Target practice: reading the art of appropriation

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Target Practice
Reading the Art of Appropriation

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This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the conferral of the degree: Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD)

School of the Arts, English and Media
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University of Wollongong

2017
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This research has been conducted with the support of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.
Abstract

While appropriated text abounds in contemporary artworks, appropriation itself has been historically theorised as a critical engagement with images specifically. This is partly due to the outsize impact of Douglas Crimp’s *Pictures* exhibition (Artists Space, 1977) as well as the influence of a number of high-profile essays on the subject of appropriation, published by Crimp and his peers in the journal *October* in the late 1970s and early 80s. While these writers explicitly described appropriation as an engagement with representation in general, they only theorised appropriation as a critical engagement with imagery in particular, ignoring any text appearing within an artwork they were describing, an ironic oversight since these writers used literary theory and semiotics to explain appropriation art itself. As text in appropriation art has continued to be disregarded over time, its absence has resulted in a contemporary understanding of appropriation art as narrowly concerned with image-as-sign, to the exclusion of the linguistic (and other) signs also appearing within an artwork’s frame. 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 become synonymous with appropriation art itself, restricting discourse about the practice to the function of images, which in turn limits not only what content appropriation art is recognised to engage but also what politics it is perceived to express. My thesis looks at the use of text in appropriation art, beginning in this *Pictures* moment, to reconsider a number of the canonical artworks and essays from that time. The thesis then pivots to look
at the contemporary period, tracing how the *Pictures* frame continues to restrict how we see appropriation art today and also, through the works of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Anne Collier, reconsidering appropriation art now.

I have chosen to write about these artists who use appropriation, in part, because this is what I do in my creative work as well. The studio work that makes up the practice-based portion of this PhD submission uses appropriated language to put the messaging of contemporary culture in dialogue with itself, making it what Hal Foster in his 1985 essay ‘Subversive Signs’ calls ‘both a target and weapon’. The work that I have realised under the umbrella of this PhD sits somewhere between the appropriations of the Pictures Generation, and the representations and reclamations of Collier and Tiravanija, in order to consider and contest the operations of language in commercial culture today. My work takes many forms, including photography, performance, neon signs, and prints, and I am submitting it for examination in a portfolio that takes the shape of an artist’s book. The book format is an essential part of the presentation of my artwork here, both because it places my inquiry into text in a form in which text commonly circulates and because the book format underscores a fundamental misunderstanding that motivated much of my work, one that began with me seeking answers from a book on my shelf.
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my advisors, Ian McLean and Lucas Ihlein, for their patience and guidance throughout the PhD. I feel so fortunate to have learned from Ian’s own longstanding and profound work on appropriation, as well as his excellence as a writer, just as I am grateful to have benefitted from Lucas’ empathic approach to art practice, his invaluable editing acumen, and his intuitive and immediate understanding of my often interdisciplinary approach to artmaking. It was an absolute pleasure to work with them both, and my work has grown immensely with their guidance.

Second I would like to thank Sarah Miller and Derek Kreckler for their friendship, Tom Williams for so generously sharing his time and printing expertise with me in the studio, and especially Su Ballard, who I am lucky to count as a mentor and friend.

Most of all, I would like to thank my family. This is for Eve, who inspired me to start down this path, for Lucy who joined us along the way, and, most of all, for James, without whom none of it would have been possible. I love you.
I, Liz Linden, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of the Arts, English, and Media, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualification at any other academic institution.

Liz Linden

28 November 2017
Statement of contributions to jointly authored works contained in the thesis:

None

Statement of contributions by others to the thesis as a whole:


Statement of the thesis submitted to qualify for the award of another degree:

None

Published works by the author incorporated into the thesis:

Linden, L, 2016, 'Alone in the Crowd', Third Text, vol. 30, no. 3-4, pp. 159-172.


Additional published works by the author relevant to the thesis but not forming part of it:

None
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As an artist, I am interested in the ways globalisation has necessarily brought conflicting value systems into increased proximity, a circulation of values that can be traced by looking closely at the products, advertising, artifacts, and ephemera of consumer culture and allowing the inconsistencies made visible in these proximities to work on each other. I use appropriation as an artistic strategy in my work because it seems to me to be the most direct way to point to these internal contractions.

Often these inconsistencies in values are disclosed in the juxtapositions between text and image that occur so often in commercial culture. I frequently work with appropriated text because language is paradoxically something with which most viewers are fluent, while at the same time text’s very ubiquity (in art, in advertising, in online culture, etc.) seems to render it below scrutiny. Our willingness to overlook the complex multiplicity of ways text signifies in these contexts also flags it as an area that can productively be re-examined. The potential for appropriated language, in particular, to function critically as a mirror held up to consumer culture is clear, in part, because all artworks using language ‘remove evidence of the artist’s participation in the formation of the artwork, so that the form of the work and its content might mutually express one another without subjective comment by the artist’ (Goldstein, Gudis et al., p. 139). Using appropriated language further extends that distance, putting the messaging of contemporary culture in dialogue with itself.
This thesis tries to understand why it is that the term ‘appropriation art’ evokes image-based practices over text-based ones, when so many of the most iconic appropriation artworks from the postmodern period through today actually employ text. To make sense of this, I begin at the beginning, so to speak, with *Pictures*, looking at how this iconic 1977 exhibition and the writing about it at the time and afterward both defined ‘appropriation’ narrowly as an engagement with images\(^1\), and how this narrow early definition has persisted, unchanged, through to today, tracing some of the consequences of that narrow focus to the reception of text-based appropriations today.

My thesis begins by looking closely at *Pictures*, curated by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in New York City. The *Pictures* exhibition is identified here as the nexus of postmodern appropriation, because both the works exhibited in the show and the essays written about it became enormously significant, essentially making the careers of many artists and writers involved. Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, Troy Brauntuch, Philip Smith and Robert Longo all marked *Pictures* as an early milestone in their careers, while the writing of critics who celebrated them, Crimp, along with his contemporaries at *October* and elsewhere, remains influential today.

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\(^1\) I argue that in appropriation art text is often part of the ‘picture’ and used as an image in its own right. However, in this thesis I follow Crimp’s example and use the term ‘image’ in the very limited sense to refer to the appropriation of pictorial imagery as opposed to textual imagery. This is necessary in order to make my argument with Crimp, who understands ‘image’ in this limited sense.
That said, the gradual art-historical conflation of Crimp’s specific interest in the image-based operations of the works he curated in his 1977 exhibition with a sweeping definition of ‘appropriation art’ overall has resulted in the term being restricted in its application to (mainly photographic) imagery. While artists in the postmodern era through to today continue to re-present cultural artifacts from a wide variety of media and forms as a critically-loaded, culturally- and temporally-specific gesture, the term ‘appropriation’, still, evokes work with pictures.

And yet Crimp acknowledged that the group of artists in the *Pictures* exhibition, who were exemplary of this new appropriative mode of artmaking, were actually interested in the politics of representation generally and that their cohort,

> sees representation as an inescapable part of our ability to grasp the world around us…Representation has returned in their work not in the familiar guise of realism, which seeks to resemble a prior experience, but as an autonomous function that may be described as “representation as such”. (Crimp 1977, p. 5)

In short, the artists Crimp curated in *Pictures*, and those he later wrote about, were not concerned with images specifically. Images were, however, *his* focus.

That he curatorially limited his framing of these artists’ practices to a consideration about how images operate is entirely appropriate and necessary to curating a small exhibition of artists working in vastly different media with diverse conceptual priorities. What my thesis attempts to examine is not so much why Crimp initially curated the exhibition in the way he did, but how his curation was framed as definitive of the genre in writing by himself and others, such that ultimately his intended and unintended oversights and omissions were
driven underground, essentially disappearing from view. Because of the importance of Crimp’s own art criticism and work by other writers building on his arguments over time, his narrow curatorial concept is still applied as an all-encompassing one-size-fits-all explanation for a critical art practice that is much broader, more interesting, productive, and diverse than its current definition acknowledges.

Today, artists working with appropriation necessarily recognise not only that the circulation of images maps power dynamics across culture, but that images 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 authorises certain representations while blocking, prohibiting, or invalidating others’ (Owens 2002, p. 68), 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, like the appropriations of the Pictures-era before them, 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.

This thesis looks specifically at appropriations of text for critical ends, in part because work with language increasingly defines contemporary art practice and also, importantly, because it defined appropriation art in 1977; of all the works on display in Pictures, relatively few actually deployed images while a
great many used appropriated text. That Crimp, as he theorised appropriation’s engagement with representation, built his argument on a scaffolding of linguistic and literary theory, and all the while ignored text present in the artworks he was hanging on it, is one of the unsung ironies of art history, and one that this thesis examines.

The first chapter focuses specifically on *Pictures*, the curatorial concept for the exhibition, and Crimp’s representation of the artists’ works in his essay in the *Pictures* catalogue, especially places where text in those artworks was overlooked. Chapter two examines Crimp’s returns to that exhibition in his subsequent essays discussing *Pictures* and theorising appropriation art in the years immediately following the exhibition. His second essay titled ‘Pictures’ was published in 1979 in *October* as was his ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’ from 1980. Both re-present Crimp’s ideas about this postmodern way of working, as he gradually narrowed his frame for *Pictures* from an engagement with ‘representation’ generally to an engagement with the image and the photograph in particular, a shift reflected in the original diversity of media exhibited in 1977 to the more specifically photography-based works Crimp writes about as the 70s draw to a close. This chapter also briefly considers a lesser-known essay by Crimp, published in *Flash Art* in 1978, which splits the difference between his original catalogue essay and the *October* ‘Pictures’.

Chapter three investigates Crimp’s professional milieu and the work of his peers, with whom he was in near-constant dialogue. As an editor of *October*, Crimp not only had access to an excellent platform to promote his own writing,
but he also had an immediate cohort of like-minded art writers with whom to refine his ideas. His interlocutors were, at that late 70s/early 80s moment also thinking through appropriation as a specifically postmodern gesture, investing it with critical potential and political significance beyond the initial, quiet gestures that were present in the *Pictures* exhibition. Rosalind Krauss, Crimp’s teacher at CUNY and mentor, and Craig Owens, another Krauss student and Crimp friend, both write in dialogue with Crimp and each other, advancing his arguments about appropriation in the pages of *October*. While Krauss and Owens had important insights into the role of language in postmodern art practices and in photography as well, they tended to hew to Crimp’s own parameters for appropriation specifically; in other words, Crimp’s own oversights about the central role of text in appropriation art remained unexamined.

Chapter four shifts to the present to look at examples of how these now canonised arguments about appropriation as an engagement with images have continued to dominate contemporary discourse about the practice, while the oversights and omissions of the importance of text to the practice have remained largely unexamined. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s (Met) 2009 exhibition, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, organised by the Met’s curator of photography Douglas Eklund, served on the one hand to reinforce assumptions about appropriation’s intrinsic connection to imagery, and photographs in particular. On the other hand, *The Pictures Generation*, by virtue of its ambition to be ‘the first major museum exhibition to focus exclusively on “The Pictures Generation”’ (Met 2009), brought together a wide variety of works by artists emerging in the 1974 to 1984 window, also including a remarkable
number of artworks using appropriated text as the engine of their critique. As such, while the exhibition and exhibition catalogue were ostensibly dedicated to postmodern photography practices, together they inadvertently served as the most comprehensive overview of text-based appropriation from the postmodern era to date.

Eklund’s catalogue contains a number of noteworthy oversights and omissions of its own, even as it provides evidence of the intrinsic and formative relationship between appropriation and text, a link that Eklund does not explicitly make despite the fact that he treats a number of these early text-based appropriation artworks as exemplary of the practice. Chapter four then pivots to ask why the term ‘appropriation’ continues to signify much the same way as it has since postmodern times within the art world even though it is experiencing tectonic shifts in its application and meaning in the world at large. Building on contemporary debates about ‘cultural appropriation’ in pop culture and the pages of Artforum, the chapter questions whether popular shifts in how ‘appropriation’ signifies will lead to shifts in art’s definition of the term as well.

Chapter five steps outside the Pictures frame entirely, to consider how, since appropriation operates on representations of all types, it is instructive to look at artist’s practices using appropriation where the recontextualising gesture is applied to text, not images. This chapter examines the practice of Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose work is far removed from that of the Pictures artists and their concerns, considering how his work with appropriated text is both consistent with the larger overlooked thread of text in appropriation art, and also how, because of the linguistic form of his appropriations, his practice remains
under-recognised as appropriation per-se. In Tiravanija’s case, this is both because of the inherited limitations of our definitions of appropriation and because discussions of his work are so often overdetermined by rhetoric related to another mode of art making, relational aesthetics, a dominant frame for critical art practices of the 1990s and beyond.

Chapter six investigates the work of American photographer Anne Collier, both for her works’ obvious differences from Tiravanija’s and for the ways theory and discourse around her medium, photography, came to color the perception of her work with found content in a way that was similarly limiting to discussions of other influences in her broader practice, obscuring the importance of her work with text. Collier’s work, both because she is a photographer and she often takes photographs of existing photographs, is inevitably read through photographic theory, which, while relevant, is not the sole frame for her work. The use of photographic theory also tends to steer discussions of her work back towards her use of found imagery and not to her equally longstanding interest in found texts.

Taken together, the chapters that make up this thesis argue that, while Crimp’s theorisation of appropriation in the period from 1977 to 1980 began from the necessarily limited frame of *Pictures*, shaped by his own intellectual interests and by the interests of his peers, it is nonetheless surprising that appropriation, one of the most ubiquitous and versatile critical art practices of our time, is still defined by the narrow parameters set for it by one ‘modest group show’ (Crimp 2016, p. 199) in 1977. Appropriation, after becoming one of the most written-about, curated about, looked at, and reflected upon art
practices of contemporary times, is still confined by the essential contours of one curator’s original interest. That Crimp and his peers reached for semiotic models to explain how appropriation operates tells us, in the art theory, what the art theory is: one of language. This thesis looks again at language, the text of the theory, the text of the art, to start reading, really reading, the words that are, already, in front of us.


Chapter 2: Representation

In 1977, Douglas Crimp, a young art historian, critic, and curator, organised a group exhibition titled *Pictures* at Artists Space in New York. While the exhibition itself was relatively small in scale, showing a number of emerging artists’ works in a second floor non-profit gallery in Tribeca, it quickly became identified as a seminal moment in the identification and theorisation of a new approach to making art, which was called ‘appropriation’. This chapter describes Crimp’s seminal 1977 exhibition, the frame with which Crimp delineated the boundaries of this emerging art practice, and what Crimp’s framing left out of the picture.

Crimp brought together a number of diverse practices by artists working across different media, under the deceptively simple exhibition title ‘Pictures’. In this concise title Crimp managed to both assert a break with Modernism’s medium specificity and unify the disparate artists’ practices in the exhibition—a coup of clarity and concision that ultimately enabled his curatorial concept to take hold. The conceit was to take these varied 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 in their sensibilities and politics. Crimp’s curatorial essay in the *Pictures* catalogue 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 the most
debased of our cultural conventions—television and picture newspapers. (1977,
p. 28)

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

And yet, in organizing his exhibition devoted to representation, with
artworks working with representation in a wide variety of forms ranging from
hand-drawn images, photographs, texts, sounds, and so on, Crimp’s curatorial
writing tended to focus exclusively on images, to the exclusion of all other types
of representation within an artwork’s frame. In the case of the overlooked
presence of text in many of the Pictures artworks, this omission from Crimp’s
discussion is particularly ironic since the rhetoric of ‘representation’ is borrowed
here from semiotics, which Ferdinand de Saussure defined, in part, as an
engagement of meaning in text and language in the field of linguistics as well as
society at large (1985, p. 35). While text is very clearly a form of representation,
a status made abundantly clear by the project of semiotics, writing is
interestingly foreclosed from Crimp’s list of ‘art forms more directly concerned
with representation’ (1977, p. 28) (i.e. ‘film’, ‘photography’) included in his
curatorial essay. Similarly the exemplary function of ‘television’ and ‘picture
newspapers’ in that passage only further underscores the oversight; both TV
and print media consistently and fundamentally employ text to create the totality
of their messages.

Further text was almost always included in the practices of artists of this
so-called ‘Pictures Generation’ (including Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Jack
Goldstein, Dara Birnbaum, Troy Brauntuch, Robert Longo, Martha Rosler,
Sarah Charlesworth, and others), although the linguistic components of their
artworks were most often ignored in the critical discourse surrounding them. Certainly any writer can only be expected to pursue the priorities of her own project, and indeed the critical texts of that moment did a great service to a number of the artists whose complex works they considered, but it is interesting that as this omission of text is reproduced over time, its absence has resulted in a contemporary understanding of appropriation art that is narrowly concerned with image-as-sign, to the exclusion of the linguistic signs appearing within an artwork’s frame.

For the exhibition, Crimp chose to show the works of five artists: Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. A total of thirty works, in an extraordinary variety of media given the limited number of artists, were included in the exhibition with large oil pastel drawings on paper by Smith, a series of smaller tempera-on-paper paintings by Levine, wall mounted sculptures by Longo, prints by Brauntuch, and audio, photograph, and film works by Goldstein.

Longo’s four ‘picture objects’ (Crimp 1977, p. 24) consisted of cast aluminum wall reliefs that appeared very much in dialogue with Hollywood narratives through their filmic or literary titles and occasional direct quotation from specific movie sources and the iconography of film stills. His Seven Seals for Missouri Breaks, Silver Scene: “let’s go to the hills and join the gurillas [sic]” (1977), refers to the filmstrip’s serial still images or the high-speed sequential photography of a photo finish in sports. In this case, Longo’s sculpture presents a horse and rider galloping as a series of discrete movements, as if Edward Muybridge’s photographs of a trotting horse were made manifest in sculpture.
While, like Muybridge’s photographs, Longo’s sculptures picture change over time, Crimp reminds us that, ‘The peculiarity of Longo’s pictures is that they are things’ (1977, p. 24).

Longo’s work is not only concerned with temporal change, but also the changing social mores of his time. By using stills excised from Arthur Penn’s ‘Revisionist Western’ (Dika, p. 130) The Missouri Breaks of 1976, Longo’s sculpture refers, through its imagery and its title, not only to the heroic mythology of the American West but also to contemporary remakes and reevaluations of the West’s macho aesthetics. “The American Soldier and the Quiet Schoolboy” (1977), another work in the exhibition, similarly invokes a long chain of filmic associations from both its visual character (depicting a still from the scene of the assassination of the titular character of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s 1970 film The American Soldier) and from its textual or meta-textual associations. 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. (2012, p. 132)

But for all Longo’s interest in motion picture associations, the sources his
works appropriate are not exclusively filmic, or even necessarily visual. The two other 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 a small area rug, lying across a short plinth on the floor. Opening Scene: “a screaming comes across the sky” (1977) presents a relief of man walking away from the viewer, into a blank, flat void. Each work renders smaller elements of larger scenes static, embedded by their titles in pop cultural contexts for closer inspection.

Figure 1: (LEFT) Robert Longo, 1977, Seven Seals for Missouri Breaks, Silver Scene: “let’s go to the hills and join the gurillas”; Figure 2: (RIGHT) Edward Muybridge, 1878, The Horse in Motion.

Levine’s Sons and Lovers (1976-1977), a suite of thirty-two tempera on graph paper drawings depicting paired silhouetted profiles in alternating sizes, similarly employs a literary reference for indeterminate ends. Titled after a 1913 D. H. Lawrence novel of the same name, the profiles include 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 progression of relationships represented is intuitive and the narrative impossible to definitively identify. Levine’s work, like Lawrence’s, diagrams ‘a nearly-perfect melodrama: claustrophobic, suffocating, family-bound, with a set of psychologically predetermined and reenacted roles’ (Singerman 2012, pp. 37-38). Levine’s Sons and Lovers employs seriality to imply relationships between still images, in this case her source imagery merging political icons with generic figures, expanding the ‘family’ melodrama to include associations that while still familiar assert the political narrative in an otherwise non-specific domestic space.

Figure 3: Installation photograph from Pictures, 1977, Artists Space, New York.

Smith’s four monumental paintings, Leap/Move, I & II, Back, Bring, and Spins, all from 1977 and measuring one hundred inches 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 ‘pictographic’ (Crimp, p. 20) 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 pedagogical like a cave-painting or a blackboard; 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’ (p. 24). 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.

The seven print works by Brauntuch vary in their content, although they are related through their shared deployment of the mysterious as a Trojan horse for the critical. The obscurity of his images are intriguing, and at times reveal through secondary sources a mystery element of political significance that changes the works’ reading. Brauntuch’s prints in the exhibition are unified visually through their minimal aesthetic or design (expanses of blank page, solid-coloured backgrounds, 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 or serial images similarly pervade Brauntuch’s work in the exhibition, with his frequent use of the diptych or triptych structure reinforcing the idea of ‘reading’, or of a progression of information. A number of Brauntuch’s works in the *Pictures* exhibition employ text to verbally enforce the serial. In these cases the use of language functions, like the enigmatic images, as a foil to immediate assimilation with the information’s contextual importance being difficult to immediately discern. For example, Brauntuch’s *Play, Fame, Song* (1977) is a triptych of prints presenting white line drawings on black backgrounds of simple architectural figures, underscored by a word from the title. The word ‘Play’ is presented under a 5-stroke drawing of a swing, ‘Fame’ captions an only-slightly more complex drawing of a column base and tiered pedestal, while ‘Song’ is paired with a minimally-described halo from a spotlight hitting an empty stage. In the context of this work, the ‘Play’, ‘Fame’, and ‘Song’ words activate the simple drawings as symbols of the aforementioned words; without the incorporation of text into these works, the simplicity of the drawings would perhaps indicate that they are unfinished sketches or a drafting exercise. In other words, the addition of text in this context designates that these images are signs, just like the text—that they are equivalents in the representational stakes.
Similarly Brauntuch’s *Untitled* (1976), later titled *With White Hands in Black*, is an oversized pamphlet that unfolds in mystifying ways. In the installation at Artists Space, the work was presented (and sold) in two parts: first a diptych of prints of ballet dancers, each including the text ‘With White Hands in Black’ and a circular golden disk showing the back of a spectator’s head; second a three-dimensional triptych of an open pamphlet presenting the same dancers, flanked on either side with panels reading, ‘APPLAUSE’, and ‘BALLET DANCERS’, respectively. The complexity of the work is only heightened by the addition of text, which operates both to create a narrative sequence or exchange as in the triptych (where a tension is set up between the audience and its applause and the dancers performance) and to refer to a detail that is either tangential or irrelevant to these circumstances (where ‘With White Hands in Black’ could allude equally to the white-on-black print of the dancers, the
presumably white hands of the audience members clapping in the dark, or even the white-gloved hands of a careful viewer handling Brauntuch’s work).

