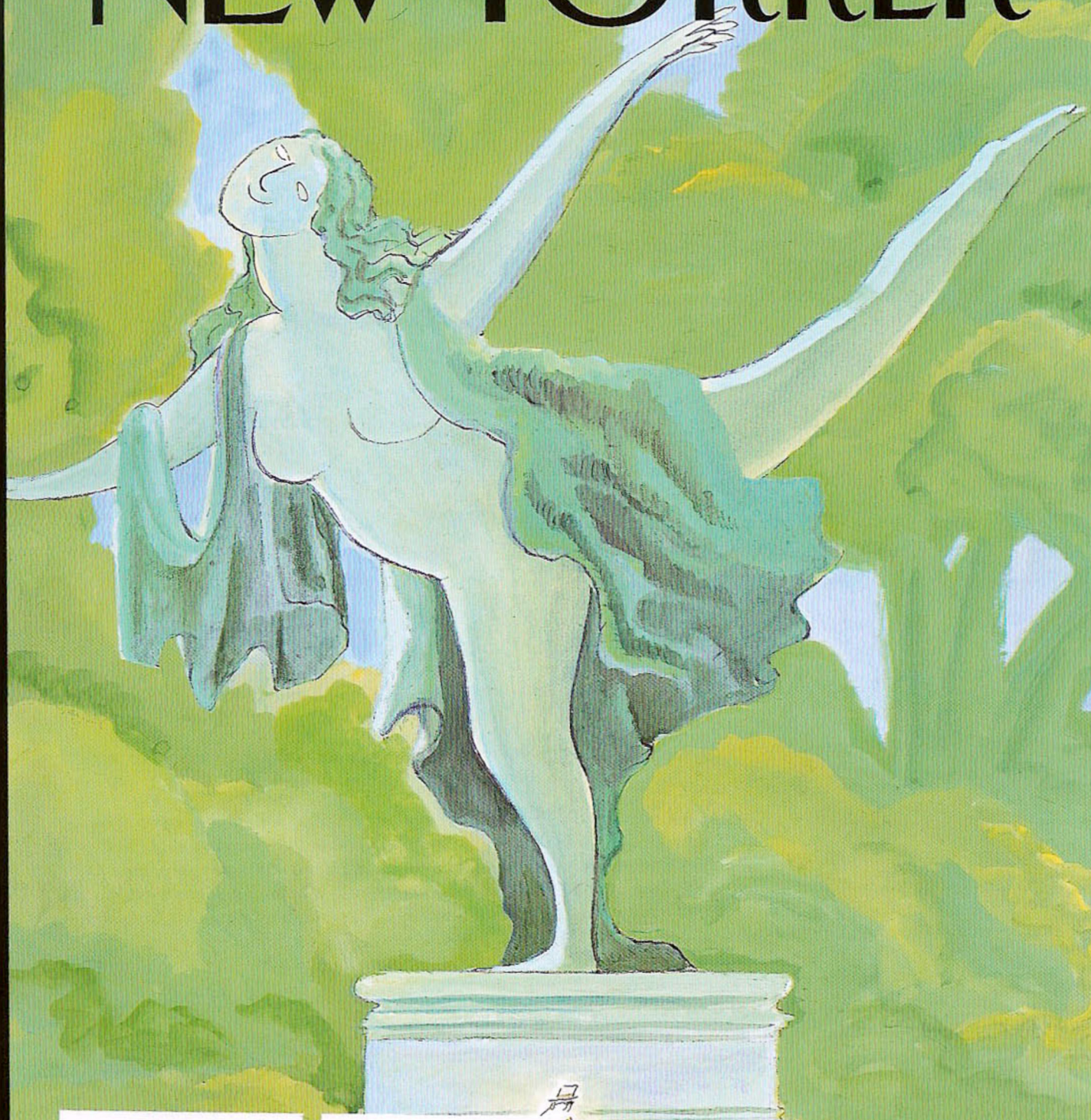


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ALIEN EMOTIONS

Pictures art revisited.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

"The Pictures Generation," at the Metropolitan Museum, revisits a hothouse orchid of an avant-garde that sprouted in art schools in the nineteen-seventies and, by 1984 (the cutoff date for works in the show), had withered in the chill winds of the New York art world. The movement's vastly influential signature method was appropriation: the filching or the imitation of existing images, to sabotage and/or revel in their rhetorical contrivance. Born of recessionary, disenchanting times, Pictures art shared menacingly cynical attitudes toward mainstream culture with punk rock, in night-life venues, and with deconstructionist lucubration, in academe. It yawned between those poles: sardonic burlesque and stilted critique. If any single work in the Met show could stand for all, it would be one of a series executed with minimal labor, in 1979, by the artist Sherrie Levine: fashion ads from glossy magazines trimmed to the contours of the profiled heads of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, and framed. Looking at them, you register the sainted Presidents and the *soignée* models—and the forms of silhouette and of color photography—in stuttering alternation. Your brain can't grasp both at once. Nor can your heart. The images aren't neutral. They come loaded with political and social associations, bearing on notions of "America." With diabolical efficiency, Levine thus made good on a claim commonly advanced for Pictures art: spurring consciousness of how, and to what ends, representations affect us. Let it be noted that these works do nothing else. As slight and as brittle as they are pure, they demonstrate the limits of critical knowingness as an artistic strategy. The rest of "The Pictures Generation"—photographs, paintings, drawings, collages, installations, sound pieces, films, and videos, plus books, magazines, and ephemera—is comparatively slipshod, though often arresting

and occasionally fun. In the unique case of the self-photographer Cindy Sherman, it is transcendent.

