multimedia theatrical pieces"¹⁷ and his sustained engagement with performance. Around the time of *Pictures*, he was the curator of performance at The Kitchen, an alternative art space in downtown New York. Many of Longo's source images for his sculptures originally appear or are re-contextualized in movements and videos. Crimp describes Longo's performances as, "Composed of a barrage of textual fragments and images, those works frustrated the ability to retain particular images that would provide a structure of meaning."¹⁸ Here Crimp's repetition of "images" is telling, where the latter repetition could have more inclusively and accurately been replaced with "representations" in order to indicate the difficulty of creating meaning out of both the fleeting images *and* texts. By not acknowledging the texts' role in meaning-creation in the latter phrase, Crimp's summation elides the presence of text in the performances entirely, a conscious or subconscious sleight-of-hand that is symptomatic of the larger curatorial and critical blind spot to the importance of text in these early, indeed formative, appropriation artworks.

Phillip Smith's four monumental paintings exhibited in *Pictures, Leap/Move, I & II, Back, Bring, and Spins*, all from 1977 and measuring one hundred by sixty-two inches, function similarly to *Sons and Lovers* for their oblique chain of references that keep the eye moving through each painting, and from painting to painting, with a series of similarly sized figures placed one after the other in rows crossing each panel. Their diagrammatic or, to borrow from Crimp, "pictographic"¹⁹ potential is underscored by the

way serial associations are encouraged both within the work and by its installation: the individual images on each painting are presented at approximately the same-size regardless of their real-world proportions; the wall-size scale of the works along with their dark backgrounds imply something fundamentally communicative, like a cave-painting or a chalkboard; while the inclusion of multiple paintings, hung together along one long wall moves the eye from left to right not only across the painting, but also across the body of work. Crimp explains that, “for Smith the logic of the picture is in its contiguity with other pictures.”²⁰ The inherent movement from one image to the next, and one painting to another, encourages a semiotic or linguistic transfer that asks not what the paintings depict so much as what they *mean*.

Jack Goldstein’s works in the exhibition varied greatly in media, ranging from eight short films made between 1975 and 1976 to four individual sound works on vinyl from 1977 along with a set of nine records from 1976, *Suite of 9*, and a triptych photographic work, *The Pull* (1976). While Goldstein used a range of media, the operation at work in each piece remains the same; Goldstein removed contextualizing information from around each central actor or activity to disorient the viewer from something potentially familiar, presenting the focus of each work against a “blank” background absent of other sensory input or detail, be it an astronaut floating through an otherwise empty page, film of a dog barking in front of a black backdrop, or the sounds of an earthquake whose scale and location cannot be determined by rumble alone. These decontextualized moments, when presented as time-based media, are heralded with a straightforward textual title card or media label and are thus rendered paradoxically iconic and unfamiliar, a destabilizing polarity that came to be seen as a hallmark of Goldstein’s appropriative artworks.

Presented variously as static works on a wall (for example, records hung in their sleeves) and as works to be viewed or heard on demand, Goldstein's participation in Crimp's exhibition most directly challenged to the notion of "pictures." When his films weren't being screened, *The Pull* (1976) was his sole work in the exhibition working explicitly with imagery. Indeed Goldstein's records were his dominant visual presence in the exhibition, and they were hung on the wall in the manner of a set of prints. The records stood out aesthetically both for their frequent color-coding by subject matter (green for the sound of falling trees, blue for a swimmer drowning, red and white marbled for a forest fire) and their simple, deadpan texts labeling each one. Alternating between an assertive, uppercase Helvetica type, in the case of Goldstein's *Suite of 9*, and a more romantic, vernacular script mimicking the record design of the previous era, as in *The Murder* from 1977²¹ (fig. 2), Goldstein's labels are suggestive and taunting, the texts coyly hinting at the invisible content of the records.