Finally Goldstein’s works in the exhibition vary greatly in media, ranging from eight films made between 1975 and 1976, to four individual sound works on vinyl from 1977 along with a set of nine audio works from 1976, *Suite of 9*, and a triptych photographic work, *The Pull* (1976). While Goldstein’s media vary greatly, the operation at work in each piece remains the same; Goldstein removes contextualising 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 decontextualised moments are thus rendered paradoxically iconic and unfamiliar, which came to be seen as a hallmark of Goldstein’s appropriative artworks.
Presented variously as static works on a wall (records and photographs hung in frames) and as works to be viewed or heard on demand (the films and records could be played on request), Goldstein’s participation in Crimp’s exhibition most explicitly challenged the notion of ‘pictures’; when his films weren’t being screened, *The Pull* (1976) was his sole work in the exhibition with visible imagery. Indeed the dominant visual presence in the exhibition was that of his records, which were framed and installed on the wall in the manner of a set of prints as well as available for playing. The records have a strong visual presence for their color coding according to their subject matter (green for the sound of falling trees, blue for a swimmer drowning, red and white marbled for a forest fire), but their other salient characteristic is the declarative text labeling each one. Using Helvetica type and a deadpan sensibility, the labels are
suggestive and taunting, hinting at the visually inaccessible content of the
records.

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What is at stake here in this early portrayal of these works’ shared
affinities could not have been entirely obvious at the time. It only became visible
in retrospect as it was reified over time, becoming definitive of appropriation art
through repetition by other critics. While Crimp’s focus on representation as
‘picture’ has remained central to the understanding of appropriation art over
time, other kinds of representations have remained in the shadows, overlooked
or underexamined by later critics. For the most part, critics have unquestioningly
inherited Crimp’s understanding of ‘representation’ as ‘picture’ as ‘photograph’,
both because of the wide-reaching influence of Crimp’s ideas and because his
interlocutors were, for the most part, approaching appropriation from the same
theoretical bases.

Crimp was a protégé of art historian and theorist Rosalind Krauss, who
was his teacher at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.
Crimp was also a ‘close friend’ (Eklund 2009, p. 111) of Helene Winer, the
director of Artists Space, which was founded as a non-profit gallery to exhibit
work that would not otherwise easily find a home in the commercial gallery
system. Under Winer, Artists Space fostered a number of now art-historically
important artists’ careers at a critical early stage of development. Winer and
Crimp shared enthusiasm for the experimental practices of some younger
artists living downtown and as a result Winer and Crimp worked together on a variety of projects intended to ‘bring theoretical rigor to the study of contemporary art’ (Eklund, p. 111).

The ‘theoretical rigor’ Crimp and his peers hoped to apply to the interpretation of contemporary art was informed in large part by a number of newly translated books and essays by French writers including Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard (Eklund 2009, p. 17, Sandler 1996, p. 332). Crimp’s catalogue essay for the *Pictures* exhibition cites a number of these intellectuals, along with the work of earlier writers whose work informed this new generation of French theorists.

In 1977 Crimp also began his tenure as an editor at *October*, a journal of art criticism founded the year before by Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe. Their opening statement read, ‘We have named this journal in celebration of that moment in our century when revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique’ (1976, p. 3). *October* contributors, like Crimp himself, developed and experimented with postmodern, poststructuralist approaches to criticism as a rejection of Modernist formalism and they celebrated artworks invested in similar operations.

These approaches to art criticism were developed in response to the tumult of the times, manifesting in the work of artists who wanted to rethink traditional values in the face of:

an America suffused with disillusionment—its hopes for political and social transformation dashed, wracked by opposition to the Vietnam War, and anguished by the Watergate crisis. The utopian promise of the counterculture
had devolved into a commercialized pastiche of rebellious stances prepackaged for consumption, and the national mood was one of catatonic shell shock in response to wildly accelerated change, from the sexual revolution to race riots, punctuated by assassinations. These artists had a front row seat at the spectacle of the nuclear family’s disintegration and the reorganization of traditional gender roles as a result of the women’s and gay liberation movements. The persistence of traditional sexual politics beneath the rhetoric only added to their disenchantment. (Eklund 2009, p. 16)

Eklund also pointed out that in the 1970s the ‘massive boom in college education’ since the 1960s ‘unleashed on the world huge numbers of artists, highly educated and trained professionally,’ (2009, p. 22). These ‘younger artists’ (1977, p. 5), as Crimp almost exclusively described the Pictures cohort, were increasingly sophisticated both in terms of their art-historical context and theoretical imperatives. They also benefitted from the conceptualism that preceded them, which had expanded the methodology and field of visual material available to art practice. Film historian Vera Dika says that, ‘In the 1970s, the “movies,” especially old movies, had become a culture-wide fascination and were being taught at newly founded film departments…and being recycled and remade in many Hollywood and European productions’ (2012, p. xvii). It is out of this milieu of reconsideration and reworking that contemporary appropriation grew.

Therefore Crimp and his peers and descendants have used the photographic, and photo theory, to great ends, on the backs of which is built much of the best media criticism today. While each of these Pictures artists did sometimes make work that referred at least obliquely to the conventions of
photography, some of which were included in the exhibition, there are other
shared references and operations as well. For example, the preponderance of
works in the exhibition which employed progressive or serial imagery and
formats (diptychs, triptychs, etc.) points to just one obvious affinity that could
easily have been the curatorial impetus for the exhibition. Indeed, in cases such
as Smith’s monumental drawings or Levine’s paintings, the serial is surely a
more overt reference than the photographic. Even in cases where the
relationship between the original photographic source and the final artwork is
more direct and indexical, such as the Seven Seals for Missouri Breaks, Silver
Scene: “let’s go to the hills and join the gurillas” (1977) Longo relief or
Goldstein’s The Pull (1976), the sequential elements of the artwork are salient.
It is interesting to see how easily this label begins to describe so much of the
exhibition and it is an interesting thought experiment to image how the same
exhibition framed by curatorial ideas about seriality might have shifted how the
art is interpreted today.

What I describe as ‘the serial’ aligns closely with what film historian Vera
Dika calls ‘the cinematic’ in the work of the Pictures artists, another hypothetical
curatorial frame in which Crimp could have chosen to present these works. Dika
writes that Pictures artists use ‘cinematic contemplations in ways distinctive of
its generation’ (2012, p. xiv) and goes on to note that,

while Crimp acknowledges that the term ‘pictures’ is nonspecific in its meanings, referring
to different types or representations, he omits that the word has long been used as a
colloquialism for ‘the movies’. (p. 6)

Shifting the understanding of the art along these lines, for example, Dika
explains that the practice might more commonly be understood as a collection
of ‘transformative strategies… that engage movement and time’ (p. 15). This frame also brings the viewer’s attention to the ubiquitous presence of ‘movement’ in the *Pictures* work.

Another hypothetical curatorial frame identified by Crimp in the exhibition catalogue positioned the appropriative practices of the *Pictures* artists as an inheritance of Minimalism. He wrote that the artists in the exhibition who ‘see representation as an inescapable part of our ability to grasp the world around us’ are directly indebted to Minimalism for its lessons about perception and the psychology of viewership (p. 19). This art-historical link between the minimal interventions of appropriation to the contemporary engagement with perceptions of media (as opposed to architecture or environment more generally) not only presages and validates some of the more controversial ‘plagiarisms’ (Evans 2009, p. 81) that characterise the photographic appropriations of Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, for example, but it also underscores appropriation and ‘Minimalism’s [shared] emphasis on the literal’ (Sandler, p. 351). In other words, by placing the practice of appropriation within the field of Minimalism, what is at stake in some of its operations are immediately made clearer, its threats to authorship more explicit.

But it is Crimp’s own emphasis on ‘representation’ as the primary curatorial theme that belies the importance of other forms of representation (textual, sonic, cinematic, etc.) that he chose to exclude from discussion in his *Pictures* frame. It is here, in looking at Crimp’s interest in ‘picture’ as ‘representation’ more broadly, that the seed of the long-standing art-historical oversight of text in appropriation is planted.
With the exception of Smith, the six artists mentioned in the exhibition catalogue (Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo, Troy Brauntuch, Jon Borofsky, Sherrie Levine, and Philip Smith) have works that prominently employ text to explore representational ambiguity. While Jon Borofsky was notably not included in the exhibition itself, Crimp nonetheless discusses his early drawing *Mulatto Man* as ‘typical’ of these young, postmodern practices for its ‘use of the caption as a means of articulating the mute photograph’ (p. 14). And yet, in his catalogue essay Crimp fails to consider the role of text in those works where text figures prominently.

For example, in writing about the work of Troy Brauntuch, Crimp mentions his diptych prints *Golden Distance* (1976). Each black panel depicts the same appropriated image of the back of a woman’s head (an image which is also included in Brauntuch’s *White Hands* work included in the exhibition), one image in white and the other overlaid with a circular, transparent gold disk. 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 it is referred to merely as a ‘caption’ that ‘seems only to reinforce the inaccessibility of the photograph’ (Crimp 1977, p. 23). In other words, the text is a simple complement to the primary element of the photographs.
And yet, when one looks at the work, the text is in fact a 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 merely draw our attention to something present but invisible to us in the first image, serving a diagrammatic function for the first 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 printed 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

Figure 6: Troy Brauntuch, 1976, *Golden Distance*. 
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 fundamentally legible, generally sans serif for clarity with any terminal or shoulder strokes weighted so as to be clearly visible). It is instructive to note this ‘purely informational’ assumption about the text being reproduced elsewhere over time. Douglas Eklund, in his discussion of *Golden Distance* in *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* catalogue, likens the phrase to ‘the subtitles of a foreign film’, another simile that fails to account for the visual qualities of the work itself (2009, p. 101).

Hanging high above the golden woman on the page, floating like a cloud or a halo, it further 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.

Interestingly, this kind of free-associative leap from the pendulous text to the ether of whispers is exactly the kind of operation Crimp allows himself when
writing about imagery. In his writing on Philip Smith, the only artist mentioned in the essay whose discussed works do not incorporate text, Crimp allows *himself* to wax associative in just such a manner, describing Smith’s ‘flow of images’ as moving ‘without transition from the depiction of the easily credible…to the fanciful…reducing every possible kind of picture to an equivalence’ (p. 28), with Smith’s densely populated canvases pairing the formal rhyme of a man holding a banner aloft with a man with a parachute, then moving laterally to allude visually to the alliteration of a parachute and a parakeet, and so on.

In Goldstein’s case, text figured prominently in his records included in the *Pictures* exhibition, as discussed above, although Crimp’s entire description of the physical presence of the work doesn’t even mention the words labeling each of the records, simply calling them, ‘variously colored phonograph records’ (p. 10). And yet the text, printed on the circular label and cardboard sleeve of each record of the nine record suite in an assertive, uppercase Helvetica type, is one of only two distinguishing features identifying each of the works in the series, while the other independent works on vinyl in some cases use a familiar, vernacular script to mimic the romantic record design of the previous era. The text here acts as a ‘supplement’ to the aural content of the artwork itself, a presence that is not as neutral or benign as it might first appear. Craig 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’. (1979, p. 43)

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 the perverse deferral of gratification inherent in displaying them on the wall.

Figure 7: Jack Goldstein, 1977, *The Murder*.

Crimp’s essay similarly discusses a ‘recently published’ book, *Untitled* (1977) an early work by Levine, which is a loose-leaf artist’s folio consisting of rearrangeable facing pages each featuring one word. ‘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 the
Again, Crimp 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 serifed capitalised typeface. Each print in the series appears on what looks like personalised stationery with ‘SHERRIE LEVINE’, ‘NEW YORK CITY’, and ‘1977’ centered at the foot of each page, a marginal note that could be easily accompanied by the kind of ‘From the desk of...’ prefix common to personalised notepads of the era. 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, set up an assertion of mastery on the part of the artist over every possible variant within this crucially all-encompassing domestic narrative. Levine becomes, as in the *Sons and Lovers* work in the exhibition, the omniscient narrator over all domestic dramas possessed in this work, a specificity that overwhelms the agency Crimp asserts for ‘each of us’, and instead reassigns authorship, in all cases, to the artist.
While the titles of all artworks are of course texts in themselves, my argument about the frequent, overlooked presence of text in appropriation artworks takes the text’s visual presence within the frame of the artwork as a qualifying criterion for consideration here. That said, it is simply worth noting that a number of the *Pictures* artists appropriate textual references in the titling
of their works as well, including Levine’s use of the D. H. Lawrence novel and Longo’s copying the opening line of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* or the title of a Billy Joel pop song. This invocation of other texts outside the physical work but within the meta-textual contents of the work’s details serves as a significant clue to the importance of language and text to the *Pictures* artists overall.

Longo’s sculptural works in the *Pictures* exhibition emerged out of his ‘multimedia theatrical pieces’ (Eklund 2009, p. 82) and his sustained engagement with performance. At the time of the *Pictures* exhibition, 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-contextualised 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’ (p. 24). Here Crimp’s repetition of ‘images’ is telling, where the latter repetition could have more inclusively and accurately been replaced with ‘representation’ 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 simple description elides the presence of text in the performances entirely, a conscious or subconscious critical 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.

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’ (p. 75). 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. Given that appropriation art has been defined as a practice invested in questioning the limits of representation and ‘structures of signification’ (Crimp 1979, p. 87), the uncritical inheritance of ‘representation’ as ‘image’ is remarkable. Further, the critical investment in applying the lessons of semiotics to appropriation makes it doubly ironic that the role of language was not considered, either at the time or in later writings by Crimp or those of his October peers, a subject I will address in the forthcoming chapters.
Reference list

1976, 'About October', *October*, no. 1, pp. 3-5.


Crimp, D 1979, 'Pictures', *October*, no. 8, pp. 75-88.


Owens, C 1979, 'Detachment from the "Parergon"', *October*, no. 9, pp. 42-49.


Chapter 3: Rehearsal

*Pictures* was an important but small group exhibition, in notably diverse media by emerging artists, written about in intellectually ambitious, highly specific terms. The prior chapter explored how *Pictures* curator Douglas Crimp’s stated interest in artworks reconsidering the operations of representation became refined over the course of his curatorial essay to thinking about image-based representation exclusively, ignoring text or other types of representations even as he theorised these works’ operation on representation using literary theory to leaven his arguments. This chapter looks at how Crimp further winnowed out non-image-based representations from his writing about this postmodern operation on representation, an operation he would come to identify as ‘appropriation’.

While Crimp did not use the word ‘appropriation’ in his original curatorial essay in the *Pictures* catalogue, he returned to the exhibition and refined his critical frame for it in texts published in subsequent years. Two years after the *Pictures* exhibition, Crimp wrote another essay also titled ‘Pictures’ (1979), and a year after that he wrote 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism' (1980). Both essays were published in *October*, the art theory journal he edited at the time, and these two essays, taken together, have become some of Crimp’s most cited writings on appropriation, and therefore have to a large extent overshadowed the original curatorial essay which, in many cases, is confused with the 1979 essay, because of their shared title. Crimp has himself
acknowledged that his 1979 ‘Pictures’ essay ‘is the one that for years most people read’ and that it ‘became required reading in the art world’ (2016, p. 273).

Crimp’s 1979 ‘Pictures’ essay begins with a brief, italicised introduction to the 1977 exhibition, and explains that he chose that title not only because of the exhibited works’ ‘most salient characteristic—recognizable images’, but also because:

*Picture*, used colloquially, is…nonspecific: a picture book might be a book of drawings or photographs, and in common speech a painting, drawing, or print is often called, simply, a picture. Equally important for my purposes, *picture*, in its verb form, can refer to a mental process, as well as the production of an aesthetic object. (p. 75)

That the title could signify in so many different ways was an early indicator not only of the variety of works in the exhibition but also the artists’ shared concerns with the malleability of signification itself.

Crimp’s multiple arguments for the versatility of the word ‘picture’, the extended catalogue of items to which the noun may correspond: the word’s ability to change its part of speech, and the title’s correspondance to the action of calling forth a mental image, both underscore the intrinsic nature of linguistics and semiotics to the project of appropriation. It is this metaphoric precision of ‘to picture’ that underscores this point. The ‘mental process’ of ‘picturing’ something is exactly analogous to Saussure’s description of how the linguistic sign evokes a mental image of the signified in his *Course in General Linguistics*, a foundational semiotic text which was footnoted by Crimp in his 1977 *Pictures* essay.
Saussure writes that, ‘The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image’ (1985, p. 36), which he goes on to explain is a ‘two-sided psychological entity’ (p. 37). In other words, the act of ‘picturing’ which so defined the *Pictures* exhibition and appropriation more generally is, at its fundament, a semiotic, linguistic process, an act of making meaning not originally of images, but of language.

Crimp’s introduction to the 1979 text also retroactively brings the term ‘postmodernism’ to bear on the works in the exhibition, writing, ‘As is typical of what has come to be called postmodernism, this new work is not confined to any particular medium’ (Crimp, p. 75). This briefest of introductory texts therefore came to popularise in art-discourse the ‘postmodernism’ term that, while today nearly inextricable from (or interchangable with) appropriation itself, was only just beginning to be used in an art-context. (While ‘postmodernism’ had been used in architectural discourse in the decades prior, it had at first only limited exposure in other humanities contexts, gradually bleeding into literary theory through poststructuralism and then also influencing sociological approaches investigating the stakes of postindustrial capitalism in art and other disciplines (Sandler 1996, pp. 339-340).)
As such, for Crimp, the *Pictures* artists’ catholic and experimental use of media was a primarily political, rather than aesthetic, gesture. While this variety of postmodernism, later defined by Fredric Jameson as a kind of ‘aesthetic populism…[dedicated to] the effacement… of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture’ (1991, p. 54), came to define many contemporary art practices, the prescience of Crimp’s use of this term in the late 70s in this context cannot be overstated because it flagged not only the analytical operations of appropriation in the studio, but also ensured these works’ place in a certain type of ‘critical’ discourse, an emerging theoretical discourse that foregrounded linguistics.

Further, while Crimp’s 1979 essay is often flagged as the moment ‘postmodernism’ was introduced into the context of appropriation art, he actually used this term to describe the *Pictures* practices one year earlier, in a little-known precursor to the *October* ‘Pictures’ essay. In 1978, he published ‘About *Pictures*: Picture as representation as such’ in *Flash Art*. This essay essentially splits the difference between where Crimp started out in 1977, and where he ended up in 1979, sharing some discussion of the motivations and milieu of the *Pictures* artists and Jack Goldstein’s *The Jump* (1978) with the original curatorial essay and also including many new passages on temporality that returned and came to define the 1979 essay, the *Flash Art* essay essentially serving as a way station en route to his later shift to thinking about the *Pictures* artworks in terms of ‘performance’ (1979, p. 77).

The 1978 essay also leans away from writing about artworks that deal with ‘representation’ and toward the narrower subject of images, for example
shifting his 1977 attribution of the *Pictures* artworks to ‘a renewed impulse to make pictures about recognizable things’ (emphasis mine, p. 3) to the 1978 formulation describing ‘the work of a group of young artists who use recognizable images about pictures’ (emphasis mine). In other words, the 1978 essay operates as a weathervane, essentially pointing in the direction that Crimp’s appropriation theory would be heading.

Further, 1978’s ‘recognizable images about pictures’ Crimp reconfigured in 1979 to describe ‘the work’s most salient characteristic—recognizable images’ (p. 75). Thus this better-known essay tipped Crimp’s writing increasingly toward photography, inclining Crimp’s already ‘picture’-centric arguments from 1977 about postmodern appropriation generally further towards the theoretical frame of photography, a relationship made explicit by later writers and art historians, who tended to address the postmodern through photographic frames. For example in 1984 Abigail Solomon-Godeau argued that ‘virtually every critical and theoretical issue with which postmodernist art may be said to engage in one sense or another can be located in photography’ (Wallis 1984, p. 80), while Crimp confirmed the importance of photographic images as the *matériau* of appropriation at the outset of his *Pictures* catalogue essay, explaining that, ‘To an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema’ (1977, p. 3).

Yet strangely, despite the ways the 1978 *Flash Art* essay clearly heralds the moves Crimp makes in his later, better-known essays, ‘About *Pictures*: Picture as representation as such’ appears to be so obscure that even Crimp
omits it from his various later considerations of the *Pictures* moment. He does not mention it in his *Before Pictures* memoir nor in his various other essays on the exhibition discussed here, nor, it seems, do other writers. For example Douglas Eklund’s *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* exhibition catalogue does not mention nor cite it, despite that catalogue’s fairly exhaustive chronicling of the years immediately following the exhibition.

Thus because the 1979 ‘Pictures’ essay is so much better known, and therefore so much more influential than the 1978 *Flash Art* essay in its impact on how appropriation is conceived of today, this chapter takes 1979’s ‘Pictures’ as an important midpoint in a chronology of the merging of postmodern and photographic concerns. ‘Pictures’ has benefitted over time from a retroactive critical feedback loop, where Crimp’s early parallel claims about appropriated content, generally, and photography, specifically, have been reinforced and conflated over time. Writers such as Solomon-Godeau and Eklund point back to Crimp as evidence that this postmodern, intrinsic alliance was always already there while, interestingly, the similarly explicit and forthright link between appropriation and semiotic, text-based operations has not yielded nearly the same wide engagement.

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Crimp begins and ends the main body of his 1979 essay with a consideration of critic Michael Fried’s 1967 assessment of minimalism as a refutation of the ideals of modernism, citing his essay, ‘Art and Objecthood’,
where Fried notoriously claimed that, ‘Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater’. Crimp goes on to explain that the recent break with modernism has been ‘effected precisely by a preoccupation with the “theatrical”’ (p. 76).

Crimp returns to Fried toward the end of the essay, to take issue not with his definitions of minimalism or theater but in fact with modernism itself. Crimp writes:

> The work I have attempted to introduce here is related to a modernism conceived differently, whose roots are in the symbolist aesthetic announced by Mallarmé, which includes works whose dimension is literally or metaphorically temporal, and which does not seek the transcendence of the material condition of the signs through which meaning is generated. (p. 87)

The finer point Crimp puts on modernism here is notably self-interested, not only because he bolsters his claims about Mallarmé by footnoting himself, but also because he immediately tosses his own distinction aside in the following paragraph, re-engaging Fried’s version of modernism in order to claim the term ‘postmodernist’ for the works of the Pictures artists.