Mounted by the Met's associate curator of photography, Douglas Eklund, in the museum's newly spacious photography galleries, the show is largely a story of two gangs of artists that convened in New York. It was plainly heaven, in the SoHo of the late nineteen-seventies, to have been a student at the California Institute of the Arts or the State University of New York at Buffalo. CalArts kids were mentored by the conceptualist and legendary teacher John Baldessari, who, among other assignments, instructed pairs of students to film themselves performing snippets of scripts from old movies. (A projected compilation of the results, "Script," made between 1973 and 1977), evokes an era smitten with the freeze-dried passions of Jean-Luc Godard.) The CalArts star was David Salle, who later gained renown as a painter—a chief colleague and a rival of the paladin of American neo-Expressionism, Julian Schnabel—after breaking ranks with his mostly painting-averse peers. Early works by Salle in the Met show, including a svelte and spooky installation of unnerving photographs (a sneering galoot in a racecar, bare-breasted female African dancers), sentimental music, and flashing lights, well described by Eklund as "like a church of someone else's religion," are a revelation. The Buffalo cohort had a student couple at its core: Sherman, who entertained friends by showing up at gatherings in disguise, and Robert Longo, who was given to movie-inspired icons of macho melodrama. Coming independently to the movement were the stalwarts Richard Prince (a versatile prankster who made an early hit with reproduced Marlboro cigarette ads), Barbara Kruger (with brilliantly crafted feminist agitprop), and Levine (a scandalous success with re-photographed photographs by Edward Weston and

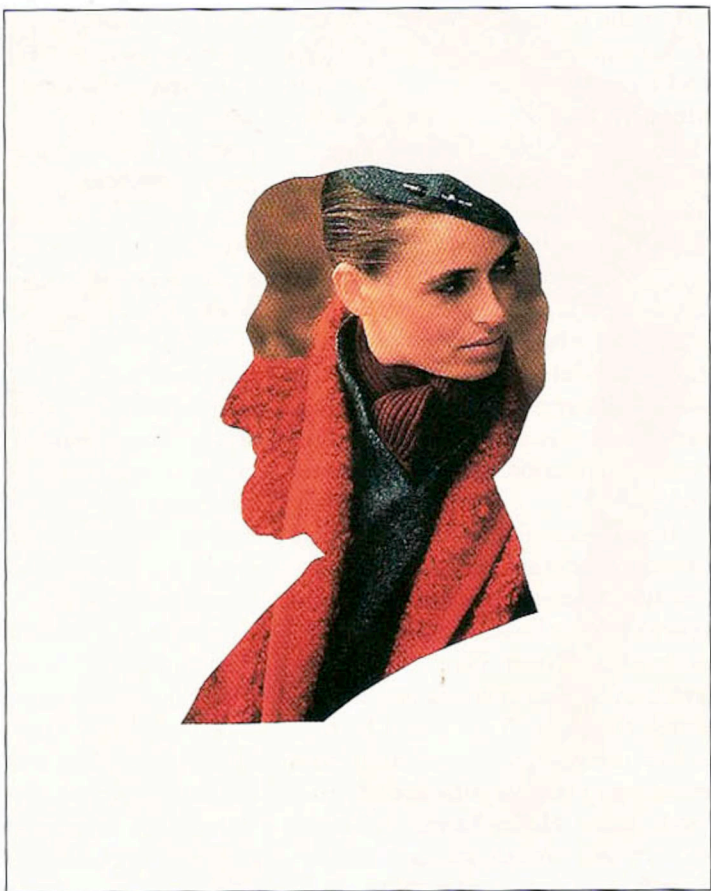
Walker Evans, which needed the mystiques of originality and authorship in art). The photographer Louise Lawler merits special mention for her cold-eyed shots of expensive art works in overdecorated apartments—as wince-makingly pitiless as the assessment of a privileged youth, home from college, of his or her parents' taste. For highly comic relief, there are videos by the gifted performance artist Michael Smith, whose "Baby Ikki" (1978) cast him as a diapered tyke crawling on a sidewalk and toddling out into traffic in lower Manhattan, to the amusement of passersby and the dudgeon of a police officer obliged to hustle him—none too gently—out of harm's way. Eklund writes that Ikki stood for the fix of a generation "infantilized as part of their induction into the mainstream of American culture." Be that as it may, he's a hoot.