While these labels figured prominently on Goldstein's records in the exhibition, Crimp's description of the physical presence of the work doesn't even mention text, simply calling them, "variously colored phonograph records."²² Yet these texts act as a supplement to the aural content of the artwork itself, a position that is not as neutral or benign as it might first appear. Quoting Jacques Derrida, Owens writes:

The supplement, however, is not a simple addition; it also supplants. Both an increment and a substitute, it plays a compensatory role: "It adds only to replace. It insinuates itself in the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void." (The written supplement may extend the range of speech by prolonging it, but it also compensates for an absence--that of the speaker.) Hence the "danger" which the

supplement comports within itself, the possibility of perversion: that its vicarious nature be overlooked, and that it be mistaken for the positivity to which it is only "super-added."²³

In the case of Goldstein's work in the exhibition, the text on the records was part of their visually-striking, informative, and ambiguous presence in the exhibition, alluding both to their potentialities and to the perverse deferral of gratification inherent in displaying them on the wall. Further, by recognizing these texts as both *being* and *describing* the records' content, the texts enact, exactly, the critique of representation that Crimp claims for appropriation itself.

The seven print works exhibited by Troy Brauntuch vary in their content, although they are related through their shared deployment of the mysterious as a Trojan horse for the critical. Brauntuch's work attracts the viewer with obscure content that perplexes and intrigues, then only reveals through secondary sources (if ever) the mystery elements' political implications, potentially changing the overall significance of the work.

Brauntuch's prints in the exhibition are unified visually through their minimal design (expanses of blank page, solid-colored backgrounds, text and image-elements placed strategically within an otherwise empty field), and their media (the works all employed common, commercially available print techniques such as lithography, chromalin printing, C-prints and rubber stamping).

Series similarly pervade Brauntuch's work in the exhibition, with his frequent use of the diptych or triptych structure reinforcing the linguistic function of the work.

Presenting many of his images serially as a progression of information highlighting a narrative drive through a body of work, this directionality forces the viewer to "read" the

work, even when the images lack any visible text. Further a number of Brauntuch's works in the *Pictures* exhibition employ text to verbally enforce the serial. For example, his *Play, Fame, Song* (1977) is a triptych of prints presenting white line drawings of simple architectural figures on black backgrounds, underscored by a word from the title. The word "Play" is presented under a 5-stroke drawing of a swing, "Fame" captions a simple drawing of a column base and pedestal, while "Song" is paired with a minimally-described spotlight illuminating an empty stage. Thus the "Play," "Fame," and "Song" words activate the drawings as symbols of the aforementioned words; without the incorporation of text into these works, the austerity of the drawings would perhaps indicate that they are unfinished sketches or a drafting exercise. In other words, the addition of text in these prints designates the images as signs, like the text itself—claiming them as equivalents in the representational stakes. The prints are mounted flat, leaning slightly against the wall on small white shelves, which further heighten their pedagogical aspect as they look like teaching tools, small blackboards with chalk trays below.

Crimp's writing about Brauntuch's *Golden Distance* (1976) serves as a case study in his oversight of the important role of text in these artworks. In his curatorial essay, Crimp discusses *Golden Distance*, a work that was not included in the exhibition itself but is nonetheless reproduced as a two-page spread in the *Pictures* catalog. Each black panel depicts the same appropriated image of the back of a woman's head (an image that repeats in another Brauntuch print included in the exhibition), one image in white and the other overlaid with a circular, transparent gold disk (fig. 3). The panel with the woman in gold also includes a white text in a formal script reading, "Whispers around a woman."

As one of only two changes to an otherwise serial image, the text is no doubt an important part of the movement of this work, and yet Crimp refers to it as a “caption” that “seems only to reinforce the inaccessibility of the photograph.”²⁴ In other words, Crimp describes the text as a simple complement to the more important element of the photographs.

And yet, when one looks at the work, the text is in fact the salient element, flagging the move from seriality to specificity. The image changes register through the addition of a gold veil, or lens, while the text moves from absence to presence itself. Does the phrase refer to the gold zone’s sudden appearance around this woman, or does the concurrence of the gold filter and the explicatory text simply draw our attention to something present but invisible to us in the first image, serving a diagrammatic function for the left-hand panel, bringing our attention to the presence of “whispers” all along? Also, because these are Chromalin prints, the white areas of the work are not actually “printed” but result from negative space left on black and gold transparencies; in other words, the white one sees in looking at the print is the carrier paper itself. The mirroring of the white image on the left with the white text on the right now reinscribes the space of the diptych as the space of a book, with facing pages opened to us. The text formally enforces this analogy, reading naturally from left to right, mirroring our larger “reading” of the diptych itself. Further, the text is no simple caption, but also a vital formal element in the larger image. This is made clear not only because of its unorthodox placement on the page (captions generally rest below a work, so that the viewer encounters them after the image) but also for its typographical identity (captions are generally sans serif for clarity with any terminal or shoulder strokes weighted for legibility).²⁵

Hanging high above the golden woman on the page, floating like a cloud or a halo, the text visually alludes to that other fundamental shift by the artist; inscribing the figure of the woman in the golden circle, she is also flattened into the circular, perpendicular ring of halos as depicted in the sacred art of Russian Orthodoxy, and yet unlike Russian icons, she is viewed from behind. Is this a woman abdicating sainthood or is it a saint repudiating the viewer? Is there an air of sacrilege about these whispers? These are readings made possible by the text, without which the prints are merely an exercise in repetition.