This critical reversal serves, perhaps unintentionally, to underscore the art-historical infighting that characterised this moment in contemporary art criticism where the pages of magazines like *Art News* and *Art in America* as well as major newspapers such as *The New York Times* were covered with territorial battles over the terrain of modernism, hand-wringing laments for the demise of formalism, and aggressive defenses of a more sociopolitical approach to making and evaluating art. Turmoil in the staff at *Artforum* provides a notable case in point as in 1975 with the introduction of Max Kozloff, a new
editor, the magazine ‘rejected formalism and embraced a sociological approach to art’ (Sandler 1996, p. 334), only to be inundated with criticism for its new tack in the pages of *The New York Times* and elsewhere. Kozloff’s tenure as editor at *Artforum* was relatedly brief; he resigned in January of 1977 and in March of that year a letter of protest in support for Kozloff was sent to the magazine, signed by more than one hundred artists and arts professionals.

Crimp’s bracketing of his own essay with the work of Fried also serves to orient the reader to the precise version of ‘modernism’ to which Crimp’s ‘post’ should be appended. He writes, ‘if *postmodernism* is to have theoretical value, it cannot be used merely as another chronological term; rather it must disclose the particular nature of the breach with modernism’ (p. 87). Crimp attributes this breach to both the postmodern artist’s promiscuous use of media as well as the way this experimental engagement with media invokes a temporal awareness.

Crimp’s essay begins with a definition of postmodern art as work where ‘the integrity of the various mediums—those categories the exploration of whose essences and limits constituted the very project of modernism—has dispersed into meaninglessness’ (p. 76). Interestingly Crimp’s list of ‘these new aesthetic activities’ includes ‘film, photography, video, [and] performance’ (p. 76), but not text, despite including Lawrence Weiner and Robert Barry in a line-up of representative postmodern artists. And indeed while Crimp is using Weiner and Barry as exemplars of conceptual practices that reject ‘any physical manifestation of the work’ (p. 76), their bodies of work from that time belie an overwhelming aesthetic reliance on a recognizable visual identity expressed through the presence of text, a myopia that Jörg Heiser, citing art historian
Robert C. Morgan, calls ‘a “national failure” to integrate Conceptual art “into the mainstream of our visual history”’ (2004).

The opening of Crimp’s essay also specifies an effect of this blurring of lines between media; this mutability signals the shifting nature of the work over time, and thus the effect of time in a viewer’s experience of a work. Indeed as early as 1978 in Crimp’s *Flash Art* article, temporality had become a key to understanding postmodern appropriation, as well as a foil for Modernist priorities. He concludes that essay:

> Unlike the use of ‘found images’ in earlier modernist art (in Robert Rauschenberg, for example), the presentation of pictures in this work is less involved with formal transformations than with processes that must be called temporal. Not only do they involve time spent, time lavished, but they are about time, the time of reading (of a fixed stare), about the time of memory, and about those emotions which are fundamentally temporal: longing, nostalgia, presentment, anxiety, expectation, dread. (p. 45)

In 1979, Crimp describes this awareness of temporality in the experience of the *Pictures* work as resulting in the ‘presentation of an event in such a manner and at such a distance that it is apprehended as representation—representation not, however, conceived as the re-presentation of that which is prior, but as the unavoidable condition of intelligibility of even that which is present’ (p. 77). In 1979 it is once again the work of Jack Goldstein that Crimp uses to exemplify the effect he is describing, using Goldstein’s *The Jump* to describe the multivalent quality of a representation as both a film of a ‘completed action’ and a never-ending process where the ‘temporal mode is the psychological one of anticipation’ (p. 79).
It is notable that this is the third time, in three essays, that Crimp uses *The Jump* to illustrate his argument, an argument that differs somewhat each time. In his 1977 catalogue essay, Crimp uses Goldstein’s in-progress rotoscopic work to explore how recognition and repetition work in the practices of the *Pictures* artists, and how the operation of recontextualisation necessarily underscores the signifying structures of the material being re-presented. In 1978, Goldstein’s (then completed) work becomes about ‘expectation’ that is ‘never satisfied’ (p. 35). By 1979, *The Jump* is described as iconic of postmodern practices that use a durational quality to imply that the viewer necessarily cannot ever apprehend all of the work’s significance, ‘the whole is but a fragment’ (p. 79). This is the ‘fragment’ (1978) of Roland Barthes, the semiotic scrap that calls forth a reader (1977, p. 148).

This Barthes-ian assessment of Goldstein’s work points to the persistent influence of semiotics on Crimp’s approach to the *Pictures* work, and again highlights the linguistic qualities he ascribes to postmodern practices. It is, ironically, a postmodern work’s strength *as a language* that ensures its place in *Pictures*. Looking at Crimp’s extended treatment of the work of Jack Goldstein in 1979’s ‘Pictures’, his descriptions of the Goldstein works again ignore the presence of text. For example his description of Goldstein’s record works included in the *Pictures* exhibition, which he also discussed in the 1977 essay, focuses entirely on the records’ storytelling ability either on their own or as soundtracks to Goldstein’s performance works. Crimp makes no mention of the works’ visual qualities at all in this second essay, neither their colorful materials nor their declarative, stylised labels. Artist and writer John Kelsey,
on the text works and writings Goldstein produced in the late 80s throughout the 1990s and up to the end of his life, pointedly objects to reading Goldstein’s work with text as simply a ‘means of circumventing the art object’ writing that:

A glance at the printed covers of the vinyl 45s (The Dying Wind, A German Shepherd, etc.) that Goldstein began producing in 1976 is enough to confirm [the influence of conceptualism]. In his case, however, language was always already embedded in the abstract things of the media age, displayed on their communicating surfaces. The stark, black-on-white Helvetica typeface was as much a part of the work as the tactile and retinal (‘gorgeous’) qualities of the colored vinyl that stored and played back prerecorded sounds. Abstract things were synthetic hybrids of language, technology, and materials: multimedia.

Writing was itself a technology and a communicating thing among things.

(2012, p. 182)

Kelsey essentially takes Crimp’s description one step further; where Crimp explains the content of Goldstein’s record works as essentially sonic-narrative readymades, ‘paralleling his use of stock footage to make films’ (p. 78), Kelsey points to the fact that the texts on the records are, as well, culturally resonant, evocative appropriations.

Much as Crimp does not engage with the presence of text on Goldstein’s records, his 1979 essay also similarly ignores the text in Goldstein’s short films. He writes: ‘These films show either simple, split second gestures that are repeated with little or no difference, or slightly more extended actions that appear to exhaust themselves’ (p. 78). But these films are also begun with title cards, which operate similarly to the labels of Goldstein’s records. Presented uniformly as monochromatic black backgrounds with white Helvetica type, they describe in literal terms the content to come. Paradoxically it is the bland
indexicality of the titles that triggers the anticipatory state: *A German Shepherd, Bone China, The Chair*. Because the titular subjects of the works sound so hopelessly banal, the viewer necessarily asks herself what could possibly happen therein that might merit documentation. These title cards thus serve both to introduce the work and set in motion the state of anticipation that for Crimp characterises these postmodern practices. In other words, it is the titles themselves that create the psychological mode that marks them as postmodern; it is text that sets the narrative state in play.

This is why these film works are, at least in recent years, often represented as diptychs in exhibition catalogues with a still of the opening title card presented alongside a still of a representative image from the film. The Orange County Museum of Art’s catalogue for Jack Goldstein’s 2012 traveling retrospective, *Jack Goldstein x 10,000*, presents the films in this way, referring to both the title card and the photographic image as ‘stills’ (Kaiser, Goldstein et al. 2012, pp. 56-68), underscoring the importance of the introductory texts to the conceptual and aesthetic impact of the works overall. While Crimp cannot be held accountable for design or curatorial approaches that post-date his own, it is notable that he too, at least implicitly, considers the initial text part of the overall work, writing of Goldstein’s *A Ballet Shoe* (1975) that ‘the entire film lasts twenty-two seconds’ (p. 78), a duration that includes the title card.

And while Goldstein’s *The Jump* (1978) serves as a touchstone in Crimp’s 1977, 1978, and 1979 essays, he imperfectly refers to it as a loop. Strictly speaking, the film does not show an endless cycle of jumpers, but a 26-second sequence of three jumps, bracketed at the beginning by a title card and
at the end by a flashing fourth figure that does not actually jump. Crimp’s omission of the title card from his descriptions of this work allows him to claim that the work is ‘a potentially endless repetition of repetitions’ (1979, p. 79), a *mise en abyme* that mirrors his concluding claim that postmodern artists ‘are not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification; underneath each picture there is always another picture’ (1979, p. 87). And yet the work does indicate a beginning and an end, through the artist’s inclusion of the text. While the title card does not entirely negate the role of repetition in this work, it does, at the very least, complicate Crimp’s reliance on this signal work to represent the operations of Pictures Generation artists overall.

![Figure 10: Jack Goldstein, 1978, The Jump.](image)

The critical sleight-of-hand, whether intentional or accidental, serves to tighten up some of the more essential threads of Crimp’s discussion. And whether or not Crimp truly needed *The Jump* to be a loop in order to persuasively make his larger point, it is noteworthy that the work is, partly due to the visibility of Crimp’s arguments, *remembered* in this way. Robert Longo, *Pictures* artist and
curator at The Kitchen in the late 70s, debuted *The Jump* in an exhibition of Goldstein’s work there in 1978 and he also refers to it as ‘an extraordinary film loop’ (Hertz, Goldstein et al. 2003, p. 172) in an edited interview with Richard Hertz published in the anthology *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia*.

Crimp’s 1979 ‘Pictures’ essay also introduces Cindy Sherman into the cohort of artists working in this postmodern way. Discussing one of her black and white ‘film stills’, *Untitled* from 1978, as a ‘picture of presentiment… of simultaneous presence and absence, a narrative ambience stated but not fulfilled’ (p. 80), Crimp identifies, through Sherman, another trait shared by the works of the *Pictures* artists, another latent curatorial theme identified two years after the exhibition itself. The ultimate importance of narrative significance and ambiguity is for Crimp underscored by the back-to-back pairing, on the following pages of the essay, of an image of the Sherman work and a still from Longo’s film *Sound Distance of a Good Man* (1978), an image which is based on the same source as Longo’s wall relief, “*The American Soldier and The Quiet Schoolboy*” (1977), from the *Pictures* exhibition itself.
These photographs, neither of which were exhibited in *Pictures*, effectively supplant the original works in the exhibition, both in Crimp’s own writing on the subject and art historically as the 1979 ‘Pictures’ essay came to be better known than the original. This gradual shift in Crimp’s 1977 interest from works re-presenting ‘recognizable things’ (1977, p. 3) toward works employing ‘recognizable images’ (1979, p. 75) is a shift that, for Crimp, becomes increasingly embodied in the photograph.

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In 1980, Crimp published ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’ in *October*, his second essay dealing with the legacy of *Pictures* in that journal in two years and it was in ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’ that he finally introduced the ‘appropriation’ (p. 98) term into the *Pictures* context. ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’ leans heavily on the work of Walter Benjamin in order to consider specifically the role of the original in creating the conditions for re-production and re-presentation that Crimp elaborated in the 1977, 1978, and 1979 essays. In this way, Crimp’s 1980 essay operates as both a close reading of Benjamin’s ‘A Short History of Photography’, (1972) first translated into English in 1972, and a reconsideration of Benjamin’s concept of the ‘aura’ from his ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’(1988, p. 221), translated in 1976.
In this 1980 essay, Crimp asserts that photography provides a solution to a problem he encountered as he worked through the logic of his first *Pictures* essays. While his earlier texts claimed that performance was ‘exemplary’ of the art of the 70s, by creating ‘a specific situation and for a specific duration’ that led to a ‘privileging [of] the spectator instead of the artist’ (p. 92), this led to a paradox. ‘What I wanted to explain was how to get from this condition of presence—the *being* there necessitated by performance—to the kind of presence that is possible only through the absence that we know to be the condition of representation’ (p. 92). For Crimp, it is photography that provides a solution to this problem of ‘presence’ (p. 92) because it has an indexical relationship to both the original subject of the photograph but still has no single, *original* image. The photograph’s near-infinite reproducibility, the very thing about it that most-troubled modernist art theorists, is also the thing that, for Crimp, makes it so useful for investigating postmodern questions of representation.

In ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’ Crimp uses performances by Goldstein and Longo to illustrate their kinship with photography, writing ‘The extraordinary presence of their work is effected through absence, through its unbridgeable distance from the original, from even the possibility of an original’ (p. 94). Crimp then points out that ‘This quality of presence would seem to be just the opposite of what Walter Benjamin had in mind when he introduced into the language of criticism the notion of the aura’ (p. 94). Indeed for Crimp, ‘presence’ indicates a kind of hallucinatory quality, so that the viewer is made aware that what they are experiencing is something
both vivid but fundamentally unreal, something with no fixed meaning, while Benjamin’s ‘aura’ refers to some tangible trace of the artist’s hand, a concrete aspect of an artwork that serves as evidence of artistic genius.

But because photography’s engagement with the technical and the machine-made has always marked it as apart from the other fine arts, with the inherent reproducibility of its products, Benjamin had to shift his notion of aura to suit. Crimp notes that for Benjamin, in photography aura functions opposite to the way it does in painting, for in a photograph the aura ‘means not looking for the hand of the artist but for the uncontrolled and uncontrollable intrusion of reality, the absolutely unique and even magical quality not of the artist but of his subject’ (p. 95). This characterisation of what makes a photograph auratic is both intrinsic to contemporary discourse around the snapshot and anathema to the postmodern uses of photography for the Pictures Generation. The value of photography for the postmodern artist is not created by reflecting contingency in the making of the image, but exposed in the taking of the photograph, meaning the decontextualisation of that view from its original context. It is in this sense that Crimp introduces appropriation into the discourse of postmodernism, writing of the Pictures artists that, ‘their images are purloined confiscated, appropriated, stolen’ (p. 98).

It is important to note that, because ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’ is a response to Walter Benjamin’s work on photography, Crimp’s essay focuses in this case on ‘photographic’ works, works he sees as engaged with the questions about reproduction and originality initially brought about by photographic technology. The works he cites as representative of this
photographic mode are the performances of Goldstein and Longo; Sherrie Levine’s copies of Edward Weston, Andreas Feininger, and Elliot Porter; Cindy Sherman’s self-portraits; and Richard Prince’s rephotography. While in 1977 Crimp set out to describe the shared critical imperatives of a number of young artists, he did so by describing their critical engagement with ‘representation’, narrowly defined, as he singled out the images within the works and ignored other types of representation within their frames. Here again in 1980 Crimp focuses on images as the essence of the ‘photographic’. But it is important to note that the eponymous ‘photographic activity of postmodernism’ does not actually refer exclusively to photographic images as postmodern, but instead describes the broader postmodern insistence that ‘it is only in the absence of the original that representation may take place’ (p. 98), and that this insight itself is analogous to the photographic process of taking a picture.

As such, Crimp’s use of photography and image-based works to describe and illustrate his thesis in some ways fosters a confusion about his most compelling insights, perhaps reinforcing a titular misreading that has been compounded over the decades, until an oversimplified relationship of photography and postmodernism has been canonised in art history. This simple misunderstanding of Crimp’s title, underscored by a cursory look at the artists highlighted in the essay, is made possible by similar, earlier limitations in the essays about *Pictures* published in the 70s. Much like those essays, ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’ is remembered as an essay on the distorting power of images, rather than representation itself.
To some extent Crimp’s exploration of photographic types of activity while using photographs as some of his examples muddies the waters of his argument. If he had discussed non-photographic works by the same artists (for example instead using Richard Prince’s painting *Four Women* from 1976 rather than his untitled color photographs of men looking in the same direction from 1978) Crimp may have made the role of absence more explicit, but his choice to use primarily photographs as his argument’s examples is consistent with his earlier texts.

In 1978 and then 1979 Crimp revisited his earlier argument, examining the use of these representations specifically along the lines of temporal and then narrative function, which simply took the limited definition of representation from 1977 and repeated it across new axes, extending its oversights. But by 1980, Crimp had so thoroughly described the boundaries of his engagement with these artists that when he doubled down on photography specifically as the mode of representation and repetition that interests him, there is really no particular omission left to note—he simply continued to train his lens on the limited area of imagery that motivated him, as opposed to considering how a wider breadth of examples of works by those same artists might have yielded a fuller picture of the motives behind their practices and appropriation generally.

That said, this 1980 text does allow us a retroactive window into some of Crimp’s perspective from the 70s, and it also serves as a cautionary tale for the inaccuracies, distortions, and omissions that have since become even more reified over time. While it is really only here, in 1980, that *Pictures* and photographs become explicitly linked by Crimp, there is still a broadly held art-
historical belief that the *Pictures* exhibition was *about* photography, as evidenced in both the common misconception that Cindy Sherman’s work was included in the 1977 exhibition and in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 2009 *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* exhibition being curated by the museum’s photography department.

Because the language Crimp is using to make his arguments about appropriation is in many cases coming from the domain of linguistics and literary theory, it is important to consider how this language may have contributed to slanting his arguments about images into the photographic, and also how his arguments about images might be mapped onto the many instances of works of the Pictures Generation that do use language, essentially asserting the photograph as a visual synonym of text. For example, Crimp describes how *Pictures* artists ‘approach the question of representation through photographic modes, particularly all those aspects of photography that have to do with reproduction, with copies, and copies of copies’ (p. 94). And yet these claims about the endless reproducibility of a representation are the same claims made about the function of language by Barthes and others concerned with the denotative nature of linguistic messages, which again points to the willed, narrow focus of Crimp’s simile, always returning to the idea of the photograph and not the idea of language, as the fundamental metaphor for appropriative engagement with representation.

Also, what Crimp describes as an ‘unbridgeable distance from…even the possibility of an original’ (p. 94) is equally an insight from semiotics, described by Saussure as ‘the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign’ (1985, p. 37). What
Crimp is indicating here is the *Pictures* artists’ interest in the potentially inexhaustible chains of signification any element invokes. This endlessness is explained by the arbitrariness detailed in Saussure’s semiotic systems, for it proves that what is signified by any given sign could equally be indicated by another, and vice-versa. Saussure uses the word ‘sister’ to illustrate this, pointing to the existence of this same familial relationship whether indicated by ‘soeur’, ‘sister’ or any other language (p. 38).

Indeed the only non-‘photographic’ work discussed in the 1980 essay is an artist statement by Sherrie Levine. In it, Levine does something that becomes iconic of her practice and that is to appropriate the writing of another, presenting it as her own text about her work. In this case, the text purportedly about Levine’s childhood is taken from an Alberto Moravia novel, modified only slightly. Crimp points out that this plagiarism is of a piece with her appropriative practice, citing her bold re-photography of Edward Weston’s images of his nude son and the copyright issues raised by Weston’s estate, while also pointing out that Weston’s nudes were themselves indebted to the nude sculptures of the ancient Greeks. And so Levine’s defense against copyright infringement is a form of art historical hostage-taking, a critical hiding-behind the presence of another. Citing Weston’s statement that a photograph ‘must be visualized in full before the exposure is made’ (p. 99), Crimp sounds positively semiotic, echoing, exactly, Saussure’s point that in language, ‘it is the viewpoint that creates the object’ (1985, p. 28), the ‘mental process’ that calls forth the text.
While Crimp’s argument shifted over time from probing representation of things to representation of images, he was consistent in his elision of text and images even as he used literary theory in this inquiry. Others, including many of his peers at *October* at that time, similarly regarded ‘the work of art…as a kind of “text” leading to a discourse on representation’ (Sandler 1996, p. 334) and found this elision equally seductive. Chapter three will consider some of Crimp’s peers’ responses to the critical operations of postmodern appropriation, as framed in Crimp’s *Pictures*. 

Figure 13: Ferdinand de Saussure, 1985, diagram from 'The Linguistic Sign'. 

![Diagram](image)
Reference list

Benjamin, W 1972 [1931], 'A Short History of Photography', [S Mitchell], *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 5-26.
Crimp, D 1978, 'About Pictures: Picture as representation as such', *Flash Art*, vol. 88-89, pp. 34-35.
Crimp, D 1979, 'Pictures', *October*, no. 8, pp. 75-88.
Chapter 4: Repetition

Douglas Crimp’s writing about the *Pictures* exhibition and the appropriative practices of artists of this Pictures Generation became influential almost immediately, in part because he was working in dialogue with a number of influential art writers and theorists who quickly identified his work on appropriation as definitive of the postmodern practice, incorporating his insights into their essays and footnoting his writing in their own. Much of this process took place in the pages of *October*, the influential art theory journal Crimp was editing at the time. Because of Crimp’s close association with that publication, his work on *Pictures* was almost immediately available to his peers there and his subsequent essays on the subject were also published between its covers.

*October* had been founded the year before the *Pictures* exhibition by Crimp’s teacher at the CUNY Graduate Center, art historian Rosalind Krauss, in collaboration with writer Annette Michelson and painter Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, in order to ‘publish writing grounded in presuppositions that are materialist, or at times idealist. Indeed, the tensions between radical artistic practice and dominant ideology will be a major subject of inquiry’ (1976, p. 4). *October* contributors were influenced by the great influx of newly translated writing by French cultural theorists and philosophers including Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard, along with the work of earlier writers whose thinking was important to this new generation of French theorists, such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan (Eklund 2009, p. 17; Sandler
In short, *October*’s writers shared a heavily footnoted, intellectually ambitious style grounded in linguistic and structuralist theory, that deliberately pointed away from Greenberg’s formalist concerns with Modernism that had dominated American art criticism in the 1960s in favour of postmodern, poststructuralist approaches to art criticism. Art historian and Artists Space’s original board president Irving Sandler complained that the journal’s embrace of Crimp’s *Pictures* concerns were ‘part of a campaign it waged against formalism and modernism using as its weapons postmodernist ideas and approaches culled from the writings of… French intellectuals’ (1996, p. 332).

This common set of references shared by the *October* writers inadvertently ensured that they were often working in dialogue with each other, for example with both Krauss and Craig Owens citing Crimp’s writings on appropriation, and he theirs, even in the same issue of the journal. For example, in *October 13* from 1980, not only do Crimp, Owens, and Krauss all have essays discussing postmodernism and appropriation published in this issue, but Crimp and Owens each footnote the same, earlier Krauss essay on Robert Rauschenberg in their own respective texts (Crimp 1980a, p. 44; Owens 1980b, p. 68, 70). 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 interconnected the *October* writers arguments were.