I missed "Pictures," a movement-initiating, instantly legendary group show, curated by the critic Douglas Crimp, at the public-funded gallery Artists Space, in the autumn of 1977. Levine and Longo were in it; Salle, Sherman, and Prince were not. It was a tentative affair, most telling in short films by the Californian Jack Goldstein: the M-G-M lion incessantly roar, a trained German shepherd barking on cue. Works by Longo foretold his later big drawings, from staged photographs of chicly clad citizens apparently being hit by fatal bullets, which became virtual logos of the New Wave in art; three of those saturnine tableaux temporarily grace the Met's lobby. But the alien sensibility that the show heralded was soon unavoidable: a precociously brainy mood in art that was fronted, rather than followed, by critical talking points. "Postmodernism" was the password. Critics—including Crimp, Craig Owens, and Hal Foster (the editor of a 1983 anthology forthrightly titled "The Anti-Aesthetic")—who were influenced by Rosalind Krauss, the Columbia professor and a co-editor of the academic journal *October*, vied for prestige with the artists, whom they rather gingerly promoted. The artists turned out to be unherdable—as artists, like cats, generally are. Several joined Salle on a bandwagon of painting that had been set rolling by a resuscitated art market and by fresh styles spawned in Italy (which proved transitory) and Germany (which

did not). As a phenomenon of fashion, Pictures art blurred into a katzenjammer scene of graffiti, club performance, do-it-yourself film and video, and all-around youthful effrontery on the Lower East Side. I deemed the Pictures artists too strainingly smart to be durable until I was stunned by a show, in 1982, of wide-screen-format color photographs by

words of French philosophy—were understood to “construct” consciousness by way of “simulations” in “a forest of signs.” (“As we know,” Foster wrote, in 1982, “the real cannot be apprehended directly: we have only (mis)representations of it.”) “Life” wasn’t in particularly good odor, either. In 1979, Salle published a personal manifesto titled, with bleak satisfaction,

despair or teary-eyed sentimentality.” (Having succeeded, she would go on to explore other recognizable states and conditions of experience.) Goldstein’s dutifully barking dog and Longo’s stricken citizens convey double binds of excitement and constriction. Dour nudes in early paintings by Salle hint at sexual obsessions drained of sensuality—let alone



Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Still (#6)," from 1977, and Sherrie Levine's "Untitled (President: 5)," from 1979.

Sherman, in which she posed as variously anxious or stupefied vulnerable women in cinematically composed and lit solitude. Here was something really new (one-frame movies, Hitchcockian in their expertly managed intensity) and at the same time old (painting-like inventions, with a nuanced imagination and a visual beauty redolent of Old Masters up to and including Rembrandt).

Real Life, the name of a low-budget magazine co-founded in 1979 by the painter (and now the dean of Cal-Arts) Thomas Lawson, apostrophized the Pictures world view. It was aggressively ironic. Nothing could so curl the lip of a self-respecting intellectual in that milieu as any assertion of “reality” independent of texts and images, which—in buzz-

“The Paintings Are Dead.” Not that the artists were deep thinkers. As members of a generation steeped in mass media and nurtured in graduate education, and following the general collapse of established values in the sixties and of revolutionary idealism thereafter, they thrilled to suggestions that their automatic sophistication could see through, and dissipate, the antediluvian authority of their elders. But they suffered, too, from a loss of credible traditions that had made life seem real and reality seem livable. Many works in “The Pictures Generation” exude a melancholy of clever artifice masking inexpressible emotion. Such was a conscious goal for Sherman, who stated in 1982 that she wanted “that choked-up feeling in your throat which maybe comes from

love or even liking. Ever elegantly wistful, Levine touched a nerve, familiar to artists who envy the past, with handmade, faithful copies of reproductions of modern art works, like rubbings of an Aladdin’s lamp that should, but won’t, disgorge a genie in service to the heart’s desire. The show catches these and other poignancies on the fly. The Pictures moment was brief, but it vibrates, still. ♦

From the Boston Globe Magazine.

I should have been angry—or embarrassed myself—but instead I was oddly flattered. His memory of me was of a wonton seductress who owned her sexuality, a far cry from the shy 19-year-old I had really been.

A recollection that could land him in the soup.