Revision

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that when Douglas Crimp curated the 1977 exhibition at Artists Space, and he called it “Pictures,” he very clearly signaled his priorities to the world. In the introduction to his 1979 “Pictures” essay, he stated, “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.”²⁶ At issue here is not the necessary delimitation of Crimp’s interest in how images signify, but that the incomplete way “representation” was defined in this circumscribed context has been married with what has since become known as appropriation art. As text in appropriation art has continued to be disregarded over time, its absence has resulted in a contemporary understanding of appropriation as narrowly concerned with image-as-sign, to the exclusion of the linguistic (and other) signs also appearing within an artwork’s frame. Given that Crimp defined appropriation as a practice invested in questioning the limits of representation and “structures of

signification,”²⁷ the uncritical art-historical inheritance of “representation” as “image” is remarkable.

Further, the critical investment in applying the lessons of semiotics to the operations of appropriation makes it particularly ironic that the role of language within the frame of the artworks was not considered, either at the time or in later writing. Ferdinand de Saussure defined “semiotics,” in part, as an engagement of meaning in text and language in the field of linguistics as well as society at large,²⁸ and Crimp’s 1977 essay cites not only Saussure, whose groundbreaking *Course in General Linguistics* popularized the semiotic study of language, but also Roman Jakobson, whose own work applied semiotics to study to the power of poetic language. However Crimp’s main influence, semiotically speaking, was Roland Barthes, as it was Barthes who compellingly claimed that “signifying media”²⁹ of all sorts could be analyzed using semiotic tools, deconstructing everything from film stills to fashion to, notably, an advertisement for prepared Italian foods.

Indeed, it is in Barthes’ essay “Rhetoric of the Image,” first published in 1964 and published in translation in 1977, that one possible precursor to Crimp’s oversights can be seen, as in this text Barthes himself fails to acknowledge the affective, aesthetic impact of text and typography, much as Crimp failed to address the informational, affective, or aesthetic impact of text in the individual artworks he wrote about. In the essay, Barthes lays out a framework for the analysis of a Panzani advertisement for packaged pastas and sauces, describing the three expressive elements of the ad as “the linguistic message, the denoted image, and the connoted image.”³⁰ Barthes therefore allows the ad’s photograph to signify in at least two ways with both a “perceptual” and “cultural message,”³¹ thus as

an illustration of the products available and also of “*Italinicity*” itself,³² while the text of the advertisement is treated as pure message, without aesthetic significance or meaning to leaven its literal one, despite the stylistic and typographic-historical evocations that equally accrue in its visual identity.

Crimp shared this investment in Barthes’s work on semiotics with his colleagues at *October*. His peers at that publication, notably Rosalind Krauss, his professor at CUNY who co-founded *October* with Annette Michelson, and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe in 1976, and Craig Owens, another of Krauss’s students, identified Crimp’s work on appropriation as a noteworthy development in the theorization of postmodern practice and quickly incorporated his insights from *Pictures* into their own writings. Krauss and Owens, like Crimp, were also influenced by the great influx of newly translated writing by French cultural theorists and philosophers including Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Jean Baudrillard, along with the work of earlier writers whose thinking was important to this new generation of French theorists, including Saussure, Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, and Sigmund Freud.³³ In short, *October*’s writers shared a heavily footnoted, intellectually ambitious style that deliberately pointed away from the Greenbergian concerns of Modernism that had dominated American art criticism in the 1960s in favor of postmodern, poststructuralist approaches to art criticism. Their common set of references inadvertently ensured that they were often writing in dialogue with each other, with both Krauss and Owens citing Crimp’s writings on appropriation, and he theirs, in some cases in the same issue of *October*.³⁴ The problem with viewing appropriation through the lens of this contemporaneous, interconnected body of writing is that while Crimp’s stated positions may be reinforced,

or contested, or questioned, his omissions remained absent from view, inscribed, at most, in the negative space of the established arguments; despite, or perhaps because of, this densely worked critical terrain, Crimp's specific oversight of the centrality of text in the appropriations of the *Pictures* artists went unacknowledged, even while Krauss and Owens wrote about text, and appropriation, in their own work at the time.