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That Crimp was even in a position to be editing the journal at the time he was in graduate school and curating *Pictures* says something about his personal talent and ambition, but also about the scale of the New York art world in the late 70s which was small, interconnected, and experimental, with very little mainstream attention or commercial pressures to influence it. As such, for many in the art community their work and personal lives overlapped in complicated, sometimes conflicting, ways. For example, some claim that Crimp’s ideas for the *Pictures* exhibition grew partly out of his friendship with Helene Winer. Winer was then the director of Artists Space and in the mid 70s she and Crimp also began collaborating on a variety of projects intended to ‘bring theoretical rigor to the study of contemporary art’ (Eklund 2009, p. 111).

But Winer also introduced Crimp to Jack Goldstein, her boyfriend at the time, whose work ultimately featured prominently in the *Pictures* exhibition and essays, in many ways becoming the template that Crimp used to model appropriation-based practices. According to Goldstein, he first introduced Crimp and Owens to the virtues of appropriation. Goldstein described their pre-*Pictures* interactions like this:

Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens would come over to the place where Helene and I lived. They were into post-formalists like Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, and Richard Serra, but slowly they came around to what the CalArts crowd was doing. They formed their careers around our work...At first Doug would hardly even speak to me. On different occasions, I showed him a number of my films, but it took a long time before he understood what I was talking about. He slowly accepted the fact that you could borrow and recontextualize images from anywhere, not only popular culture but from political ideologies and history books and fashion magazines. (Hertz, Goldstein et al. 2003, pp. 89-90)
Crimp disputes this characterisation of the beginning of his work on appropriation, calling Goldstein’s account ‘belittling’ (Kaiser, Goldstein et al. 2012, p. 45) in his 2012 ‘Controlling Pictures’ essay, published in the catalogue for a posthumous Goldstein retrospective that toured American museums in 2012 and 2013.

Nonetheless these different versions of Crimp’s coming to work on the subject of appropriation point to the highly interconnected nature not only of Crimp’s professional milieu but also his personal one, giving some sense of the proximity in which these like-minded artists and arts professionals of the late 70s in New York worked and socialised. For example, Crimp was living at the time in the South Street Seaport area of lower Manhattan, alongside a number of other Pictures Generation artists, including Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, David Salle, Tom Lawson, and Troy Brauntuch (Hertz, Goldstein et al. 2003, p. 170), artists whose practices came to be similarly influential on Crimp’s thinking about appropriation. In part, this social interrelatedness should in some sense indemnify Crimp from claims of conflict-of-interest or self-promotion in editing October while also publishing in it, as it demonstrates what a small, intersecting community the New York art world was at the time. It also illustrates how nearly impossible it would have been for a journal of October’s stated ambitions, ‘to write about critical art practices’ that do not ‘construct an object for art criticism but constitutes an act of such criticism’ (Krauss 1984, p. 68), to avoid writing about Crimp’s work on Pictures. As Crimp put it about curating Pictures:

I attempted to apply the linguistic and poststructuralist theory I’d been reading. The theory was new to me, and so were the artists I selected for the show, but both the
theory and the art were “about” representation, and thus seemed related. (2015, p. 22, reprinted in Crimp 2016, p. 199)

In short, the alignment of theory and practice in *Pictures* perfectly mirrored the interests of the journal, and as such *October* became a megaphone for Crimp’s ideas.

This interconnectedness of the critical art community of New York City in the 1970s can further be seen not only in Krauss’ mentorship of Crimp, bringing him to *October* from her classroom, but also in Owens’ presence at the journal, as he was not only a friend of Crimp’s but also a student at the CUNY Graduate Center. Crimp, Krauss, and Owens shared so many areas of interest and expertise because their academic, professional, and social worlds were so closely interconnected. And while the interdependence of many of the journal’s arguments has resulted in it appearing ‘cultish’ (Pearlman 2003, p. 13), and essentially preaching to the converted (Bertens 1995, p. 91), it was explicitly conceived of as ‘a framework for critical exchange, for intertextuality within the larger context of theoretical discussion’ (1976, p. 4). Thus these overlapping areas of interest, citation, and discourse were part of the mandate of the publication itself.

In addition to the repetition and reinforcement of Crimp’s ideas on appropriation in the pages of *October*, his work and the work of other *October* writers has been further canonised in influential art history anthologies. Many of the texts he, Krauss, and Owens published in *October* in the late 70s and early 80s were almost immediately reproduced and republished elsewhere, including in later-*October*-contributor Hal Foster’s 1983 anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic*:
Essays on Postmodern Culture and Brian Wallis’ 1984 anthology Art After Modernism. Despite the fact that these anthologies were published in the early 80s, and are now considered art historical time capsules in and of themselves, they are still regularly taught in art schools across the world (Singerman 2012, p. 18) as readers on ‘contemporary’ art issues. As such, these anthologies are instructive indices of Crimp and October’s continuing influence on defining appropriation; Crimp has an essay of his own republished in each of them while his essays on Pictures are cited in the footnotes of both anthologies in the texts of multiple other anthologised writers.

The problem with viewing appropriation through the lens of this interconnected body of writing, both as it appeared at the time in October and has been anthologised since, is that while Crimp’s stated positions may be reinforced, contested, or questioned, his omissions remain absent from view, inscribed, at most, in the negative space of the established arguments. Despite, or perhaps because of, this overworked 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 insightfully about text and appropriation in their own writing at the time.

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Krauss’ impact on Crimp’s intellectual formation is important to acknowledge; indeed long before she began footnoting his work on postmodern appropriation he was steered and influenced by her. As Crimp’s professor and
mentor, Krauss had been writing and publishing on art since the late 60s. In graduate school at Harvard, where she was a student alongside Michael Fried, she was at first a devoted formalist and admirer of the work of Clement Greenberg, the art critic who in many ways defined the terms of Modernism that October so explicitly tried to move beyond. Krauss rejected Greenberg’s modernism both in her early writings on Minimalism and later in the pages of October more explicitly. Indeed the first essay she published in October’s inaugural issue, ‘Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism’, takes up the legacy of Modernism in the field of postmodern video practices and explains that ‘artists’ video is largely involved in parodying the critical terms of abstraction’ (1976, p. 50) and the medium specificity Modernism came to stand for.

‘Video’ is also significant for its use of the term ‘appropriation’ (p. 56) in the context of art criticism, Krauss employing the term in print four years before Crimp. Thus appropriation is notably present even in the first pages of October, where Krauss describes mirror-reflection as ‘a mode of appropriation, of illusionistically erasing the difference between subject and object’ (pp. 56-57). She notes such a reflection for its ‘vanquishing of separateness. Its inherent movement is toward fusion’ (p. 56). Krauss’ ‘appropriation’ then is a mode of synthesis and an interrogation of presence, a notion that is later echoed by Crimp’s 1980 use of ‘appropriation’ to describe work where ‘the original cannot be located…[and] even the self which might have generated an original is shown to be itself a copy’ (1980b, p. 98).

In 1977, Krauss again returns to the notion of presence, with her two-part ‘Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America’, the first essay of which was
published the spring before the *Pictures* exhibition opened. ‘Notes on the Index’ identifies the shared sensibility of the art of the 70s as the ‘indexical’, explaining ‘the functioning of the index in the art of the present… operates to substitute the registration of sheer physical presence for the more highly articulated language of aesthetic conventions’ (1977a, p. 81). Krauss’ essays, both parts one and two, go on to highlight artworks that serve as a mark of another presence, using photographs, captions, and site-specific architectural interventions as examples of ‘the type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples’ (1977b, p. 59). Like Crimp, Krauss also cites Roman Jakobson and other prominent literary theorists to support her argument.

Crimp cited ‘Notes on the Index’ along with Krauss’ ‘Video: Aesthetics of Narcissism’, in his 1979 ‘Pictures’ essay, and therefore Krauss’ essays help delineate some of Crimp’s frames of reference for thinking about the *Pictures* works. And beyond the broader influence of Krauss’ ideas about what distinguished these works of the 70s from their Modernist forebears, there were also more specific ideas and overlaps that contributed to Crimp’s limited framing of the kinds of representations his exhibition explored. For example, one can see a precursor to Crimp’s discussion of the function of text in Jon Borofsky’s *Mulatto Man* (1976) in Krauss’ discussion of the work of captions in the first part of ‘Notes on the Index’. That essay focuses largely, though not exclusively, on language and the role of text in generating the clues and red-herrings that enriched the readymade practices of Duchamp, and in this context Krauss writes:

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If Duchamp was indeed thinking of the *Large Glass* as a kind of photograph...

[then] The notes for the *Large Glass* form a huge, extended caption, and like the captions under newspaper photographs, which are absolutely necessary for their intelligibility, the very existence of Duchamp’s notes—their preservation and publication—bears witness to the altered relationship between sign and meaning.... The photograph heralds a disruption in the autonomy of the sign. A meaninglessness surrounds it which can only be filled with the addition of a text. (1977a, p. 77)

Crimp echoes Krauss’ assessment of the ‘meaninglessness’ of the independent photograph in his description of Borofsky’s cartoon, writing:

The typical use of the caption as a means of articulating the mute photograph was illustrated by Jon Borofsky in an exhibition last year. Of the several pictures that made up the show, Borofsky included one entitled *Mulatto Man* whose source was clearly a newspaper photograph, and when he projected that image on the wall to make his copy drawing, he reproduced at the bottom the caption that accompanied it. That caption did not state the signification; rather, it provided the drawing with a meaning that it did not otherwise have. The picture is not transparent to such a meaning, while the caption is self-sufficient, has meaning with or without the picture. (1977, p. 14)

Thus Crimp’s early and persisting insistence on the instability of meaning in images, while denying the ‘arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign’ (Saussure 1985, p. 37), is perhaps a key inheritance from the work of his mentor Krauss.

It is also worth noting here that this disregard for the complexity of signification in linguistic signs, even while citing Saussure, Jakobson, and other notable literary theorists in their work, is not unique to Crimp and Krauss, but can be further traced back to their mutual influence Roland Barthes. Barthes compellingly claimed that ‘signifying media’ (1968, p. 9) of all sorts could be
analyzed using semiotic tools, a fundamental aspect of Crimp’s engagement with representation, and on this premise Barthes deconstructed everything from film stills to fashion to, notably, an advertisement for prepared Italian foods. Indeed, it is in Barthes’ text ‘Rhetoric of the Image’, first published in 1964 and published in translation in 1977, that one possible precursor to Crimp and Krauss’ oversimplification of the operation of linguistic signs can be seen, as in this essay Barthes treats text as pure information, straightforward in its significance and unencumbered by the arbitrariness that is ascribed to it elsewhere.

Further Barthes himself fails to acknowledge the affective, aesthetic impact of text and typography, much as Crimp failed to address the affective or aesthetic (or in some cases even informational) import of text in the individual artworks he wrote about. In ‘Rhetoric of the Image’, 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’ (1977, p. 37). Barthes therefore allows the ad’s photograph to signify in at least two ways with both a ‘perceptual’ and ‘cultural message’ (p. 36), thus as an illustration of the products available and also of ‘Italinity’ itself (p. 34), 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.

Despite tracing Crimp’s oversights to the earlier work of Krauss, and before her Barthes, after 1977 it is Crimp’s influence on Krauss that is made
manifest as she refers to his work in her own footnotes in ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition’. In fact, Krauss cites Crimp twice in that text, the first footnote citing the *Pictures* exhibition and Crimp’s two eponymously titled essays as presenting practices that don’t ‘repress the concept of the copy’ (1981, p. 64) and instead engage in ‘a certain kind of play with the notions of photographic reproduction’ (1981, p. 64). Krauss’ second footnote of Crimp occurs immediately after, linking her discussion of Sherrie Levine’s copyright violation of Edward Weston back to Crimp’s account of the same in his ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’ essay. Thus Krauss looks to Crimp to bulwark her ideas about practices that employ photography to point to the instability of the original and the copy, much as Crimp used her earlier writing on temporal and indexical modes of postmodern practice to frame the work of the *Pictures* artists.

But beyond the mutually reinforcing citations that ensure Krauss and Crimp’s works are read in dialogue with one another, Krauss’ work is also important in any examination of the role of text in postmodern practice, specifically because she so often wrote about language visible in artworks. For example in 1982 Rosalind Krauss wrote persuasively about the contemporary critical bias towards celebrating imagery over text in her essay, ‘When Words Fail’. This text addresses ‘the invasion of the visual with the textual’ 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 the present critical discourse on photography’ (p.
92). However, despite Krauss’ acknowledgement that ‘capturing and holding the transient experience, recording the present and storing it up against the future’ (p. 95), 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 writers such as Derrida and Barthes who created ‘a kind of paraliterature’, which ‘is the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation’ (p. 37), pointing to the critical import of engaging with such appropriated material that is ‘always already-known’ (p. 39). Krauss’ 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, of the 1920s and 30s illustrates some of her discernment for the critical role of language appearing within a given frame. And yet despite these insights, and her work’s overall prominence for Crimp, it was not these particular insights that he built upon in his essays returning to postmodern appropriation.

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Craig Owens is notable amongst the *October* writers for his particular rigor in engaging with semiotics and text, as well as his self-consciousness in acknowledging the limitations of his project. He wrote eloquently about the writing and text art of Robert Smithson and others in his 1979 essay ‘Earthwords’, explicitly connecting ‘the eruption of language into the aesthetic field’ with ‘the emergence of postmodernism’ (p. 122). He further asserted that Smithson’s insertion of language into art ‘represents one of the most significant aesthetic “events” of our decade’ (p. 128).

That said, sensitivity to the importance of text art did not consistently carry into his work on appropriation directly. Owens worked on appropriation explicitly in his two-part essay ‘The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism’, from 1980, in which he asserts that the contemporary period is defined by a renaissance of allegorical work and that ‘allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery’ (1980a, p. 69). In this context Owens uses the practices of Levine, Brauntuch, and Longo to define appropriation, describing them as ‘artists who generate images through the reproduction of other images’ that ultimately ‘empty them of their resonance…their authoritative claim to meaning’ (p. 69). Owens therefore frames appropriation as annihilating, pointing to the ultimate instability of definitive meaning in representations overall, rather than characterising appropriation as a synthetic or unifying drive as originally identified by Krauss.

In part one of Owens’ ‘The Allegorical Impulse’, he also discusses the importance of text in postmodern work, describing allegory’s
blatant disregard for aesthetic categories...nowhere more apparent than in the
reciprocity, which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal: words
are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered
as script to be deciphered. (p. 74)

And yet despite this acknowledgement that text in postmodern art could be
considered as an aesthetic presence, he declined to pursue this line of thinking
further, instead primarily linking allegorical practices to the ‘appropriation of
images’ (p. 69) throughout the essay. Thus his self-consciousness about what
his own work omitted did not serve to directly address text as a fundamental
mode of representation contested by appropriation, only to mark its omission as
critical dark matter.

In later writing, Owens pulls back some of this focus on imagery, for
example in his brief essay from 1982 on the work of Sherrie Levine. In ‘Sherrie
Levine at A&M Artworks’, Owens explicitly denies the conventional
characterisation of Levine as solely an ‘appropriator of images’ (p. 148), taking
pains to establish the great variety of media which she appropriates in her
practice. And in 1983, Owens made explicit the links between feminist art and
textual explorations of representation in ‘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 appropriated name ‘A Picture is No
Substitute for Anything’ as an ‘unequivocal critique of representation as
traditionally defined’ (2002, p. 84). In ‘The Discourse of Others’, Owens makes
the connection between postmodern appropriation and feminism clear by linking
artists’ attacks on the authority of the author with an attack on patriarchy itself.
In ‘The Discourse of Others’, Owens also 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’ (2002, p. 73), an insight that underscores the political stakes of contemporary writing as art practice both in the early 80s and still today.

Owens should therefore be credited for making explicit the link between feminism and appropriation, diversifying the media of appropriation generally, hailing the limitations of thinking about representation only along the axis of imagery, and a remarkable perceptiveness to the role of text in postmodern
practices overall. That said, these examples of his moments of great insight into the politics of appropriation and artists working with text are tempered by instances where his own valorisation of images dominates any consideration for the critical role of language in a work.

Figure 15: Barbara Kruger, 1982, Untitled (You Are Not Yourself).

This is evident in Owens’ 1984 essay on Kruger, ‘The Medusa Effect, or, The Specular Ruse’, where Owens’ 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. (Owens 1992, p. 191)

By Owens’ admission then, 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 characterisation 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.

Therefore both Owens and Krauss’ writing on postmodern art practices further defer to Crimp’s portrayal of appropriation, adding subtle nuance and shading to his picture, even as they left the negative spaces of his arguments untouched. While they each contributed their own remarkable insights to the body of writing that has come to define appropriation, refining our art historical understanding of the practice in important and critical ways, Crimp’s fundamental frame for appropriation they left untouched, still defining appropriation as a space for repurposed imagery, despite themselves. Chapter 4 will consider how this original frame for appropriation, the Pictures frame, continues to overdetermine how we view the practice today.
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Chapter 5: Revision

When Douglas Crimp and his peers at October theorised and wrote about appropriation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, their work was quickly published in influential international art journals and re-published shortly thereafter in anthologies of art writing that remain widely read and studied today. While they are justly attributed with having shone a light on appropriation art, it is also true that their were still many aspects of the practice that their writing on the subject left in the shadows.

Problematically many of their oversights, including that of the early prominence and ongoing importance of text in appropriation art, persist. Crimp returned to the subject of Pictures throughout his career, even titling his 2016 memoir Before Pictures as a shorthand to contextualise his personal and intellectual formation in New York City in the 70s, but for him and others appropriation’s specifically image-based practices remain compelling, fecund terrain. October continues to publish articles on image-based appropriation, for example Richard Misek’s ‘Trespassing Hollywood: Property, Space and the “Appropriation Film”’ published in 2015, as do Artforum, Art in America, Flash Art, and other art publications that equally shaped public discourse around contemporary art at the time of Pictures as much as they do today.

Curatorially, this image-based understanding of appropriation persists in the conception of exhibitions in major art museums, commercial galleries and smaller non-profit spaces alike. For example, in 2008 the Museum of Modern
Art in New York mounted an exhibition titled *Pipe, Glass, Bottle of Rum: The Art of Appropriation*, whose press release explained ‘Appropriation of popular imagery flourished in the 1960s and was deeply ingrained in contemporary art by the early 1980s, with artists actively mining both fine art and other sources for their subject matter’ (emphasis mine, Butler 2008). The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in North Carolina similarly introduced their 2014 exhibition, *Another Look: Appropriation in Art*, by explaining ‘Since the turn of the 20th century… artists have appropriated imagery from well-known works of art, commodities and the media in order to make a statement about art’s relationship to, and place within, our world’ (emphasis mine, Nasher Museum 2014). And as recently as 2017, exhibitions at the Kölnisher Kunstverein and the Skarsgart Gallery in London have mounted exhibitions devoted to what is described as painter Leidy Churchman’s ‘appropriation of images’ (emphasis mine, Kunstverein 2017) and ‘work by artists who have made the appropriation of photographic imagery from advertising campaigns, magazines, the internet, and found objects the focus of their work’ (emphasis mine, Padley 2017), respectively.

But beyond the persistence of this limited definition of appropriation as an organising principle for contemporary exhibitions, the *Pictures* exhibition itself is also a frequent curatorial subject, the emphasis of these exhibitions hewing closely to Crimp’s own. The number of exhibitions based on or devoted to reconsidering *Pictures* began accelerating in the last two decades, coinciding with the timeline of professional ebbs and flows that the editors of *ARTnews* ascribe to the *Pictures* artists themselves, charting their ‘sudden rise…[then]
their fall from favor in the late ‘80s, and their return to prominence in the ‘00s’ (2016). Exhibitions from that latest phase honoring, quoting, appropriating, and reinterpreting Crimp’s 1977 exhibition include Artist Space’s own “Pictures” at an Exhibition from 2001, as well as a flurry of exhibitions and events in anticipation of the publication of Crimp’s memoir including Pictures, Before and After – An Exhibition for Douglas Crimp at Galerie Buchholz, Berlin in 2014, and Douglas Crimp – Before Pictures New York City 1967-1977 at Galerie Buchholz’s location in New York in 2016. But the mother lode of all Pictures-themed exhibitions, both in terms of scale and ambition, was the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s (Met) The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984 in 2009.

The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984 was, by virtue of its sponsoring institution, the biggest and most ambitious Pictures-themed exhibition by far, with thirty artists, amongst them original Pictures artists Levine, Brauntuch, Goldstein, and Longo, as well as others closely associated with appropriation today including John Baldessari, Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Bloom, Sarah Charlesworth, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Thomas Lawson, Allan McCollum, Paul McMahon, Matt Mullican, Richard Prince, David Salle, Cindy Sherman, and Laurie Simmons. The Pictures Generation’s ambition, according to the exhibition overview published on the Met’s website, was to be the first major exhibition to look again at ‘this tightly knit group of artists’ who were:

educated in the self-reflexive and critical principles of Minimal and Conceptual art…
[and] brought those lessons to bear on a return to recognizable imagery, exploring how images shape our perceptions of ourselves and the world. (Met 2009)
With such a frame for the exhibition, one that clearly endorses the conception of appropriation as specific to ‘imagery’, viewers are primed to expect that this exhibition will reify, not break out of, the existing frames for appropriation.

And of course because Douglas Eklund, curator of *The Pictures Generation*, is a curator in the Met’s department of photography, this stated focus was unavoidable. Eklund’s *Pictures Generation* did not set out to pay overdue attention to text, and in many cases reinscribed and sometimes heightened stereotypes and biases already evident in the predominant framing of appropriation as an image-based, photographic practice. For example, the exhibition catalogue, edited by Eklund, begins with a forward by Thomas P. Campbell, then the director of the Met, who explains that the artists of the *Pictures Generation*,

…created seminal and influential works whose overarching subject was imagery itself—how pictures of all kinds not only depict but also shape reality. These artists’ achievements have contributed to photography’s central position as the defining medium of contemporary art. (p. 6)

This statement, appearing in the first paragraph of the first page of the book, notably shifts Crimp’s focus on ‘representation’ in the 1977 exhibition where ‘the work of the five artists in this exhibition… turn to those of other art forms more directly concerned with representation’ (p. 28) to Campbell’s ‘imagery’. Campbell’s forward indicates very clearly that the exhibition is not setting out to reconceive *Pictures*, nor closely re-examine the original conception for the *Pictures* exhibition, but instead to illustrate the extant popular understanding of what appropriation signifies today.
It is also worth considering the ways these two *Pictures* catalogues illustrate the respective approaches of these exhibitions, both of which are about representation. Crimp’s original catalogue takes a coy, ironic approach, presenting a gratification-delaying text-only face to its reader that does not hint at the image-centric discussion inside, while the Met catalogue literalises the promise of the title, placing a famous black and white self-portrait photograph by Cindy Sherman at full-bleed on its cover. That Sherman is used here as a representative for the Pictures Generation itself is ironic because she is in many ways the artist most closely associated with *Pictures* who was in fact not in the original exhibition.