For example, in 1982 Rosalind Krauss wrote persuasively about the contemporary critical bias towards celebrating photography over text in her essay, "When Words Fail." This text addresses "the invasion of the visual by the textual"³⁵ in the photography of Weimar Germany, citing the profusion of photographic self-portraits of the era depicting only the subject's hand with a writing implement and a handwritten page as an occasion to reconsider "misconceptions that operate at the very heart of present critical discourse on photography."³⁶ However, despite Krauss's acknowledgement that "capturing and holding the transient experience, recording the present and storing it up against the future,"³⁷ is not unique to photography but in fact a representational ability shared with writing, her insights here are necessarily applied to the photography of the 1920s and 30s while her call to look at contemporary "misconceptions" about photography went unanswered. Krauss also wrote about the importance of appropriated text specifically in her 1980 essay, "Poststructuralism and the 'Paraliterary,'" which was originally delivered as remarks at a symposium on contemporary criticism. This essay addresses the shifts in criticism wrought by authors such as Derrida and Barthes who created "a kind of paraliterature," which "is the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation,"³⁸ pointing to the critical import of engaging with such appropriated material that is "always already-known."³⁹ Krauss's identification here of the

contemporary application of appropriation to critical texts, as well as her sensitivity to the “talking picture,” meaning the photograph depicting text, illustrates some of her discernment for the critical role of text appearing within a given frame.

Craig Owens’s writing frequently addressed language in the context of conceptual, postmodern, and feminist art. His 1979 essay “Earthwords,” for example, demonstrates his canny recognition of the specific importance of text to postmodern art, writing that artist Robert Smithson’s recourse to writing “transformed the visual field into a textual one [and] represents one of the most significant aesthetic ‘events’ of our decade.”⁴⁰ Further, Owens’s brief essay from 1982, “Sherrie Levine at A&M Artworks,” explicitly denies the characterization of Levine as “primarily... an appropriator of images,”⁴¹ taking pains to establish the great variety of media she adopts in her practice. Finally, Owens made explicit the links between feminist art and textual explorations of representation in his 1983 essay “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism.” Here he writes specifically about appropriated text in the work of Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler, and others, notably flagging Levine and Louise Lawler’s collaboration under the name “A Picture is No Substitute for Anything” as “an unequivocal critique of representation as traditionally defined.”⁴² In this essay Owens hails the role of critical writing *as art* for a number of feminist artists, who “often regard critical or theoretical writing as an important arena of strategic intervention,”⁴³ an insight that underscores the political stakes of critical writing as art practice both in the early 80s and today.

Owens should therefore be credited for remarkable perceptiveness to the role of text in postmodern practices, as well as diversifying the media of appropriation more

generally, although these examples are tempered by instances where his own valorization of images dominates any consideration for the critical role of language in a work. This is evident in Owens's 1984 essay on Kruger, "The Medusa Effect, or, The Specular Ruse," where Owens's image bias is present from the outset. Owens opens his essay:

Barbara Kruger propositions us with commonplaces, stereotypes. Juxtaposing figures and figures of speech—laconic texts superimposed on found images (Kruger does not compose these photographs herself)—she works to expose what Roland Barthes called "the rhetoric of the image": those tactics whereby photographs impose their messages upon us, hammer them home.⁴⁴

By Owens's admission, Kruger's practice engages clichés both visual *and* textual ("figures" and "figures of speech") whose stereotypes she appropriates to examine and undermine. Yet, despite this, Owens still frames her practice as concerned with the operations of "photographs," a characterization that fails to acknowledge the reciprocal elements of her critique, in which the images are equally called upon to expose the stereotypes and assumptions inherent in the texts. While other writers, notably Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster, turned to appropriation in their own much-anthologized articles of the early-80s, sometimes specifically attending to the operations of text in the practices of artists such as Dara Birnbaum, Jenny Holzer, Rosler, and Kruger, this essay takes as its starting point the idea that such artists' engagement with language was not an evolution of appropriation, but rather the matrix from which it emerged.