Figure 16: (LEFT) *Pictures*, 1977, catalogue by Douglas Crimp; Figure 17: (RIGHT) *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, 2009, catalogue by Douglas Eklund.
Much of the confusion over her presence in that moment is circumstantial, both because she worked around that time at Artists Space, her then boyfriend, Robert Longo, was included in the exhibition, and because Crimp discussed and depicted her work in his 1979 ‘Pictures’ essay. Crimp explains that ‘seeing the first of Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills clarified—or perhaps I should say transformed—my sense of what the Pictures phenomenon was all about. Whereas issues of signification predominated in the first essay, performance now became the paradigm’ (2016, p. 254). Thus while she is an imperfect avatar for the original Pictures, she is also iconic of what Pictures has come to mean over time, a shift that Eklund’s exhibition and catalogue do not so much address as exemplify. That Eklund would not directly acknowledge these shifts, from Crimp’s starting place of ‘representation’ in 1977 to his swing to ‘performance’ by 1979 to the popular association of Pictures with ‘photography’ by 2009, is consistent with the stated focus of the exhibition in the director’s forward. That image bias, or photographic bias, is not perceived as a limitation is of course because photography’s association with appropriation is by that time considered axiomatic.

There were also other limitations of the original Pictures frame that transmuted to the Met exhibition, a number of which were noted by observers at the time, and which also illustrate how time removes nuance from art historical ideas and how, once entrenched, such ideas become hard to budge. These lapses occurred both at practical and conceptual levels. One such omission occurred in the artist list for the exhibition. Despite the fact that the original Pictures only included five artists and the Met’s Pictures Generation, 1974-1984
featured six times that number, Eklund chose not to include Philip Smith, justifying his decision in part by noting Smith’s relative obscurity by the time of the Met exhibition. Eklund explained in an interview with *Art in America* at the opening of *The Pictures Generation*, ‘As for the relegation of Smith [in the art world], I don’t have any idea why that happened. When I reviewed his work for this show, it seemed not strong enough to be included; it was a curatorial, aesthetic judgment on my part’ (Wilcox 2009). This omission caused a fair amount of critical outcry and consternation at the time (Cotter 2009a; 2009b; Lobel 2009; Schwabsky 2009), although Crimp somewhat perplexingly defended Eklund’s decision by simultaneously pointing to the lack of gay artists in the exhibition and scratching his head over the trajectory of Smith’s career, saying Smith:

was not so much of the group, of the social world, of the people who formulated this. He's gay and this [the Met exhibition] 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. (Rosenbaum 2009)

Crimp also acknowledged that like Eklund, he himself erased Smith from his own late 70s accounts of the exhibition (Crimp 1978; 1979).

However, later in his memoir Crimp softened his tone, explaining that Smith ‘was most certainly a serious artist, and the work from 1977 holds up well today’ (2016, p. 254). But Crimp’s critical détente in the memoir is later offset by his participation in one of the more internecine art world battles of the Pictures Generation, citing Thomas Lawson’s public speculations on the reasons behind Smith’s omission from the Met show. Lawson blamed the omission of Smith on Crimp’s influential 1979 ‘Pictures’ essay, pinning Crimp’s decision to not
mention Smith in that article posthumously on ‘that dark prince’ (Lawson cited in Crimp 2016, p. 260) Jack Goldstein who, Lawson speculates, had undue influence on Crimp. But Crimp, in re-telling Lawson’s claim, manages both to concur with Lawson’s judgement of Goldstein (Crimp calling Goldstein at the end of his life ‘paranoid, competitive, and bitter’ (2016, p. 264)), and also to slight Lawson himself who, despite being a peer of Crimp’s at CUNY with his own influential studio practice, publication record and notable art journal of the time, Crimp nonetheless calls a ‘lesser known artist’ (2016, p. 260).

While Crimp’s memoir thus serves to rest his finger on the scales of art history, this transparency in his thinking is also often generously self-reflexive and, in many cases, insightful. For example, Crimp does specifically address his role in erasing Smith from history, explaining at length his own ambivalent feelings about Smith at the time he published his ‘Pictures’ essay in October, which came only two years after his exhibition. Noting that he spent time visiting Smith in Miami while his 1979 essay was in the proofing stage, he writes that his dropping Smith from the essay in October,

should have been on my mind during my visit to Philip, since he would undoubtedly be disappointed when the essay appeared; but I don’t remember worrying about it, nor do I remember discussing it with him. Perhaps his return to Miami [from New York] suggested to me that he was no longer so serious about his art making, and, in any case, I had no way of knowing that the October version of the essay would become so influential. (2016, p. 253)

Regardless of whether Smith’s omission from the Met retrospective exhibition should be ascribed to Crimp’s earlier omission of the artist in 1979, his even earlier omission of the artist in the 1978 Flash Art article which Crimp doesn’t
mention, Eklund’s own curatorial tastes, or the heteronormativity of the art world at large, the effect, beyond appearing to be art-historically careless, was to again limit The Pictures Generation even more narrowly to practices that employed the camera.

Another critical outcry was incited by Eklund’s dismissive treatment of the role of feminism in forging appropriation’s specific mode of critique, which was perplexing given feminism’s central role in the operations of the practice. With appropriation’s strong ties to deconstructing the politics of imagery, appropriation from its postmodern inception was often explicitly linked to a politics of looking, widely understood as operating at the ‘crossing of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation’ (Owens 2002, p. 68). That there was a politics inherent to looking was an idea widely popularised by John Berger’s 1972 television series for the BBC and subsequent book, both titled Ways of Seeing. In the book, Berger asserts that ‘the “ideal” spectator is always assumed to be a male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him’ (1973, p. 64), an idea which he complements by presenting with a selection of paintings, prints, and photographs from both art and advertising sources.

This idea was further established in Laura Mulvey’s essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, published in 1975. Citing psychoanalytic theory and aimed more specifically at the art and film communities rather than a general audience, Mulvey’s essay was wildly influential in academic circles and remains so today. ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ argues that ‘as an advanced representation system, the cinema poses questions of the ways the
unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking’ (p. 7) and identifies these structures as’ Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look’ (p. 11). Mulvey’s essay quickly ‘generated a great deal of critical discussion on the masculinity of the cinematic gaze’ (Owens 2002, p. 73), including amongst the October writers, as the acts of looking and being looked at were no longer assumed to be benign or neutral. Instead looking became an act fraught with patriarchal significance, challenging the critical viewer to leave ‘the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms… to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire’ (Mulvey 1975, p. 8), a challenge often taken up by the artists of the Pictures Generation, as well as the writers considering their work. Craig Owens, for example, lauds Mulvey as one of the artists (she was known at that time as an avant-garde film maker) who has made ‘major theoretical contributions’ (2002, p. 73) through her writing, integrating her insights into his own texts on feminism and postmodernism, reinforcing both Owens’ stated ties between feminist artists writing art theory in the postmodern period and between postmodern art and feminist politics generally. This framing of appropriation as a feminist operation has thus become intrinsic to its postmodern origins, because appropriation was from its outset understood to be a troubling of authorship, and therefore inevitably concerned with how ‘the notion of the author is integrally linked with that of patriarchy; to contest the dominance of the one, is implicitly to contest the power of the other’ (Godeau 1984, p. 91).
 Appropriation is still widely understood in these same terms today. For example one article recently published in The New York Times’ weekend style magazine described how:

above all else, the Pictures artists addressed power, especially patriarchal power, at its quotidian level of social engineering, as well as in its grip on art history. If we are to think of the Pictures Generation as an art movement, then it was the first one in history that included a substantial number of women artists. Much of the early resistance to it was flagrantly misogynistic, though its male artists came in for their own share of ridicule from newspaper and magazine critics, whose favorite dismissive word for this art was ‘brainy.’ (Indiana 2017)

And sadly this slight is strangely still present in Eklund’s work on Pictures in the year 2009. Whether the curator is repeating a 70s-era framing of appropriation as the domain of ‘theoretical girls’ (Jeff Wall in conversation with Dan Graham as quoted in Eklund 2009, p. 144) or during a gallery talk at the opening events of the exhibition characterising appropriation narrowly as the work of ‘women artists…of a specific position of New York conceptual art’ (Kalm 2009), Eklund seems consistently uncomfortable or unwilling to celebrate the specifically feminist foundations of postmodern appropriation.

When pressed to describe works already theorised by others as feminist in their approach, such as Sherrie Levine’s rephotography of Weston and Evans, Eklund essentially tags them as an act of photographic drag, writing that Levine’s works ‘picture appropriated works from the point of view of a woman or of a woman feigning a man’s point of view’ (2009, p. 210). Eklund goes on to laud Levine’s self-consciousness about her appropriation of the authorial gaze in strangely banal and infantilising terms, praising ‘Levine’s awareness of what
she is doing [which] allows her to be expressive in an honest way’ (p. 210). He also confirms his own self-awareness about what Howard Singerman later termed Eklund’s ‘uncomfortable relationship between women artists and theory’ (2009, p. 260), in further writing of Levine, ‘not to peg her to another man for validation—but as Bob Dylan said, “To live outside the law you must be honest”’ (p. 211). That this quote seems inappropriate and entirely out of context only renders his attempt at making amends ironically more sexist, not less.

Further, Eklund often seemed apologetic for the feminism present in certain works, for example praising Simmons and Sherman because they ‘felt no need to identify themselves as feminist but instead found indirect ways to address similar concerns in a way that would not circumscribe their work as exclusively feminist in its meanings’ (p. 143). Singerman identifies Eklund’s distaste for feminism as a symptom of his broader discomfort with theory itself, explaining:

It becomes clear early on that Eklund actually has little interest in Crimp’s attempt to come to theoretical terms with the Pictures work…. Eklund seems to deeply distrust ‘French philosophy’ or Continental theory and, even more, the theoretically informed criticism that emerged in relation to postmodernism. For him, art criticism always comes too late, and always in excess. (2009)

Singerman then traces some of the consequences of this discomfort, writing:

Perhaps the most unfortunate effect of Eklund’s resistance to theory, whether as an interpretive or a critical or a political language, is that it does not allow him to acknowledge its historical presence - and specifically to register how intertwined the discourses of critical theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism were by the early ’80s. (2009)

This discomfort is ironic because, as Singerman explains,
what marks much of the work in this show is its discursivity, by which I mean not only its openness to criticism and theory but its participation in them: the ways in which the work itself posed questions to viewers, to other works, and to the field of art and language within which it very consciously operated. (2009)

It is perplexing that a curator of such a large exhibition devoted to making sense of the origins of postmodern appropriation would be dismissive of its feminist priorities. It paints Eklund into a particularly difficult corner because he simultaneously embraces the photographic priorities of the practice, even as photography at that time was so closely entwined with a feminist critique that he clearly struggles against.

However none of these public discussions of the relative strengths and weaknesses in Eklund’s exhibition concern themselves with appropriation’s wider engagement with representation—specifically representations of power, manifesting in a variety of formats, text, image, or otherwise. The role of text as a representation on which appropriation operates was not explicitly acknowledged in the exhibition because curatorially and institutionally the exhibition was dedicated to photographic practices. And yet, surprisingly, precisely because the exhibition included such an ambitious number of artists showing a huge amount of early appropriation-based work, there was actually a remarkable amount of appropriated text in the show and in Eklund’s resulting catalogue.

Eklund, when faced with works made with appropriated text, toggled between treating it as incidental, as Crimp had before him, and writing about it in more measured ways. The catalogue includes plenty of moments where Eklund echoes Crimp’s oversights, as with the text in Bauntuch’s *Golden*
Distance which Eklund likened to ‘subtitles’ (p. 101) or Levine’s Sons and Lovers paintings where he also ignored the text printed in their margins – although he did notably reproduce one of the paintings uncropped, depicting the full carrier paper to its edges in his catalogue (p. 110).

That said, Eklund’s exhibition also brought together a number of fascinating, relatively unknown text-based appropriations and there are a number of moments where his writing does, despite his affinity for photography, give appropriated text careful attention. He describes Levine’s Untitled, her artist’s book from 1977, as:

a series of offset prints… in which the artist floats, each on a separate sheet… the generic names we all use to describe the members of the family unit and the rooms in which they move like ghosts, inside communally shared memories of a suburban American childhood. The strength of the works is derived from the play between the tightly controlled deployment of readymade words and the chaos of irreducibly individual memories triggered in each viewer that language can never fully express. (pp. 108, 111)

In this passage, Eklund recognises that the power of this work is located precisely in its text’s familiarity, that it is taken from the world and placed into service in Levine’s artwork, where the ubiquity of its terms allow them to recombine in nearly as many formations as there are readers.

Eklund also dedicates many pages to reproducing and writing about the works Levine produced with Lawler under the collaborative name A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything, describing their ‘enigmatic collaboration’ and explaining how ‘the template for the collaborative activities was a mailing of fancy invitations’ (p. 258) or printed exhibition announcements for events that
were often hypothetical, unrealised or purely speculative. Eklund explains, ‘what they were describing through these theatrical expressions of marginality was a snapshot in negative of the increased glare of the spotlight that reflected the alignment of the art world with the big-business spirit of Reagan’s first term’ (p. 259). Thus the ‘theatrically marginal’ form they used in this picture-obsessed moment was, logically, text.

Eklund also writes compellingly about Lawler’s own work with appropriated text, treating it as central to her practice at the time of Pictures and ultimately formative for her and her peers at the time. For example he describes an early artist’s book by Lawler, *Untitled (Red/Blue)* (1978), which consisted of reproductions of the back of each card in a deck of cards with ‘a phrase identifying its suit and number (such as “Queen of Diamonds”)’ (p. 259), and explains:

> In bringing supposedly supplementary information to the foreground, toying with arrangements, and slyly teasing the viewer-reader about what is ‘behind the back’ of each card, Lawler was handing out a road map for her career to come…. Lawler would eventually become the preeminent spy in the house of art. Lawler’s books are like props or signs for books—and this conception of the object as both itself and the idea of itself became a rolling river for Pictures art. (p. 261)

Eklund similarly positions Lawler as the conscience of the Pictures Generation ‘by bringing the marginal to center stage’ (p. 271). Eklund describes a work Lawler made for Bronx-based alternative art space Fashion Moda on the occasion of *Documenta 7* in 1982, in protest at its abundance of macho, male painters in the place of artists with more critical practices. Lawler created and sold stationery outside of the exhibition which was printed with text appropriated
from Curator Rudy Fuchs heroic, self-aggrandising language about the
exhibition, beginning with ‘Dear ______, How can I describe the exhibition to
you: the exhibition which floats in my mind like a star….’ As with A Picture Is No
Substitute for Anything, Eklund identifies the engagement with text as ‘marginal’
and at the same time iconic of Pictures practices, which points to his underlying,
if unstated, insight that these appropriations of language not only mimicked the
form of critical appropriation his exhibition addresses, but in fact, embodies it.

Figure 18: Louise Lawler, 1982. Documenta 7: A Story. Kassel, West Germany.
Further evidence of Eklund’s surprising and perhaps inadvertent sensitivity to appropriated text is in his writing about Kruger. He describes an exhibition of advertising ephemera and related artworks she curated at The Kitchen in 1982 as exemplary of her practice and ‘the critical practice of quotation’ (p. 245) underlying appropriation. He quotes Kruger’s press release extensively, and then goes on to equate her curatorial approach to that of appropriation itself, describing:

‘magazine and newspaper advertisements, artists’ works, television commercials, posters, “commercial” photography, corporate insignia and public signage.’ ‘The quotational qualities of the words and pictures,’ she continued, ‘remove them and their “originals” from the seemingly natural position within the flow of dominant social directives, into the realm of commentary.’ In mixing up Richard Prince photographs of watch advertisements with the ads themselves (or ones like them), Kruger was extending the critical practice of quotation to the form of the exhibition itself, which precisely did not bracket art off from the rest of the visual lingua Franca of the culture at large. (p. 245)

That Eklund cites Kruger’s own interest in ‘words and pictures’ (emphasis mine) here, and acknowledges that appropriation works quotationally through contiguity and context, and demonstrates his own openness to language—or at the very least a willingness to concede it is a key part of the larger picture. This open-mindedness to text is all the more surprising given the initial framing of his exhibition as ‘an account of one of the most important moments in the gradual integration of photography into the mainstream of contemporary art’ (p. 8).

While Eklund does not identify these engagements with text as central to the practice of appropriation, neither does he deny them a place in an art
historical moment he characterises as having ‘put the image back into art after Conceptualism’s near-total ban on visuality’ (p. 19). Indeed, he made many of these text-based appropriations more visible than ever before in his exhibition and book about photography.

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The limited framing of appropriation as a critical practice with imagery did not happen because of the Pictures exhibition alone; the august body of critical art writing that surrounded it arguably bears the greater responsibility for the widespread understanding of appropriation in its Pictures conception specifically because this writing, much anthologised, studied, and quoted, has been able to circulate more widely than any exhibition could, and has therefore acted as a megaphone for the image-focused understanding of the practice.

Crimp’s conception of appropriation art was as influential as the work itself in defining the new paradigm of postmodernism with which the Pictures Generation is so closely associated. One indication of this broad importance of Crimp’s writing on appropriation is the sheer number of published rereadings and revisions of his ideas, both by himself and others. While Crimp has acknowledged that ‘much would be made of the shifts’ (2015, p. 23) in his essays on the topic over time, these appropriations are, in fact, the imperative of appropriation. Johanna Burton explains that,

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.” (2004, p. 261)

Thus a new generation of art writers, from Burton to Jan Tumlir (2013) to Andrew Durbin (2016) to Marie Shurkus (2006), have noted Crimp’s own willingness to return to this material and they have in some cases revised and built on his arguments further. Still, contemporary writers and artists continue to return to appropriation and *Pictures* largely to rework the terrain of images, while the intrinsic nature of text in appropriation art remains underground. At the same time, it is clear that only in discourse and criticism can new ideas about *Pictures* and appropriation be exhumed since it is only in documentation that the original exhibition still exists; contemporary art writers cannot reconstruct that time, they can only re-interpret it based on its remaining artifacts.

And arguably, in 2017, ‘appropriation’ *is* actually experiencing a renaissance, in the art world and beyond. This is interestingly *not* because of renewed art-historical investment in the term so much as the social justice issues that have arisen in the post-global financial crisis, post-Occupy, post-Obama era of domestic civil rights violations in the United States and the widespread international redistribution of resources into the hands of the 1%. That globalisation has served to concentrate wealth in the hands of increasingly fewer members of the world’s population is no longer a fact, it is a truism, and it is in this climate of financial and social inequality that ‘appropriation’ has appeared in the zeitgeist, evident in popular debates about ‘cultural appropriation’.
In 2017, at the time of this writing, such discussions range from extended philosophical inquiries into who has the right to engage with culturally-specific material (Rankine 2014) to more narrow debates around whether non-Mexicans can open restaurants serving burritos (Carman 2017) to why cornrows, a historically black hairstyle, are increasingly being worn by white celebrities and models with something to promote (Stenberg 2015). That these debates raise the semantic specter of ‘political correctness’ does not mean they are a rehearsal of 90s-era concerns. Debate around ‘cultural appropriation’ today in the United States, for example, is informed specifically by civil rights issues addressed by the Black Lives Matter movement and questions raised by the pop cultural products that hope to acknowledge them, whether for profit or for political purposes.

That these are debates happening in the sphere of social justice does not mean they are removed from the realm of contemporary art, which, as a contextual, often-activist practice, takes such areas as contiguous with its own. Further, many in the art world acknowledge that they, specifically, have a responsibility to participate in this debate, not only as an act of intellectual solidarity and coalition-building but also out of a belief that art, specifically, has something useful to say about appropriation. *Artforum*’s summer 2017 issue included a feature titled ‘Cultural Appropriation: A Roundtable’ motivated by this point exactly and claiming this debate about culture as its own. It opened with the statement:

> Culture is itself an act of citation—of reference, response, and transformation. From Mayan iconography to Warhol, the Pictures generation to *Nanook*, orientalism to punk, art has copied, taken, simulated, re-created, and appropriated all manner of images,
styles, texts, and experiences. When is such movement a form of resistance, and when is it a form of violence? When is speech free, and when does it hurt? Such debates have long raged in the visual arts... (Asega, Bhabha et al. 2017, p. 266)

Despite the allusion to text in the introduction to the roundtable, it is apparent that ‘appropriation’ for its participants still means work with images. For example, artist Ajay Kurian refers to ‘the migrating image’ as a cipher for appropriation (Asega, Bhabha et al. 2017, p. 275) while then- *Artforum* editor Michelle Kuo characterises ‘the movement of images’ as at the heart of the debate around cultural appropriation (Asega, Bhabha et al. 2017, p. 275).

Further, the artworks raised as examples of how broader ideas about cultural appropriation are filtered into art reception also point to the place of images at the center of the panel’s conception of appropriation. One example centered on a recent controversy at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, an exhibition of contemporary American art, where painter Dana Schutz exhibited *Open Casket* (2016), a painting that depicted the mutilated body of historical figure Emmett Till in an open coffin. (Till was a teenager in 1955 when he was tortured and lynched by white men in Mississippi. Till’s mother bravely chose to display his body in an open casket at his funeral, famously saying ‘Let the people see what I’ve seen’.) Schutz, who is a white woman, was criticised in a widely-circulated open letter to the Biennial curators by artist Hannah Black who decried the work writing, ‘it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalised for a long time’ (2017). Others defended Schutz’s work; Roberta Smith writing in *The New York Times*, claimed that the painting addressed the ‘all-too-American subject, that of hateful, corrosive white racism’, asking, ‘Who owns that?’ (2017, p. C1).
The *Artforum* roundtable, addressing the subject, seemed to concur with Smith insofar as they agreed the work should not be destroyed (as Black and others had called for). Kuo took a pragmatic approach to the question of who can use these images explaining, ‘I read the demand “only a person from X race is allowed to speak for that race” as a return to a fantasy of pure subjectivity; the end game is solipsism’ (p. 277), while Gregg Bordowitz expressed a more unresolved position saying that Schutz’s work provoked people to voice ‘various positions [that] formed a constellation of disagreements, each with historical precedents. The questions raised addressed unresolved and thus far seemingly intractable problems around race and representation’ (p. 272).