Reframing

What might we think of as iconic of appropriation now if, instead of associating it so closely with image-based or photographic practices, we focused on appropriation's use of text, placing it squarely in the center of our view? What orthodoxies of art history and practice could be undone? Appropriation, as theorized by Crimp as an inquiry into how images signify, has been widely understood as operating at the "crossing of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation."⁴⁵ This framing of appropriation as an ocular-aesthetic stalemate with the gaze has resulted in the practice being politically pigeonholed as the domain of "theoretical girls"⁴⁶ and "women artists...of a specific position of New York conceptual art,"⁴⁷ orthodoxies of art history that persist despite much evidence pointing to appropriation's wider engagement with representations of power, manifesting in various formats, text, image, or otherwise.

This broader application of appropriation necessarily allows for a greater diversity of hegemonies to be addressed and political positions to be voiced, because the practice is able to explore what is at stake in more types of representations. In an effort to reconsider what might more accurately be thought of as representative of appropriation today, I will look at a few contemporary artists' works that appropriate text in ways that underscore or parallel the other operations at work in their practices, namely works by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Haim Steinbach, and Anne Collier. That these artists' oeuvres are more often considered iconic of other processes they employ highlights just how limited the discourse about appropriation continues to be, despite its ubiquity. While there are any number of artists using appropriated text for distinct, and distinctly contemporary, political ends, I have chosen these three specifically because the obvious dissimilarity of

their works provide productively far-flung coordinates for plotting on a new, expanded map of appropriation's activities.

Rirkrit Tiravanija is perhaps best known as the standard-bearer for relational aesthetics, in part due to his work appearing on the cover of the first editions of Nicholas Bourriaud's influential book of the same name. *Relational Aesthetics*, devoted to participatory, social art practices, uses a number of Tiravanija's works involving the public cooking and eating of food to bolster Bourriaud's arguments about the "convivial"⁴⁸ nature of such interactive art practices. However, the "generosity"⁴⁹ that is frequently ascribed to Tiravanija's work tends to overshadow the more critical aspect of his practice, which uses appropriation to indirectly point to unacknowledged power dynamics. For example, his seminal *Untitled (pad thai)* (1990) saw the artist's work, installed in the smaller project space of the Paula Allen Gallery, mistaken for catering in support of the main exhibition,⁵⁰ in the type of politically-charged misreading that the artist's work often cultivates. Critic Raimar Stange points to this subversive, post-colonial critique inherent in his work, writing that Tiravanija "has become famous as a 'cooking artist'—a misunderstanding that has almost concealed the real questions raised by his work for the past twenty years... [which] read Western culture against the cultural attitudes of his homeland, Thailand."⁵¹ Indeed it is appropriation, in this case transplanting Thai cooking into the gallery, that effectively sets the stage for Tiravanija's indirect political critique, one that depends on the viewers' assumptions, rather than the artist's voice, to become clear.

But Tiravanija's two- and three-dimensional works also rely on appropriation, and often text, from newspaper headlines to popular slogans, to indirectly express unsettling

political realities. For example, his 2003 text painting *untitled (less oil more courage)*, which the artist first exhibited in that year's Venice Biennial, caused a stir from its initial installation both for the artist's unpredicted swerve into painting and for the perceived bluntness of his political statement. But most critics at that time seemed unaware that the titular phrase painted on the canvas was, in fact, appropriated from the notes of painter Peter Cain. For example, Kirsty Bell writing in *frieze* called it, "a small white canvas with the words 'Less Oil, More Courage' painted in thick black letters. Perhaps this is a joke about painting, but maybe it's a clear and mild-mannered protest that brings a fragment of greater reality back into the spectacle of the Grand Show."⁵² Yet the commentary was not as clear as Bell imagined, since whatever politics inherent in the work were articulated indirectly at best, Tiravanija ghostwritten by Cain, employing exactly the kind of authorial relativism ascribed to the appropriations of Levine, Brauntuch, and others of the *Pictures* generation. Tiravanija later appropriated his own appropriation in a 2007 remake of the original painting, and in subsequent print works and installations where the Cain reference was strategically deployed. For example in the context of the 2007 Sharjah Biennial (fig. 4), where the text was inevitably overdetermined by the geopolitics of oil, the ecological message of Tiravanija's light-box street signs displaying the phrase operated precisely because of the acknowledgement in the exhibition documentation that the statement was not the artist's. In this instance, the text's appropriation added a depth of reference that removed Tiravanija's work from the realm of propaganda and returned it to the domain of art.