But even as the panelists articulated a nuanced variety of positions vis-à-vis the appropriation inherent in Schutz’s work, the sheer fact that they (and the earlier critics of her appropriation) identified her painting as a salient example of cultural appropriation in contemporary art practice only reestablishes their collective investment in the term as an operation on found imagery. While there are other visible examples of public outcry about cultural appropriation in the art world that do not involve imagery (for example, widespread consternation over poet and text artist Kenneth Goldsmith’s appropriation of Michael Brown’s autopsy report), the participants in the *Artforum* roundtable nonetheless pointed to instances of appropriated images in their discussion.

They similarly touched on another slightly earlier flashpoint around white artist Kelley Walker’s 2016 exhibition *Direct Drive* at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, which included Walker’s *Black Star Press* (2006), a series of
paintings of police brutality against African Americans, printed in ink and chocolate. While the panel remarked on noteworthy contextual differences between Walker’s exhibition in St. Louis, Missouri (of which the city of Ferguson, genesis of the Black Lives Matter movement, is a suburb) and the biennial in New York (where the city’s cosmopolitanism and racial and ethnic diversity are often taken for granted), the fact remains that the appropriations present in Walker’s works take the form of ‘imagery culled from historical and pop-cultural sources’ (Kuo in Asega, Bhabha et al. 2017, p. 272). So, interestingly, even as the roundtable acknowledged broader *pop-cultural* examples of appropriation that extend far beyond images to include other forms of representation related to personal grooming, music videos, sports logos, and political coalitions to name only a few, discussing a *shifting* definition of appropriation taking place in 2017, they recourse to narrow historical conceptions of the term in the context of *art* regardless.

This roundtable, while obviously not reinforcing my point that textual appropriations are central to the practice, still does a few important things in the larger context of my research. First, it points to how the *Pictures*-era definition of appropriation as an image-based operation persists, not only in the writings of Crimp, but also in the work of other writers of his generation and after. Second, the sheer fact of this roundtable’s existence registers the broad popular awareness of appropriation as a protean and politically fraught strategy working on a variety of media and representations for purposes of resistance, of co-option, of coalition building, of valediction, of criticism, of politics. That the term ‘appropriation’ is becoming relevant outside the confines of art also indicates a
third point underscored by this roundtable, which is the urgency for the art world of reviewing the limitations of art's narrow definition of the practice and the expediency of learning from culture at large. These are meaningful shifts in the concept and targets of appropriation that are happening whether those of us who write about, and therefore frame, art assimilate them into our histories or not. And of course, as the abundance of appropriated text in contemporary art attests, many artists already do acknowledge that appropriation is a tool that operates, for better or for worse, on all regimes of representation. The following two chapters will each look at a very different artist working with appropriation in ways that challenge the continued intransigence of this narrow frame for appropriation art.
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Chapter 6: Reframing The Work of Rirkrit Tiravanija

What might we think of as iconic of appropriation art 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? For example, where would appropriation art ‘be’ today (in terms of its recognised applications, its history, its politics) if Levine’s *Untitled*, her 1977 artist’s book of loose-leaf pages describing domestic scenes, became the ‘thumbnail’ for her practice instead of her rephotography of the works of famous men? How would appropriation art be regarded today if Richard Prince’s joke paintings replaced his Marlboro men as icons of appropriation art? What other artworks by such already canonised appropriation artists might be re-evaluated and brought to the center of their oeuvres?

Then, working from the assumption that text is a fundamental element in appropriation art, historically located at the heart of practices already associated closely with appropriation art, a number of further questions arise: Which *other* artists’ practices, of the *Pictures*-era and today, should be associated with appropriation art, taking engagement with appropriated language as a qualifying criterion? What other artworks by artists generally outside the discursive frame for appropriation art would become recognised as exemplary of the practice? What orthodoxies of art history and practice could be undone?

Appropriation art, as theorised 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’ (Owens 2002, p. 68), located primarily in the medium of photography. The imperative for viewing appropriation art through a broader frame, one that reaches beyond its traditional application to photographic and feminist approaches, is clear; an expanded frame for appropriation art necessarily allows for a greater diversity of hegemonies to be addressed and political positions to be voiced. As the post-appropriation art practices of the 1990s and 21st century show, as a practice appropriation is able to explore what is at stake in many types of representations. And not a moment too soon; at a time when appropriation art is generally taken for granted as ‘a mainstay of visual art since the mid-twentieth century’ (Misek 2015, p. 133), its ongoing relevance as a timely tool for contemporary political critique is necessarily in crisis.

Appropriation is used by a great diversity of contemporary artists working in contexts ranging from the most stereotypical and staid (photography, painting, sculpture, etc.) to the most innovative, interdisciplinary, and literally of-the-moment (ephemeral online artworks, interactive performances, virtual reality ‘installations’, and so on). Yet the discourse surrounding appropriation has remained strangely suspended in time, specifically the postmodern moment of the late 1970s and early 80s. While contemporary artists with practices and backgrounds as differing as Wangechi Mutu, Cory Arcangel, Brendan Fernandes, Richard Bell, Imants Tillers and Park MacArthur are using appropriation, a proliferation and diversity that belies the limitations of the discourse, the writing about appropriation in art has struggled to keep pace and treat it as a contemporary, rather than postmodern-specific, mode. Critical
discourse today tends to write off appropriation as ‘commonplace’ (Harren 2016) as a semantic shorthand to prevent having to re-examine its operations. But it is appropriation’s very ubiquity in a disparate field of practices that should signal the need to look at it again. The continued dominance in artworld discourse of theory developed around Pictures leads appropriation to still be treated in such a hegemonic manner, allowing the persistent flourishing of its variants, including its use of text, to go unremarked.

In an effort to reconsider what might more accurately be thought of as representative of appropriation art today, in this and the following chapter I will look at two contemporary artists’ practices that appropriate text in ways that underscore or parallel the other operations in their works. This chapter will look at works by Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, while chapter 6 will consider the work of American photographer Anne Collier. That these artists’ oeuvres are more often considered iconic of other processes they employ highlights just how limited the discourse about appropriation in art continues to be. While there are any number of artists using appropriated text for distinct, and distinctly contemporary, political ends, I have chosen these two specifically because the obvious dissimilarity of their practices provide productively far-flung coordinates for starting to plot a new, expanded map of appropriation art’s activities.

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Rirkrit Tiravanija is perhaps best known as the standard-bearer for relational aesthetics, in part due to his work appearing on the cover of curator
Nicolas 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’ (2002, p. 26) nature of such interactive art practices. Bourriaud also posits relational artworks as a direct rejection of the critical focus on representation up until that point, suggesting that relational practices take on the ‘most burning issue to do with art today: is it still possible to generate relationships with the world, in a practical field art-history traditionally earmarked for their “representation”? ’ (p. 9).

Bourriaud specifically identified the interactivity of Tiravanija’s practice as exemplary of contemporary art practices in which ‘the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist’ (p. 13). For Bourriaud, this pragmatism is what is radical about these artworks because, in any context, ‘the relationship between people, as symbolised by goods or replaced by them, and signposted by logos, has to take on extreme and clandestine forms, if it is to dodge the empire of predictability’ (p. 9). According to Bourriaud, relational work such as Tiravanija’s produces these ‘hands-on utopias’ (p. 9) in which free relations may be possible.

Bourriaud’s claims for Tiravanija’s work became so overdetermining that the vast majority of writing on his work (this included) either mentions Bourriaud and the term ‘relational aesthetics’ explicitly (see, for example, Berardini 2007; Galligan 2009; p. 75; Lee, p. 35) or describes the artwork using Bourriaud-favored shorthands such as ‘utopian’ (Kraynak 2010, p. 17; Welch 2012, p. 99),
‘companionable’ (Downey 2007, p. 271) or ‘generous’ (Decter 2011, p. 282; Kraynak 1998, p. 29). Relational aesthetics was further established as the theoretical frame for Tiravanija’s work when, two years after Bourriaud’s text was translated in English, Claire Bishop published her own influential essay on the topic, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, in the pages of October.

Bishop’s text functions both as a criticism of Bourriaud’s book and a secondhand critique of the work Bourriaud describes, since she is essentially taking issue with those works as characterised by Bourriaud. Liam Gillick, the only artist other than Tiravanija on which Bishop focuses her critique, famously excoriated Bishop (and October) for this armchair criticism, writing that in her essay ‘a set of artists has been shoehorned into a battle about intellectual territory that merely compounds the problems inherent in Relational Aesthetics’ (Gillick & Bishop 2006, p. 97), and that Bishop further arms these artists for this metaphorical battle with words and concepts that are not their own. Gillick explains, ‘Bishop extensively quotes museum guides, pamphlets, and mainstream art criticism in relation to Tiravanija and me, as if these reflect our ideas and ideology’ (p. 98). Ironically the highly public inter-critic tussle over accuracy and relevance between Bourriaud and Bishop, and later Bishop and Gillick, only further confirmed relational aesthetics as the lens through which art around the turn of the millennium would be viewed.

While the tale of critical infighting surrounding relational aesthetics may seem tangential to my fundamental questions about Tiravanija’s use of appropriated text, it is important to consider because it in some ways echoes my earlier argument about how Crimp, another curator/writer, created a frame
that became so critically overdetermining for certain practices that it persists in framing them even today. The function of such critical infighting (in the case of Bourriaud and Bishop) as much as the outright adoption of a critical perspective (in the case of the popularisation of Crimp’s ideas about appropriation) points to how the sheer repetition of ideas works to establish them and how, once established, these ideas become shorthands, even jargon, in critical writing, used to evade further scrutiny.

That such critical frames can remain so hegemonic, even as globalisation brings increasingly diverse art practices into view, speaks to the value of looking again at established critical frames that might otherwise seem dated or worth retiring. As much as Bourriaud used his introduction of *Relational Aesthetics* to warn against critics using their writing as a platform for ‘drawing up an inventory of yesterday’s concerns, the better to lament the fact of not getting any answers’ (p. 7), such revisions can, in fact, move debate forward and not back.

For example, Bishop’s essay does contain insights into the political stakes of relational work, pointing out that Bourriaud framed these interactive practices as:

superior to optical contemplation of an object, which is assumed to be passive and disengaged, because the work of art is a ‘social form’ capable of producing positive human relationships. As a consequence, Bourriaud presumes the work is automatically political in implication and emancipatory in effect. (p. 62)

Holding these relational works up to this standard, Bishop identifies a number of flaws in Bourriaud’s argument, questioning for example his focus on the interactive structure of the work as its source of meaning rather than the content
contained within it, and pointing out that ‘what Tiravanija cooks, how and for whom, are less important to Bourriaud than the fact he gives away the results of his cooking for free’ (p. 64). This question of who gets to participate in the ‘micro-communities’ (Bourriaud 2002, p. 58) so celebrated by Bourriaud is at the heart of Bishop’s critique for whom ‘relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience’ (p. 54) for its perceived success.

But this political fault-line in relational work is, in fact, the focus of much of Tiravanija’s practice. While the ‘hospitality’ (Hirsch 2011, p. 79) frequently ascribed to Tiravanija and his work tends to overshadow the more critical aspect of his practice, he most often uses appropriation to indirectly point to unacknowledged power dynamics. Tiravanija’s longtime dealer, Gavin Brown, characterises Tiravanija’s practice not by its amiability, but by its ‘melancholia’ (Tiravanija 1999, p. 72), explaining:

Rirkrit’s story seems well known: Shit-eating grin and a friend to all. His name and practice have become so naturally ubiquitous that one doesn’t even question what occupied the historical space before him. It’s so familiar and comfortable. Rice & curry—feels good in the tummy. But is that really the story here? Of course there is still a heartening thrill in eating a meal in a gallery. One has that elusive real moment. But in the end I always leave Rirkrit’s work feeling depressed. Where was the hope and feeling of community? (Tiravanija 1999, p. 72)

Brown’s discomfort with the “‘friendship” culture’ (Bourriaud 2002, p. 32) so many writers link to Tiravanija’s practice belies the authoritarian aspect of Tiravanija’s constructed situations, in which the viewer is, by definition, in the artist’s control. Brown reminds us that ‘in the end we are within his structure, his
world—a frame generally made from the cheapest plywood’ (p. 72). In short, the ‘equality’ (Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster quoted in Bourriaud, Schneider et al. 2005, p. 13) that characterises relational work for some belies the circumscribing hierarchy and artifice around it.

For example, Tiravanija’s seminal *untitled (pad thai)* (1990) saw the artist’s work, installed in the smaller project space of the Paula Allen Gallery in New York, mistaken for catering in support of the main exhibition in the type of politically-charged misreading that the artist’s work often cultivates. His *untitled (shall we dance?)* from 1993, consisted of a room in New York’s 303 Gallery installed with a record player, a single record (the soundtrack from *The King and I*) and the artist himself. When visitors entered the room, Tiravanija would put on the song ‘Shall We Dance?’ and invite them to join him in a waltz, essentially recreating a scene from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical and immediately implicating them in the absurdly revisionist historical romance between Gertrude Lawrence as ‘an English school teacher’ and Yul Brenner in blackface as ‘the “uncivilized” Siamese King’ (Record sleeve from Hammerstein & Rogers 1956).

Critic Raimar Stange points to this subversive, post-colonial critique inherent in Tiravanija’s 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’ (2012). Indeed it is appropriation, in this case transplanting Thai cooking, or Orientalist fictions, into the gallery that effectively sets the stage for Tiravanija’s indirect political
critique, one that depends on the viewers’ interactions, rather than the artist’s voice, to become clear.

And, for Tiravanija, these ‘real questions’ are often explored with language. For example Tiravanija’s two- and three-dimensional works often present appropriated text, reproducing everything from newspaper headlines to popular slogans to passports to indirectly express disturbing political realities. For example, his 2003 text painting *untitled (less oil more courage)*, which the artist first exhibited in that year’s Venice Biennale, 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. (2003)

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 the kind of authorial relativism more often ascribed to the
appropriations of Levine, Brauntuch, and others of the Pictures Generation. It is
also noteworthy, and symptomatic of wider critical oversight of the
fundamentally aesthetic nature of text, that Bell got it so wrong, inverting her
description of the physical work calling it black letters on a white canvas when
the opposite is true, a difference that is literally black and white.

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, 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.

Tiravanija also mobilises appropriated text by using language from, and the material of, the newspaper. The political content of the newspaper frequently figures prominently in his work, from his ongoing graphite on paper ‘demonstration drawings’ reproducing images of political demonstrations taken from the *International Herald Tribune* and hand-drawn by various assistants to his text paintings presented on canvases covered in newspaper spreads. One early version of such text paintings is a poster Tiravanija made in collaboration with sculptor Mark di Suvero, created as a complement to their collaborative *Peace Tower* (2006) installation in that year’s Whitney Biennial. The poster was distributed as a fold out component of the biennial’s catalogue and presents a
front page of *The Los Angeles Free Press* newspaper from 1966, which describes preparations for the original Peace Tower, a massive public artwork originally created by di Suvero and other artists in Los Angeles to protest the war in Vietnam. Over this found newspaper describing the original artwork he and di Suvero have recreated, Tiravanija has stenciled the text ‘COME TOGETHER’, in white letters that disappear into the pale ground of the newsprint.

Figure 21: Rirkrit Tiravanija and Mark di Suvero, 2006, Untitled foldout for catalogue for 2006 Whitney Biennial.
Like many appropriations of the *Pictures*-era, the appropriated ‘COME TOGETHER’ text has a long chain of references. Art historian John Tain explains:

the textual intervention is identifiable as Tiravanija’s from both the layout and the slogan form, similar to that of other pieces…. And yet, of course, we would also recognize the words not as Tiravanija’s at all, but taken from John Lennon’s lyrics for the Beatles song of the same name (which itself was inspired in turn by Timothy Leary’s 1969 gubernatorial campaign against Ronald Reagan). (2013, p. 179)

One consequence of the phrase’s familiarity is that it appears simple, a platitude from the past reappearing in the present. But the historical specificity of these 60s era pop cultural references (the original peace tower in Watts, John Lennon, Californian culture-clash politics) introduced into the milieu of post 9/11 New York City (highly self-aware as a site, and justification, for violence—including as the site of Lennon’s own assassination) resonate with a complex warning.

Often making multiple paintings of the same slogan, Tiravanija is able to amplify these resonances over time, recontextualising the recurring appropriated texts into new political dialogues depending on the backing newspaper. For example, his painting *untitled (the days of this society is numbered/September 21, 2009)* (2009) presents spreads from the September 21\textsuperscript{st}, 2009 edition of *The New York Times*, painted over with an orange text written in the same uppercase Helvetica stencil typeface used in *untitled (less oil more courage)*, the Whitney Biennial fold-out and many of his other text-based works. In this case, the painted text is a clumsy translation of a quote from Guy Debord, leader of the Situationist International and author of *Society*
of the Spectacle. The dual appropriation of the warning of the French post-war political theorist with the contemporary American newspaper headlines combines to create an atmosphere of post-globalised dread. The chaotic background is dominated visually by the colorful presence of advertisements for airlines, men’s department stores, and expensive jewelry cheering consumption in the wake of the global financial crisis, while the more sober tones of the editorial content recede into the background. Against this, Debord’s quote reads as an explicit damnation of our unquestioning, passive acceptance of consumer culture, made all the more urgent for its massive orange presence; as tall as a person, the canvas overwhelms the viewer.

Figure 22: Rirkrit Tiravanija, 2009, *untitled (the days of this society is numbered/September 21, 2009).*
By contrast another variant of the work, *untitled (the days of this society is numbered/December 7, 2012)* (2014), pairs the same text appropriated from Debord painted over a Thai paper from 2012 detailing the Thai king’s illness. While the overall effect of this work to earlier (and subsequent) versions is obviously related (newspaper backgrounds, same painted phrase, same ‘default’ typeface), the overall signification of the work is changed through the implication of Thai national politics, the significantly more blue hue to the overall color of the newspaper background, the translucent black (opposed to solid orange) paint, and also the changed line breaks of the phrase itself. While the earlier version reads, ‘THE/ DAYS/ OF/ THIS/ SOCIETY/ IS/ NUMBERED’, the
later one reads, ‘THE/ DAYS/ OF/ THIS/ SOCIETY/ IS NUMBERED’, letting ‘is’ and ‘numbered’ settle together at the bottom of the canvas. Whether this change in line breaks communicates inadvertent bad planning by the artist, a formal decision about the weighting of the text to the bottom of the canvas, or a linguistic choice to let the fatalistic verdict stand alone, the small variations in form have large repercussions on the content.

Further in the context of the ongoing, iterative nature of this work with the same phrase reproduced over the course of many canvases and prints, the ‘is numbered’ portion of the phrase also becomes self-referential, alluding to the inner-workings of art editions as well as the potentiality of the luxury market itself. This art-world institutional critique further points to the multivalent signification of the phrase in the various architectures it is deployed, re-signifying not only based on the newspapers which bear it, but also in respect to the gallery or collection wall on which it hangs.

These contextual slippages are not the only mix-ups present in this work. Quentin Bajac, a French curator working at the Museum of Modern Art, which owns untitled (the days of this society is numbered/December 7, 2012), explains of the Debord reference that, ‘it mistranslates it, in bad international English that I and a lot of people are practicing’ (Battaglia 2015). This issue of translation, specifically as it relates to globalisation and the internationalism of the art world, is one that Tiravanija repeatedly takes up from the outset of his practice, explaining that when he started making art, ‘it was all about language and identity’ (Bajo & Carey 2004). In that, Tiravanija’s work is clearly informed by his childhood. Born in Argentina to Thai parents (his father was a diplomat,
his mother an oral surgeon), Tiravanija was schooled in Thailand, the US and Canada. He remains peripatetic and polyglot, traveling and moving between homes frequently, with studios in Bangkok, New York and Berlin. He has referred to his international upbringing as formative for his work, explaining in an interview in 2004 that, ‘all the work that I have ever made is about the position I am in the Western world, which I was trying to understand’ (Bajo & Carey).

Tiravanija’s work therefore evinces particular, personal insights into the broader politics of translation and globalisation, both in the art world specifically and beyond, frequently appropriating text to bring unlikely cultural elisions into view. In Tiravanija’s text-paintings and elsewhere, linguistic slip-ups and misfires recur with some regularity. For example, one component of his 2011 exhibition, *Fear Eats the Soul* at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in New York, was a t-shirt shop silk-screening white t-shirts with various awkwardly constructed phrases immortalising such cultural collisions. For $20, visitors could order a shirt screenprinted with a phrase of their choice, ranging from the unlikely (‘MAKE A MONKEY OUT OF CLAY’) to the uncomfortable (‘IRAN IRAQ IKEA I AM BUSY’) to the hostile (‘WE DON’T MIX’) to the outright racist (‘ASIANS MUST EAT RICE’).

Tiravanija’s linguistic appropriations point to the ways in which speech is power, and the ways such elisions expose the assumptions that are embedded within its constituent parts. Unlike the appropriations of the 70s and 80s with their implied critique of authorship, (‘I am not interested in authorship’, Tiravanija has attested (Stange)) Tiravanija’s appropriations of racist language,
such as his ‘ASIANS MUST EAT RICE’, do so not so much interrogate the origins of such language, but instead put these words in others’ mouths (and on their bodies), effectively mobilising these viewer-participants into an ironic army of post-colonial political critique for the Anthropocene age. In other words, Tiravanija’s appropriated texts operate differently than those texts appropriated in Pictures-era artworks, rejecting appropriation that is based on ‘the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like voice to alter conditions forged in history’ (Hong).

Instead, in cases such as his reinscription of racist tropes onto the bodies of paying participants, Tiravanija appropriates to reanimate, then repossess.

While art theory has thus far had little to say about the operations of appropriated language in contemporary art, literary theory addresses the politics of appropriated language explicitly in contemporary writing on conceptual poetry, meaning practices that use found language to construct a text that ‘is entirely “unoriginal” and nevertheless qualifies as poetry’ (Perloff 2010, p. 10). Increasingly such framings of conceptual poetry as inherently radical have been challenged by poets of color, for whom appropriation is too often used simply as a ‘formalist white-gaze gesture’ (Keene) that appropriates the innovations of artists of color and is thus borne out of ignorance and race-based entitlement.

Korean-American poet Cathy Park Hong’s identifies ‘a new movement in American poetry, a movement galvanized by the activism of Black Lives Matter, spearheaded by writers of color’ (2014). She characterises this ‘new movement’ as operating in two ways, either by ‘fueling a raw politics into personal lyric’, or
by ‘redefining’ avant-garde appropriation (Hong 2014). Hong writes that such poets are making writing that is multivalent in its forms and its references, increasingly:

minstrelized, digitalized, theatricalized artifice, speaking in a mélange of offshoots, with multiple entryways and exits through the soaring use of aberrant vernaculars. The form is code-switching: code-switching between languages, between Englishes, between genres, between races, between bodies. (2014)

This is the code-switching evidenced by Tiravanija’s texts, and framed by his efforts to understand his upbringing between Thailand and the Americas where, he explains, he was ‘growing up in this contemporary modern structure to be fragmented, influenced, and subconsciously colonized. So all the things I have been doing are about getting myself back’ (Bajo & Carey 2004). His appropriation of language is therefore an act of reclamation, using texts that are specifically as ‘fragmented’, ‘colonized’, and contingent as Tiravanija’s multilingualism itself.

This is the hybridity that characterises much of Tiravanija’s appropriated texts, which uses such ‘code-switching’ not to critique originality and authorship, about who is speaking now, but to reintroduce questions about who is being heard. Tiravanija explains that rather than wanting to explore authorship as originating from a single, monolithic voice, ‘I am interested in the possibilities that can be arrived at when people put their ideas together. There are ideas that have been released into the world of culture that I find important to quote, re-present or re-address’ (Stange).

Yet Tiravanija does not see this polyphony of voice as inherently utopian, explaining that, ironically, the collectivity of his work, so often characterised as
‘emancipatory’ (Martin 2007, p. 383), was actually supposed to spur opposing thoughts of responsibility in the viewer:

When I started to cook and serve food… I quickly realised that viewers (readers, critics) were interpreting the work as performance in a Beuysian sense, as a staged situation, which meant that viewers had a certain distance to it. I felt that this distance represented the gap in Western thought between ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ which I needed to attack and dismantle – the ‘doubt’ about the author, or the ‘doubt’ about the subject’s position or positioning. So, in order to confuse the positions, I implicated the viewer.

(Stange)

As in many of the appropriated elements of his works, the language Tiravanija re-presents to the viewer is not specifically his (or anyone’s), but all of ours together, for which we are each accountable.

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That Tiravanija is not commonly called an appropriation artist, or a text artist, exposes the critical biases towards other, perceived-to-be more ‘contemporary’, theoretical frameworks. While he is most certainly an accomplished creator of participatory, immaterial works, the relational import of his practice overshadows the other imperatives and operations at work in his practice. He is increasingly exhibiting fabricated static objects (sculptures, prints, paintings, videos, drawings, etc.), as indeed he has always done, while the more relational, interactive installations are, if not rarer, at least often complemented or outnumbered by traditional works and editions in a given
exhibition. In short, his works take on many guises, and only some of them are relational.

This single-minded focus by art writers on relational aesthetics as the cardinal theoretical frame for Tiravanija’s notably diverse practice also overlooks the historical richness of relational practices themselves. This is perhaps partly Bourriaud’s doing, as in *Relational Aesthetics* he went out of his way to position the practices he was describing as ahistorical and completely divorced from precedent, writing, ‘we find ourselves, with relational artists, in the presence of a group of people who, for the first time since the appearance of Conceptual Art in the mid sixties, in no way draw sustenance from any reinterpretation of this or that past aesthetic movement’ (p. 44). This characterisation is often contested by other writers (Bishop 2004; Chong 2005; Tain 2013), and Bourriaud also distanced himself from it four years later in his subsequent book *Postproduction*.

In this ‘continuation’ (Bourriaud, Schneider et al. 2005, p. 7) of his arguments commenced in *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud shifts to explicitly argue for relational aesthetics’ fundamental ties to historical forms, including appropriation:

All these artistic practices, although formally heterogenous, have in common the recourse to *already produced* forms. They testify to a willingness to inscribe the work of art within a network of signs and significations, instead of considering it an autonomous or original form. (p. 10)

He goes on to argue that in relational aesthetics’ taking on the constructs of existing social environments:
use is an act of micropirating that constitutes postproduction…. Starting with the language imposed upon us (the system of production), we construct our own sentences (acts of everyday life), thereby reappropriating for ourselves, through these clandestine microbricolages, the last word in the productive chain…. Appropriation is indeed the first stage of postproduction. (pp. 18-19)

Thus Bourriaud presents postproduction as, literally and figuratively, a long chain of mixed-metaphors set in motion by appropriation. He no longer discusses relational aesthetics as a stand-alone artistic practice but presents it instead as one that is fundamentally partnered with appropriation.

In *Postproduction* Bourriaud also makes a case about the feminist politics of such appropriations in relational work, echoing Craig Owens’ emphasis on appropriation art’s attack on authorship as one on patriarchy itself, saying:

> It is a matter of seizing all the codes of the culture, all the forms of everyday life, the works of the global patrimony, and making them function. To learn how to use forms, as the artists in question invite us to do, is above all to know how to make them one’s own, to inhabit them. (p. 12)

Bourriaud’s recourse to ‘codes’ here also evokes Crimp’s emphasis on semiotics as a means of understanding appropriative practices. Bourriaud even goes so far as to refer to artists working in these ways as “semionauts” who produce original pathways through signs… [and] imagines the links, the likely relations between disparate sites’ (p. 12). Bourriaud’s use of semiotic models for understanding how appropriation operates in the relational practices of today points not only to the outstanding, continued influence of Crimp, Owens and others’ writing on appropriation in the *Pictures*-era but also indicates, again, the fundamental place of language in appropriation art.
Tiravanija’s appropriations also incorporate historical references beyond those texts from politics and media considered above, as he borrows widely from the worlds of film, fashion, and literature, as well as architecture. Works by noted architects including Philip Johnson, Friedrich Kiesler, R. M. Schindler and others appear throughout his practice. Tain explains that, ‘in reclaiming these [architectural] pieces, and “animating” the artwork as a site for the building of social relations, Tiravanija cannily transforms the act of institutional critique from something that the artist reveals into something in which the viewer participates directly’ (2013, p. 178).

This transformation of something historically iconic into something with use value is equally true of his textual appropriations, which ‘reclaim’ certain language and make the viewer interpret or, in other words, use it. His text works therefore operate as a bridge between the language’s original significance and its multiplicity of present-day readings as they shift and change for each reader: the foundations laid by the artist, its connections made by the viewer. It is this implication of the viewer’s individual subjectivity (her assumptions, her politics, her references) that is precisely the innovation of Tiravanija’s work; the interactivity of the work makes each individual critically responsible for her own unique reading. While this may appear ‘sociable’ (Bourriaud 2002, p. 28) to some, in the end each viewer is simply alone in the crowd.

Tiravanija’s work with appropriated language therefore tells the viewer, in direct terms, what the other, more ephemeral or elliptical gestures of his practice describe. Unlike the work of the *Pictures* artists, his work isn’t about contesting the authority of authorship so much as it points to how speech is not
singular but plural, and that the plurality is not inherently utopian, just as the
interactivity of language, the way it circulates from one mouth or context to the
next, does not make it inherently democratic. While the appropriation artists of
the postmodern era envisioned appropriation as ‘as a tactic of the
counterculture—in art, but also in a larger counterculture encompassing leftwing
liberation struggles over race, gender, [and] sexuality’ (Asega, Bhabha et al.
2017, p. 269), seeing their gesture as part of a bigger counterhegemonic social
strategy, Tiravanija’s appropriations point to how our experience of such
coalitions (as of language) is distinctly subjective and individual, even as we
operate as part of a larger whole.
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Chapter 7: Reframing the Work of Anne Collier

Unlike Rirkrit Tiravanija’s work and its emphasis on individual readings of culture described in the prior chapter, American photographer Anne Collier’s work highlights what we share as evidenced in our widely recognised cultural stereotypes. In a practice that is essentially quotational, Collier re-presents tropes of photography and self-representation in order to raise questions about their persistence in pop culture. Her work consists of two primary lines of inquiry, which tend to intersect: photographic documentation of found printed matter and oblique self-portraits. While she is known for the former (images of magazines spreads, tourist brochures, the casings of unspooled cassette tapes and other ephemera usually shot orthogonally in the studio), her early work consisted of self-portraits shot from such a distance that she was nearly invisible within a broader landscape. Collier describes her interest at the time in making ‘a self portrait that was somehow both personal and universal… [where] the figure acted more as a stand in, or surrogate, rather than as an actual representation of an identifiable person, i.e. the artist’ (Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 11). Her ongoing interest in self-portraits and self-portraiture remains evident in much of the ephemera she selects (often images of female photographers, or women posed to look like photographers) to photograph in the former mode.

Collier’s work is, in comparison with Tiravanija’s, more directly engaged with the legacy of Crimp’s Pictures exhibition. Her photographs, described as
‘pictures of pictures’ (Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 13), often echo works from the *Pictures* exhibition, both through their photographic decontextualisations of found printed matter from the 70s and 80s (generally photographed against white backgrounds in her studio), and through the type of depicted ephemera, which include record sleeves, advertisements, books, and magazine covers, all popular culture formats favored by the *Pictures* artists themselves. 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-lifes in that they are typically straightforward depictions of existing objects’ (Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 13). Thus Collier evokes the legacy of appropriation even as she specifically distances her own work from the postmodern frame for its critique of authorship.

While Collier has distanced her practice from the appropriation label she does, in fact, collect and recontextualise unadulterated found content in a deadpan manner strikingly similar to Sherrie Levine, the ur-appropriationist, who ‘took her photographs from photographs already in the chain… already duplicated—shot and screened and printed’ (Singerman 2012, p. 64). Collier’s practice is similarly engaged with found *printed* images as they circulate in the cast-off artifacts of another age.

However, Collier’s photographs have an ambivalent relationship to Levine’s. On the one hand, they are, unlike Levine’s, still lifes because her images are not cropped to the perimeter of the originals she documents but include the blandly uninformative backdrop of her shooting table. Art critic Dan Fox explains that ‘these aren’t works of appropriation, since they don’t wear the
cloak of the image they depict—they're not trying to pass themselves off as anything other than photographs of objects that carry photographs’ (2010, p. 92). Thus recontextualisation works differently in works by Collier and Levine; Levine’s images, by masquerading as originals, interrogate authority, both as it is ascribed to an author and to a context, while Collier’s, disclosing their found-
ness by revealing their edges and objecthood (as things in space), address the circulation of images, of typologies of images.

On the other hand, Collier and Levine alike trade on their works’ taciturnity. Collier explains, ‘I’m interested in how an image of an object which has been muted via photography can perhaps operate in a more open-ended way than the object itself’ (Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 14). And while photography can indeed ‘mute’ an object by presenting it as an image, such silencing gestures are a characteristic of appropriation as well, something that is demonstrated by the frequent use of synonyms for ‘unspeaking’ that are deployed by writers when considering Levine’s work; in describing Levine’s Sons and Lovers (1976-77), Crimp refers to the work’s ‘dumb repetition of images’ (1977, p. 18) while Johanna Burton describing the same work writes, ‘here, mutely, shapes that clearly approximated a generic couple, a dog, and the familiar profiles of a number of American presidents took on the barest whiff of narrative’ (2012, p. 21).

This ambivalent relationship with Levine’s work and that of the Pictures Generation aesthetic more generally means that Collier’s work never quite escapes their aura even as she tries to distance her work from their shadow. Because her work takes its meaning from coming after Levine, and as we shall
see after or in the wake of other images, she makes temporality a central concern of her practice.

Through their ‘muting’ and recontextualising gesture, Collier’s photographs function as art historical palimpsests, their layers vibrating between their respective presents and the anachronistic value systems through which they are read. Collier places pop-cultural ephemera from the past into circulation again in the context of the contemporary art-world’s present, layering the reticent rephotography of Levine and 70s-era critiques of the gaze with a nostalgic regard for artifacts of the Pictures-era and an of-the-moment awareness of what feels relevant, still, in these historical images.

Further, as with the layering of multiple modes of representation that characterise appropriative practices, Collier’s photographs also engage text alongside images to explore the circulation (and thus politics) of image construction. The found text in Collier’s photographs often acts as a form of institutional critique, citing additional art-historical references appearing in ‘vernacular manifestations of photographic imagery’ (Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 13) to point to the uneven distribution of certain types of contemporary images.
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. 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. (1980, pp. 98-99)

Thus Collier, depicting Weston’s nude in a reproduction that predates Levine’s own appropriation, inserts herself anachronically 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 commercialisation of art imagery enabling these anachronistic readings in the first place, curating and disseminating work by promotional potential rather than art-historical logic.

This anachronistic reading of found image against found text can also be seen in Collier’s ongoing Woman With a Camera series (beginning in 2006). This series presents a variety of found photographs of women with cameras, often posing as if they themselves are photographers. Collier presents these images contextualised in their disseminating formats (a postcard presented as a diptych showing its front and back sides, editorial content in a magazine spread, and so forth). Many of these photos include text as part of the overall image (as headlines, as ad copy, as commercial branding, etc.) and it is the recontextualising of these taglines into the social and political milieu of the 21st century that renders Collier’s photographs unequivocally absurd.
As described in chapter 3, Rosalind Krauss has written that from its outset photography often depicted text to acknowledge that ‘capturing and holding the transient experience, recording the present and storing it up against the future’ (1982, p. 95), but that it is not a trait unique to photography. Rather, it is a representational mode shared with writing. According to Krauss, this makes the seepage of language into photographs only natural. While Krauss used examples of Weimar-era photography, often photographs of hands in the act of writing, to illustrate her point, her observation remains no less true today (or in the anachronistic ‘today’ of Collier’s found content).

Figure 25: Anne Collier, 2013, *The Women Behind The Lens* (Tipper Gore).
Text is present throughout Collier’s practice, but is perhaps most critical in its place in her *Woman With A Camera* series. For example, in her *The Women Behind The Lens (Tipper Gore)* from 2013, Collier reproduces an article in the magazine *American Photo*, which itself reproduces a self-portrait, Alma Lavenson’s 1932 *Self Portrait (Hands)*, which is shot into a mirror, framed with the photographer’s hands cradling the lens and camera body, her body behind it obscured in black. This is a self-portrait where the self is synecdotally represented only by the subject’s hands—*and* her camera—echoing Krauss’ argument that such images propose the camera as an extension of the body, ‘a surrogate hand’ (1982, p. 93) authoring another form of writing. The text surrounding this image, written by the wife of a former American Vice President, a ‘Second Lady’ in political parlance, herself a photojournalist and photographer, makes a feminist argument for the historic role of photography in giving women otherwise ‘barred from the halls of power and the channels of discourse’ a form of ‘expression and communication’, in other words, by making them authors.

The camera as a surrogate for the body is also exploited by other Collier works in the series, including *Woman With Cameras #1* and *Woman With Cameras #2*, both 2012, which metonymically elide possession of the camera with possession of the nude behind it, made all the more laughably explicit by the headline accompanying the image. ‘CONTAX RTS. RTS SPELLS S-E-X’, purrs the editorial copy, written across a reclining female nude in *Woman with Cameras #1*. The text in this image, ostensibly taking the form of a camera review, makes Collier’s content feel especially dated and thus serves a critical
role in the overall operation of her work with temporality, tracing photographic tropes (aspiration, desire) through time.

Figure 26: Anne Collier, 2012, Woman With Cameras #1.

Figure 27: Anne Collier, 2012, Woman With Cameras #2, 2012.
With the review’s slowly unfolding 4 page-spread design, engineered to withhold the satisfaction of the whole image over the course of a suspense-building page-turn, this camera review mimics the brilliant, gratification-delaying design of the pornographic centerfold, an extraordinarily simple but elegant solution to a complex problem posed at the intersection of desire and design. In his 1978 essay ‘Photography en abyme’ Owens likens the folding gesture to that of a mirror used in a photograph, which returns the gaze to itself. He writes that when mirrors are used or depicted in photographs, the images are no longer read ‘as imprints of the real, [telling the viewer about something] external to the image’ (p. 73), and that instead the photograph reveals its constitutional ‘doubling’ or ‘duplication, a literal folding back of the photograph upon itself’ (p. 74).

In Woman With Cameras #1 and Woman With Cameras #2, the language present in Collier’s images does not function, as it once did in the magazine, to tell the viewer about the cameras; in Collier’s image the text tells the viewer something about the photograph, and the shifting politics that underwrite its art historical and pop cultural references.

The doubling back on itself of Collier’s images, her photographs of photographs, points to the ways in which the representations Collier presents to us have changed over time, measuring the shift between their initial receptions and their current readings. In the vacant space in these chronologies, the viewer can read the changing mores between then and now, both in the choices of their imagery and in the parsing of their texts. But, as with the appropriation-based artworks of the Pictures-era, and Tiravanija’s contemporary
appropriations, Collier’s work with found text is similarly overshadowed by other aspects of her practice even as the texts in Collier’s works amplify her anachronic critique, allowing her criticism of the persisting popularity of certain cultural clichés to be heard.

This criticism is partly feminist, because her work trades on the familiarity of this kind of content (reclining nudes, women with cameras, female self-portraitists—actual or simulated) in order to point to how the appeal of these tropes endures, as well as how critical discourse has recuperated them as symbols of female agency, situating ‘the camera as both a tool in the construction of female vulnerability and a means by which to overcome it’ (Darling & Iles 2014, p. 22). For example, a number of the photographs in Collier’s Woman With A Camera series show women holding cameras posed to look as if they were shooting self-portraits in a mirror. Collier thus conjures the selfie out of this anachronistic evidence, debunking the assumptions about the epochal uniqueness of selfies so often discussed as specific to our time and cellphone technologies.

Collier also takes up representations of agency and subjecthood, even when the depicted ephemera do not include photography at all. For example, the texts that her photos document often explicitly question how a life is described. Collier’s Questions series from 2011 depicts an open file folder containing a few well-worn pages of questions, each page printed on a different colored paper. Each page has a centered heading made of up a single thematic word which is followed by a series of brief interrogatives, set off on their own lines, each with a tilde in the place of a bullet point. Collier’s images, mute,
sterile and putatively neutral as they are, draw attention to the less pristine incidental details: the color-coding of the creased pages, punctuated by the minor folds and perforations of everyday use. These details become clues in a photographic investigation where we learn only a little: the owner of these documents used them, they were valued, they did their job—but what was that job, exactly?

Figure 28: Anne Collier, 2011, *Questions (Viewpoint).*
Taken together, the various pages in the series (whose headings include: ‘Supposition’, ‘Connection’, and ‘Viewpoint’) read alternatively as a pedagogical tool kit for a high school literature teacher or a suite of prompts for a psychological evaluation. Questions (Relevance) presents a sky blue page with the heading ‘Relevance’ under which it lists: ‘Why is this important?’, ‘What does it all mean?’, and ‘Who cares about this idea?’, while Collier’s Questions (Viewpoint), depicts an orange page asking ‘From whose viewpoint or perspective are we seeing, reading, or hearing?’ and ‘Are there other ways to interpret this information?’. Whatever their origin, these pages also serve to reflexively ask the questions prompted by much of Collier’s work: ‘What is the source and how reliable is it?’, ‘Where have I seen this before?’, ‘How do they “fit” together?’. Collier’s Questions ask of the viewer the same questions that the viewer asks of it; indeed this found printed matter, for all its inquisitive openness, becomes in the end almost entirely self-reflexive, telling us, ‘en abyme’ as Owens described, ‘in a photograph what a photograph is’ (1978, p. 75).

Collier also deals with ephemera of new age and self-help movements, presenting questionnaires dedicated to plotting one’s future and tests for understanding the self. Describing her choice to use a ‘forensic’ aesthetic to depict such subjective content, Collier explains:

The tension in my work...is to apply this somewhat restrained and essentially objective approach to subject matter that is more ambiguous and unstable (emotional, psychological, etc.). I’m trying to establish a tension between how an image looks and what it describes or alludes to. (McDonough 2010, p. 79)
*My Goals for One Year* (2007) depicts a pamphlet on a solid black background open to its central spread which contains a worksheet with the titular heading followed by twelve points on various personal subjects, with blank spaces to be filled in with the writer’s aspirations. Covering topics including ‘Salary or earnings’, ‘Health and weight’, and ‘Travel’, the worksheet essentially functions as a psychological mad-lib game, a fill-in-the-blank journey of self-discovery through a tightly-controlled terrain of middle-class, neoliberal values. That these motivational pages have been left entirely blank becomes a visual joke at the idleness of the person who might have originally obtained this workbook to seek motivation. Further Collier’s image begs the question, ‘if pages thirteen and fourteen of this booklet are not completed (indeed, not even begun) then what is the state of the rest of it?’; the blank book becoming a metaphor for the emptiness of the life it is supposed to describe.

*I Wish* (2008) similarly presents a workbook exercise for self-improvement, also left blank. Again the subject of the photograph is an open pamphlet, this one with a heading that asks ‘What Do You Wish for?’. It is in strangely variable typography, accompanied by a small, clip-art illustration of a shooting star in a night sky. This playful detail is undermined by the seriousness of the exercise, which explains, ‘one of the best ways to receive psychic guidance is to organize your goals and desires and create a wish list’. These instructions are followed with twenty-one lines to be completed by the reader, all beginning with the phrase ‘I wish’. By drawing attention to the odd juxtaposition of the child-like drawing and its ‘wish upon a star’ theme with the pseudo-scientific format of the numbered list, Collier’s photograph undermines such
magical thinking in a starkly black and white context while paradoxically also prompting the viewer to make a wish herself.

Collier’s *First Person* (2009) also points to the potentiality of life and its various modes of being. Spending time with these photographs at first the viewer wonders about the great variety of personality traits described in the list’s 134 declarations and then, inevitably, begins mentally noting which traits resonate, and which do not. At their overwhelming size (four images make up the work, each one more than 96 by 106 centimeters long) the checklist’s crisp white pages centered in the larger black field, with their tidy sequence of identifying statements, become, inevitably, what they were all along, a test for you, the viewer, as asserted by the implied ‘I’ of Collier’s title. It is in this context, the mind of the first person reader that Collier’s works coalesce, their ‘me’, ‘my’, and ‘I’ implicating the viewer despite herself.