Haim Steinbach, a contemporary of the *Pictures* artists, whose work examines cultural practices of collection and display, is renowned for presenting carefully selected

objects in dialogue with each other, arranged on shelves of his own design. However Steinbach's interest in the formal and cultural significance of the materials with which we surround ourselves extends to his frequent appropriation and re-presentation of found words and phrases (ranging from ad copy to literature) as wall-texts, in works he has been exhibiting since the 1980s. Rendered in the exact typography and layout as the original sources, then rescaled to suit the site, Steinbach's wall texts recontextualize the visual chatter that forms our increasingly media-saturated, text-rich environment, asserting that, much like the beloved, obscure, or banal objects on his shelves, these phrases are a profound register of the contemporary landscapes of our creation, which, when recontextualized, operate in the same iconic-yet-unfamiliar mode Crimp initially identified as the appropriative. Steinbach's wall texts, whether installed at heroic or diminutive sizes in architectural space, not only register these plagiarized phrases as formal objects in their own right, but also present them as freely circulating cultural currency in the same manner as his displayed objects.

For example, Steinbach's *bauhaus* (2014), installed site-specifically in his 2014 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zurich, evokes a long chain of references from its literal translation from German as "construction house" to the so-named art school of the 1920's to the German hardware store chain of today (fig. 5). Looking at the wall-text through the lens of globalization, the work's references are allowed to read interchangeably, with the traditional hierarchy of cultural values upended when presented in Steinbach's overall exhibition, its reading equally influenced by the exposed building materials of the installation (sheetrock, studs, wallpaper strips, etc.), the enveloping art historical frame of the museum, and the rich typographic legacy of Switzerland itself. Curators Tom Eccles,

Beatrix Ruf, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Julia Peyton-Jones alluded to the multivalent readings of Steinbach's installation, writing, "A prominent feature of the Swiss cultural landscape is the simultaneous appreciation of archaic artifacts and customs and the influence of the avant-garde and the Bauhaus, as implemented in the special case of Concrete art, design, and typography."⁵³ The appropriation of the logo gives this diversity of registers to the text's insertion into the exhibition, its presence pointing to the complex interrelationships of cultural capital, itself so often appropriated and mobilized for neoliberal ends.

Photographer Anne Collier's work is, of the three examples, most directly engaged with the legacy of Crimp's *Pictures* exhibition. Her photographs, described as "pictures of pictures,"⁵⁴ often echo works from the *Pictures* exhibition, through their photographic decontextualizations of found printed matter from the 70s and 80s (generally photographed against white backgrounds in her studio), but also through the content of the depicted ephemera, which include record sleeves, advertisements, books, and magazine covers, occasionally portraying women photographers in particular. Despite these affinities, Collier asserts, "I don't think of my work in terms of appropriation or re-photography, rather I think of them more as still-lives in that they are typically straightforward depictions of existing objects."⁵⁵ Thus Collier evokes the legacy of appropriation even as she specifically distances her own work from its critique of authorship.

Collier's photographs nonetheless function as art historical palimpsests, which layer the rephotography of Sherrie Levine with 70s-era critiques of the gaze and a nostalgic regard for artifacts of the *Pictures* era. For example, Collier's body of work

Woman With a Camera (beginning in 2006) presents a variety of found photographs of women's faces or bodies depicted behind cameras, as if the images were made by shooting self-portraits in a mirror. Collier presents these simulated selfies, which situate "the camera as both a tool in the construction of female vulnerability and a means by which to overcome it,"⁵⁶ contextualized in their disseminating formats (a postcard presented as a diptych showing its front and back sides, an image of Marilyn Monroe depicted in the open spread of a post-it-note-marked monograph, and so forth). Many of these photos include text as part of the overall image ("CONTAX RTS. RTS SPELLS S-E-X," assures one ad's copy, written across a reclining female nude in Collier's *Woman with Cameras #1*, from 2012), and it is the recontextualizing of these taglines into the social and political milieu of the 21st century that renders Collier's photographs unequivocally absurd.

While Collier's photographs often engage text to explore such archetypes of femininity and the politics of image construction, she also uses the found text in her photographs as a form of institutional critique, using art-historical references appearing in "vernacular manifestations of photographic imagery"⁵⁷ to point to the means of contemporary image circulation. Collier's *Veterans Day (Nudes, 1972 Appointment Calendar, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Edward Weston)* (2011) depicts a 1972 weekly datebook reprinting the same Weston nude as Levine re-photographed in 1979 as part of her *After Edward Weston* series (fig. 6). Douglas Crimp describes the Levine work this way:

At a recent exhibition, Levine showed six photographs of a nude youth. They were simply rephotographed from the famous series by Edward Weston of his

young son Neil, available to Levine as a poster published by the Witkin Gallery. According to the copyright law, the images belong to Weston, or now the Weston Estate. I think, to be fair, however, we might just as well give them to Praxiteles, for if it is the *image* that can be owned, then surely these belong to classical sculpture, which would put them in the public domain...Representation takes place because it is always already there in the world *as* representation. It was, of course, Weston himself who said that “the photograph must be visualized in full before the exposure is made.” Levine has taken the master at his word.⁵⁸

Thus Collier, depicting Weston’s nude in a reproduction that predates Levine’s own appropriation, inserts herself anachronistically within this chronology of copies, both in the moment of 1972, appropriating Weston seven years before Levine’s rephotography of Weston-marketing ephemera, and also in the year 2011 when Collier takes her image, executing a double (or triple) appropriation of Levine via Weston (via Praxiteles). It is Collier’s reproduction of this image *in a calendar*, itself a textual frame for capturing and representing time, that highlights the chronologically jumbled way images circulate today, alluding to the commercialization of art imagery enabling these anachronic readings in the first place, curating and disseminating work by promotional potential rather than art-historical logic.

Pictures, and Douglas Crimp’s work on the subject, has been influential in beginning to understand how images like these function in the postmodern landscape. One indication of the importance of his writing on appropriation is the sheer number of re-readings and revisions of his ideas, both by himself and others. While Crimp has acknowledged that “much would be made of the shifts”⁵⁹ in his essays on the topic over

time, these appropriations are, in fact, *the* imperative of appropriation. Johanna Burton writes:

In order to resist the cultural riptides, one needs to plot (however tangentially) one's own longitude and latitude within them. The notion may have been best articulated by Hal Foster in 1982, when he asserted that this approach to culture suggested a model wherein artists treated "the public space, social representation or artistic language in which he or she intervenes as both a target and a weapon."⁶⁰

Today, such interventions necessarily recognize that it is not only the circulation of *images* that map power dynamics across culture but that they are just one vector of many, in a field of representations more varied than Crimp's writings about appropriation acknowledge. Artists still use appropriation "to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others,"⁶¹ but we increasingly engage a diversity of representations (textual or otherwise) in the service of a diversity of political positions concerned with manifestations of control (in print, in performance, in legislation, in alliances, in histories, in art practice, and so on). These contemporary appropriations identify some of the dense network of associations called upon, both explicitly and implicitly, by the variety of representations that occupy the contemporary landscape, reading them again, to understand how they operate, and operate on us.

¹ Douglas Crimp, *Diss-Co (a Fragment)* (New York: MoMA PS1, 2015), 22.

² Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, (New York: Artists Space, 1977), 28.

³ Robert E. Innis, introduction to *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, ed. Robert E. Innis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), viii.

⁴ Craig Owens, "'Einstein on the Beach': The Primacy of Metaphor," *October* 4 (1977), 22.

⁵ Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (1979), 75.

⁶ Johanna Burton, "Subject to Revision," *Artforum* 43, no. 2. (2004), 260.

⁷ Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (1982), 43; Johnson Okpaluba, "Appropriation Art: Fair Use or Foul?", in *Dear Images: Art, Copyright and Culture*, ed. Daniel McClean and Karsten Schubert, (London: Ridinghouse; ICA, 2002), 199.

⁸ Craig Owens, "Photography 'En Abyme'," *October* 5 (1978), 75.

⁹ Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New York; New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2009), 16-17; Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. 1st ed. (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1985), 100.

¹⁰ Artists Space, "Artists Space Dialogues: Bettina Funcke & Douglas Crimp, Wednesday, February 3, 7pm," emailed press release, January 27, 2016.

¹¹ Crimp, *Pictures*, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³ Howard Singerman, *Art History, after Sherrie Levine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 37-38.

¹⁴ Crimp, *Pictures*, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁶ Vera Dika, *The (Moving) Pictures Generation: The Cinematic Impulse in Downtown New York Art and Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 132.

¹⁷ Eklund, *Pictures Generation*, 82.

¹⁸ Crimp, *Pictures*, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

²¹ While *The Murder* is dated 1977 on the original works list from the *Pictures* exhibition, the record's date is listed differently elsewhere, for example as 1972-1976 in the records of the Smithsonian Institution, which provided the image and caption of this work for publication here. Differences in published information about works from the *Pictures* exhibition abound, from titles, to dates, to material descriptions, and for consistency's sake in the body of my text I have cited works' information as found in the *Pictures* archival material wherever possible.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ Craig Owens, "Detachment from the 'Parergon,'" *October* 9 (1979), 43.

²⁴ Crimp, *Pictures*, 10.

²⁵ It is instructive to note this "purely informational" assumption about the text being reproduced over time because it underscores how influential Douglas Crimp's original characterizations of the *Pictures* works continue to be. Curator Douglas Eklund, in his

2009 discussion of *Golden Distance* in *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* catalog, likens the phrase to “the subtitles of a foreign film,” another simile that fails to account for the visual qualities of the work itself. Eklund, *Pictures Generation*, 101.

²⁶ Crimp, "Pictures," 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁸ Ferdinand de Saussure, “The Linguistic Sign,” in *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, ed. Robert E. Innis, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 35.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 9.

³⁰ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³² *Ibid.*, 34.

³³ Eklund, *Pictures Generation*, 17; Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (New York: Icon Editions, 1996), 332.

³⁴ *October 13* provides an interesting case-in-point, because not only do Crimp, Owens, and Krauss all have essays on postmodernism and appropriation published in this issue, but Crimp and Owens each footnote the same Krauss essay on Robert Rauschenberg in their respective texts. Further, Owens also footnotes Crimp’s essay, “On the Museum’s Ruins,” published concurrent with his in that *same* issue, *October 13*, pointing to how immediately interrelated the *October* writers arguments were. Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," *October 13* (1980), 41-57; Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse:

Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *ibid.*, 36-40; Rosalind Krauss,

"Poststructuralism and the 'Paraliterary,'" *ibid.*, 59-80.

³⁵ Rosalind Krauss, "When Words Fail," *October* 22 (1982), 100.

³⁶ Krauss, "Words," 92.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁸ Krauss, "Poststructuralism," 37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁰ Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *October* 10 (1979), 128.

⁴¹ Craig Owens, "Sherrie Levine at A&M Artworks," *Art in America* (1982), 148.

⁴² Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 2002), 84.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁴ Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 191.

⁴⁵ Owens, "Discourse," 68.

⁴⁶ Jeff Wall in conversation with Dan Graham, quoted in Eklund, *Pictures Generation*, 144.

⁴⁷ Douglas Eklund, gallery talk at *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, video by James Kalm, *The Pictures Generation, 1974 1984 at the Metropolitan Museum Of*, video, 10:05, April 29, 2009, accessed October 20, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftvSK-nx9WQ>.

⁴⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 26.

⁴⁹ Joshua Decker, "Review: Rirkrit Tiravanija, Gavin Brown's Enterprise," *Artforum* (2011), 282.

⁵⁰ Rirkrit Tiravanija, e-mail message to author, January 11, 2016.

⁵¹ Raimar Stange, "Interview Rirkrit Tiravanija," *Spike Art Quarterly* Spring, no. 31 (2012), accessed December 15, 2015,

<http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/interview-rirkrit-tiravanija>.

⁵² Kirsty Bell, "50th Venice Biennale," *Frieze* September, no. 77 (2003), accessed December 18, 2015, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/kirsty_bell/.

⁵³ Haim Steinbach, et al., *Object and Display* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2016), 358-59.

⁵⁴ Anne Collier, Jan Verwoert, and Bob Nickas, *Anne Collier* (North Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 2008), 13.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Michael Darling and Chrissie Iles, *Anne Collier* (Chicago: MCA Chicago, 2014), 22.

⁵⁷ Collier, Verwoert, and Nickas, 13.

⁵⁸ Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (1980), 98-99.

⁵⁹ Crimp, *Diss-Co*, 23.

⁶⁰ Burton, 261.

⁶¹ Owens, "Discourse," 68.

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