These unfulfilled potentialities, the unknown stories and people these worksheets might describe, carry over into Collier’s work with audio media where her photographic muting gesture is both figurative and literal. In direct echo of the irony of Goldstein’s simply-labeled records displayed as objects to be looked at, Collier presents audio cassette tapes and vinyl records as still images. Her *Introduction, Fear, Anger, Despair, Guilt, Hope, Joy, Love/Conclusion* (2002/2014) depicts an open, plastic, vacuum-formed case, white like the 8 tapes inside it, each marked in neat black lettering with the tape’s subject (‘GUilt’), number and side. These titles are written in uppercase, sans-serif lettering, similar to Goldstein’s Helvetica. Tape 8 breaks form with a dual-subject title written as ‘LOVE/Conclusion’, which typographically asserts
that love either doesn’t merit its own tape or that it is so briefly enjoyed as to not require it. The uneven weighting of life’s negatives and positives in these titles becomes a literal representation of the unhappy hours one could spend progressing from one misery to the next listening to these tapes (moving from fear, to anger, to despair, and then guilt), in order only to find that one’s hard emotional work is so unevenly rewarded (by hope, then joy, and a half-measure of love) before being abruptly terminated.

Figure 29: Anne Collier, 2002/2014, Introduction, Fear, Anger, Despair, Guilt, Hope, Joy, Love/Conclusion.
Collier’s photograph points to the poignancy in resorting to such self-help remedies and also to the pathos inherent in the simple texts themselves. As with Goldstein’s records displayed as mute objects, where his titles like ‘THE BURNING FOREST’ or ‘A SWIM AGAINST THE TIDE’ become ominous and grim, in Collier’s Introduction, Fear, Anger, Despair, Guilt, Hope, Joy, Love/Conclusion the viewer can only speculate about the acoustic evidence of disaster they contain, on tapes merely here to be read. Further, because Collier's operation is ultimately re-photography, the function of these tapes is even further abstracted. Collier’s photographs not only comment on the relative inappropriateness of displaying audio cassettes without playing them, but also of presenting such content as a picture. Collier’s photographs lock her appropriations away from the viewer, making a mockery of their use-value by giving them the status of representation.

Figure 30: Jack Goldstein, 1976, A Swim Against the Tide.
Such self-help tapes appear again in her images, this time disastrous in a new way; the tape within these cassettes has been unspooled and the chaotic tangle of material becomes the subject of the image itself, whether in _Despair_ (2005) where the eponymous cassette is visible next to the mess of unwound tape or in _Spiritual Warfare_ (2006) in which the curls and loops from an out-of-frame cassette are the only thing visible. In this representation, like that of _Despair_, the ruined tape becomes allegorical of the psychic pain, however formal and forensic the images themselves are. Owens himself aligned allegory with the ‘the fragmentary, the incomplete…the ruin’ which he likened to appropriation for its ‘progressive distancing from origin’ (1980, P70).

Collier also works with images of records, another formal Goldstein allusion. Like her _Woman With A Camera_ series, Collier often uses record covers as vehicles to collect recurring pop cultural tropes. Unlike most of her other works shot with a rostrum setup, Collier’s _Smoking 3_ (2005) depicts four stacks of records, resting side-by-side on a black carpeted floor, leaning against a white wall. The front record of each of the stacks shows an album by a notable male singer-songwriter: Jacques Brel, Bob Dylan, David Bowie and John Stewart. All albums were produced in the years from 1977 through 1981, precisely the same period in which _Pictures_ and appropriation were becoming noteworthy artistic references in their own right. Like Collier’s images of the blank booklets with other unseen pages, or her images of cassette tapes whose aural content can’t be accessed visually, this image raises a number of questions about what it withholds. Like her other photographs which ‘represent
music and the human voice’ (Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 13), this one depicts the ephemera of an aural culture in a silent form. But there are other questions about what is withheld by the photographic form. For example, these four records are presented as part of a collection, whose depth is depicted in the photograph itself; does this collection consist entirely of record covers showing 70s and 80’s-era male singer-songwriters holding cigarettes or is it simply a random personal collection of records being used to prop up the four that the artist has selected to photograph? Collier’s formal choices imply that there’s a broader ubiquity to this cliché.

Figure 31: Anne Collier, 2005, Smoking 3.
The records are also interrelated for their simple design. Not only are they all full-bleed headshots of smoking male pop stars, a notable deviation from her work with images of women, but their typography is similar as well. All covers present the artist’s name and album title in all-caps sans-serif writing, with no other text, in opaque inks and generally single colors. The designer of the James Stewart album deviates most from the norm, with a vaguely art nouveau modification to the crossbars of the typeface’s anatomy, and by orienting the words vertically. This ascendant text serves to frame the singer’s face with a burning cigarette that protrudes straight out from his mouth so that the viewer can see its red tip and notice its equally upright trail of smoke. The typography thus becomes its own comment on the oxymoronic way the selected image interacts with the album’s title, as if to say ‘there may be fire here, but there’s not much wind.’

These ironic, if understated, contradictions abound in Collier’s works with language. Her New Beginning (2007) is also a photograph of a stack of records leaning against a wall. The white-on-white composition of the image (white floors, white walls, white record sleeves) is only punctuated by the black script of the album’s title, ‘New Beginning’, and the fine black border that runs around the perimeter of the cover. In this context, the hope for a fresh start is complicated by text itself, the implied pile of new beginnings being both numerous and finite.

Collier’s practice is still associated with ‘pictures of pictures’. However, it is important to remember that while she does often work with found photographic representations, and that while often these album covers and
other ephemera do not include text, a great number of them do. As is clear from many of the works discussed here, she also, often, does not photograph photographs at all. Writing about her Questions works, Michael Darling explains that ‘in this work, Collier ably joins a long tradition of text-based, conceptual art made by Rene Magritte, Ed Ruscha, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer (among many others), as she relies on her razor-sharp eye and featherweight touch to coax grand social and philosophical treasure out of what was clearly someone else’s trash’ (2014, p. 13). That so many of her works are precisely not ‘pictures of pictures’ but instead depict literal schematics for life’s varied storylines, points to the value of looking beyond the discourse of photography to read her work because she looks beyond it as well, asking how else a person might be represented or described, and drawing implicit parallels between the unfilled blanks of her questionnaires and silent cassettes and the unknown stories contained within a picture.

And yet, because photographic theory is so obviously applicable to her photography practice, and because such theory has so thoroughly colored contemporary thinking about appropriation, about works that glean from pop culture (and about pop culture generally), it has tended to overdetermine the writing about her work. In other words, because Collier makes photographs, sometimes of photographs, the other representational mediums often depicted in her images (language, non-photographic printed matter, varied audio formats, etc.) are less often considered. Like Tiravanija’s oeuvre, itself framed so neatly by one discourse that other frames are frequently pushed aside, the discourse about the photograph has often crowded out consideration of the other media
Collier confronts in her work. Writings on the artist tend to focus on her pristine ‘commercial’ (Fox 2010, p. 92, McDonough 2010, p. 79, Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 51) or ‘forensic’ (Darling & Iles 2014, p. 19, Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 12) aesthetic, even as Collier’s work’s alignment with these types of images should itself be a warning; such advertising or evidentiary images are considered incomplete until they are placed into contexts rife with text.

But if there is anything Collier’s works share, beyond the fact that they are made using her camera, it is that they all, to some extent, concern themselves with questions about how a life can be contained or represented or described when any such single representation inevitably becomes an oversimplification, a cliché. From her interest in the recurring icon of the female photographer to her early, oblique self-portraits motivated by a desire to be ‘autobiographical but without being narcissistic’ (Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 11) to new age rituals of self-awareness, all of Collier’s works ask, in some cases literally, how to represent a life when all its details and nuance won’t fit within any single frame? She explains her own precise, studied approach to making images as an acknowledgement of that limitation:

Working with photography you are constantly aware of framing, it is inherent to the process: from the film stock via the camera's viewfinder to the resulting print, you are always aware of the limits of each image.’ (McDonough 2010, p. 79)

Collier’s own life is often used to frame her still, silent works because it is also, often, its subject. An only child who lost both her parents early in life (she was a young child when her mother died and twenty when she lost her father) these dual griefs bookend her youth and delineate her life as an artist and an adult. Her oblique, poetic work on that subject (for example Jim & Lynda from
2002, a diptych of near-identical seascapes where Collier's parents' ashes were scattered) becomes a persistent explanation in art criticism for Collier's own interest in grief, in seeking, and in meaning making and is often used as a cipher for decoding her other works.

Yet the limitations of this autobiographical frame are truly Collier's subject. In an interview from 2007 she explains that while she thinks of Jim & Lynda, as a portrait, of my parents in their absence...all the work takes the form of a kind of deflected portraiture, but increasingly I'm less invested in its explicit relationship to myself and my personal histories. (Verwoert, Collier et al. 2008, p. 12)

These questions of what of a life can be represented in an image, about how broadly encompassing a single frame can be made to be, and about self-portraiture where the 'self' described is not that of the photographer but of the viewer, these are the multivalent currents that run through Collier's practice. Collier's appropriated content in her carefully framed photographs return to questions about authorship, but not the questions raised by the monolithic and masterful voice of the author so under siege in the appropriations of the Pictures artists, nor the multivalent, unstable vernacular of Tiravanija's appropriations, but rather an appropriation that does something different again, an appropriation that raises questions about finding a shared or universal truth in the single, yet ambivalent, self of self-portraiture.


McDonough, T 2010, 'In Between: Tom McDonough in conversation with Anne Collier', *Photographic Quarterly*, no. 4, pp. 78 - 87.


Chapter 8: Conclusion

When I began this process of the practice-led PhD, I imagined that I would write something about the abundance of text visually present in contemporary art, how frequently that text was actually appropriated from elsewhere, and why that text was so rarely written about or even acknowledged in basic descriptions of artworks in which it appeared. Appropriation art’s utter ubiquity today confirms what Douglas Crimp and his peers at *October* inferred about the practice in the late 1970s, and what Brian Wallis, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, and other writers in the 1980s made explicit: that appropriation is an operation specifically suited to speak to the contextual shifts brought by globalisation and neoliberalism, and the cultural changes that those bring. These writers in the postmodern moment astutely observed that the movement inherent in the act of appropriating something and re-presenting it elsewhere was a precise parallel to the contextual movements inherent in a globalised marketplace, where goods, services, and messaging from one setting were transported and redistributed elsewhere (Wallis 1986). This understanding of appropriation remains as accurate today as it was in the postmodern moment and the prescience and persistence of the postmodern artists and writers’ insights are remarkable.

These insights are broadly applicable, much more broadly than art-historically we have tended to apply them and now, arguably, we need appropriation’s critique more than ever, as we reckon with globalisation and our
place in the Anthropocene. Since the late 1970s, myriad artists have used appropriation strategies to make sense of the world. Inevitably appropriation is quite literal, as in the case of text, which is one reason why so many artists from the Pictures Generation make work with it. Text is an almost perfect vehicle for appropriation art because the contexts of its significations — its infinite recycling of 26 symbols — is a transparent display of the world to which appropriation art seeks to alert us — one in which, Crimp explained in 1978, the singular meaning of an original ‘has been supplanted by an infinitude of indistinguishable copies, and the notion of the original is lost’ (p. 34). WJT Mitchell describes this ‘infinitude’ in language as ‘endless chains of signification’ explaining that an awareness of this endlessness,

can lead us to a perception of the *mise en abîme*, a nauseating void of signifiers in which a nihilistic abandonment to free play and arbitrary will seems the only appropriate strategy. Or it can lead to a sense that our signs, and thus our world, are a product of human action and understanding, that although our modes of knowledge and representation may be ‘arbitrary’ and ‘conventional,’ they are the constituents of the forms of life, the practices, and traditions within which we must make epistemological, ethical, and political choices. (1986, pp. 29-30)

This is why appropriated text is so useful to artists, because it wears this endlessness on its sleeve.

But, as this thesis argues, so often when art does employ appropriated text, the text goes unnoticed or is treated as some kind of tangential non-diagetic element that is rarely considered an aesthetic, *intrinsic* part of the overall work, expressing key forms and logics of its own. This thesis is my attempt to explore where some of these oversights originated and to redress
them along the way. In seeking to examine how and why text in art has fallen through the cracks of interdisciplinarity, my focus has been artworld discourse. There are, I am sure, larger reasons for the oversight of appropriated text in art, such as the very ubiquity of the appropriation of imagery that contemporary reproduction technologies not only allow but also demand, making contemporary art increasingly catholic with its references. The abundance of sources and types of representations presented in contemporary art presume an impossible viewer, one who is no less versed in typography, literature, industrial manufacturing, pop culture, critical theory, visual theory, and linguistics than she is in the broad sweep art history itself. It is an obviously high, if not impossible, bar to clear.

Rather than placing ourselves in the position of this enviable, imaginary viewer, who is ‘the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost’ (Barthes 1977, p 148), we should acknowledge that our framing of art practices is inherently collective, aggregative, and malleable, and that this process of making sense of the vast field of contemporary appropriation art is one that no single person can do on her own. That Douglas Crimp and his contemporaries at October so thoroughly mapped one corner of that field is remarkable and justly celebrated. Now it’s time to survey elsewhere.

There are a number of art writers (critics, historians, curators, artists) doing just that. While a handful of present-day scholars are indeed revisiting Crimp and others’ appropriation-related discourse to mine their oversights (I am thinking here notably of Vera Dika’s fascinating work (2012) on the cinematic
influences on *Pictures* artists, as well as Marie Bridget Shurkus’ neo-formalist thesis (2006) reconsidering the materiality of the *Pictures* works as their images increasingly circulate virtually in reproduction, and more broadly Alison Pearlman’s 2003 book *Unpackaging the Art of the 1980s*, which looks at certain *October*-enforced art-historical assumptions), none have yet engaged specifically with the role of text in these early appropriation artworks.

My critique of appropriation art’s fundamental ties to language grew out of a very simple question that was narrowly focused on artworld discourse: Why this, and not that? Why do we think of Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans* (1981) and not her *Untitled* artist’s book (1977) when we think of appropriation art? Why do we think of Richard Prince’s Marlboro men before his joke paintings? Why when, as her recent Museum of Modern Art retrospective made clear, Louise Lawler so frequently uses text as her art is it her photographs that are presented as iconic of appropriation art? The list goes on, a veritable who’s-who of appropriation art from Jack Goldstein to Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger to Martha Rosler, Robert Longo to David Salle, Dara Birnbaum to John Baldessari who all use appropriated text in many of their most famous works, and yet ‘appropriation art’ is still popularly defined by its presentation of pre-existing images. In short, why, when so many of the most well-known examples of artists working with appropriation use text, is it their works with images that have become paradigmatic of appropriation art?

The short answer is: *Pictures*. Douglas Crimp’s 1977 exhibition has been enormously influential—far more significant than he, or anyone, could have known at the time. Michael Lobel explains that ‘although the exhibition was only
one episode in a much longer development, it has taken on (one could say problematically) almost mythic status as an originary moment’ (2007, p. 20). The slightly longer answer is: the prominence of Crimp’s writing and the writing of his peers about *Pictures*. Lobel attributed the prominence of ‘the mature work of the *Pictures* generation’ specifically to ‘its embrace by many of the writers of the so-called *October* school’ (p. 14).

It is interesting to consider how contemporary conceptions of appropriation art would differ even if more attention were paid to different writings by those same authors. For example, while Crimp’s 1979 ‘Pictures’ essay published in *October* is the most widely anthologised of Crimp’s essays on the exhibition, imagining his lesser-read original curatorial essay from 1977 in its place would potentially result in a more broadly ‘representation-’ (rather than ‘image-’) based understanding of the practice today. Further, taking a step even deeper into the past and considering if the original Artists Space press release for the exhibition were better known, it seems much of the conflation of image-based practices with appropriation art might have been avoided. That press release was written to announce the still-in-development exhibition to potential additional venues some months in advance of the opening at Artists Space when its artists were still being selected. The text explained the concept for the exhibition as ‘identifying a group of young artists that represent a new sensibility…[characterised by] their use of recognizeable, non-abstract images’ (Crimp 1977). If this announcement text was instead the enduring document for this exhibition, it might again have shifted what we call ‘appropriation art’ today
because the text framed the exhibition explicitly as about images (not representation) and made the narrowness of its frame clear.

Crimp, reflecting on these discrepancies in how his work is read and remembered, reflects at the end of his memoir, ‘I had no way of knowing that the *October* version of the essay would become so influential’ (2016, p. 253). Similarly he, Helene Winer, and others involved with the *Pictures* exhibition, have looked back on it and marvelled at its longevity in the cultural imagination and its impact in shaping the art world itself. This is the luxury of retrospection.

The outsize influence of *Pictures* on today’s conception of appropriation also extends far beyond Crimp and those original writers’ arguments because, as Crimp explains in his memoir *Before Pictures*, ‘*Pictures* has come to stand less for a small exhibition at Artists Space than an artistic tendency…. *Pictures* is a signifier—even a *floating* signifier’ (2016, p. 275). In other words, the exhibition is called upon almost metonymically to evoke: appropriation; late 70s photographic practices; postmodernism; and so on. In that sense this thesis serves, again, as yet another limited and subjective frame for the practice of appropriation art, in this case taking Crimp’s floating signifier and reframing it with text at its center. But as Hal Foster notably explained, the appropriation artist ‘treats the public space, social representation or artistic language in which he or she intervenes as both a target and a weapon,’ (1985, p. 100) and ‘target’ is, after all, just another kind of ‘frame’.


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Reflections on the word image

P.N. Furbank
Reflections on
the Word ‘Image’

Liz Linden
For my family
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Part I
Reflections on the Word ‘Image’
If the purpose of an artist’s PhD, a ‘practice-led PhD’, is to recognise that studio work is its own idiosyncratic form of knowledge-production, leading to its own unique insights, then my studio practice serves, in part, to research why it is so hard to talk (or even think) about the text so often visible in contemporary artworks—whether it is presented as the partner to an image, a fragment in a diverse collage, an index to the world outside the artwork, or a standalone element unto itself. Much of my research is an attempt to give text the aesthetic attention it demands, and to ultimately point to some of the political consequences of our own inattention to the operations of text in culture.

The difficulty language in art tends to present is in some ways predictable, given that, as artist Dave Beech explains, text art, meaning written language presented in or as the visible component of an artwork, is ‘located at the intersection of contemporary philosophy, contemporary thinking on art and contemporary theories of language’ (2009, p. 29). Of course Beech’s list is by no means exhaustive; to it I would add, at a minimum, contemporary thinking about design, literature, feminism, and post-colonial politics.

This difficulty, while understandable, presents at least two practical problems in my practice, since I frequently use text in my work. First, the ‘art’ part of text-art generally seems almost impossible to assess for viewers, so overdetermining are our expectations of ‘text’. In this, I take comfort in the fact that even the work of an artist as devoted to text as Ed Ruscha is still met with some bewilderment. In an interview with Ruscha, curator Bernard Blistène confesses:

The language you use [in your artworks] is so ‘spoken’ that it stops me from speaking when I look at your paintings. For me, the impact of your work has so much to do with a kind of relocation from movies and books to the canvas, to the extent that I am blocked from having the kind of speech I might normally have with painting. (Ruscha 2002, p. 302)

And yet Ruscha is blunt in his assertion that his works with text are, simply, paintings, like still lifes of ‘flowers in a vase’ (2002, p. 264). So why is it so difficult to apply the tools of art criticism to it?

Second, in the necessary task of communicating my work to others, both in talking or writing about my impetus to work with language in the first place and my work with language itself, I often—ironically—find myself tongue-tied because the critical operations of language, where it’s expressive through the multivalence of its disciplines that in any given context intermingle differently to
simultaneously enhance and undermine a text’s respective meanings, are where
the ‘art’ part of the text-art is. How do you pinpoint something that is always
in motion?

This problem, the problem of how we speak about the meaning of text in
text-art, in which that text is both a figure of speech and a figure, in some ways
echoes the problems that plague our model of language itself. In language, a
verbal image, meaning the mental picture evoked by a linguistic description, also operates multivalently. W.J.T. Mitchell explains:

the whole question of whether verbal images are properly called ‘images’ gives us
what Wittgenstein would call a ‘mental cramp,’ because the very distinction it assumes between literal and figurative expressions is, in literary discourse, entangled
with the notion we want to explain, the verbal image.…The phrase, ‘verbal imagery,’ in other words, seems to be a metaphor for metaphor itself! (1986, p. 21)

In the case of text art, this mental cramp is further exacerbated because it extends across multiple axes of signification since text in art corresponds not only to a mental image, but is also a formal one. This extends the ‘metaphor for metaphor’ problem beyond the realm of ideas and into physical space, because ‘the physical form of words and what they mean are contingent upon the other’ (Rorimer 1989, p. 137). So not only does text art struggle to be comprehended because of the cramp-inducing quality of its mental image, identified by Mitchell in all verbal images, but also because it has a visible, written presence whose formal qualities affect its meaning and therefore its corresponding verbal image, and also because text art is an image, a literal image, which takes the complex self-reflexivity described by Wittgenstein and multiplies it.

While this verbal image ourobouros is equally characteristic of text as it is of
text art, it is in the discourse of art, more than that of literature, or linguistics, or even typography, that we would expect to find answers to some of these slippery questions about the visible presence of text in art, both because text is intrinsic to so much of art practice today and, pointedly, because art discourse defines itself as the place where we go to find such answers about expression and meaning-making with aesthetic forms.

For the duration of my PhD, I have had pinned to my studio wall a quotation from ‘The Unknown Masterpiece’, a short story by Honoré de Balzac in which the main character, a painter named Frenhofer, unhinged by a viewer’s tepid response to his newest painting, shouts, ‘You are in front of a woman and you are looking for a picture!’ (author’s translation, 2000, p. 126).

I love this story, and this moment in it, for its fantastically heroic art-historical
tropes, for the way in which it can be read anachronistically across a post-
modern axis of signification and framing (is it more accurate to say you see
‘a woman’ or ‘a picture of a woman’?), and, ultimately, for its encapsulating
the apparently timeless paranoia about the invisibility of their work that grips
artists everywhere (in my case: what if, in my work with text, there is actually
no there there?).

But I have always felt that the text visible in contemporary artworks serves as
a direct, if contingent, conduit to a vast chain of meanings inherent in our
shared language and to the weird and wonderful way those meanings fluctuate
through time and place and person. Mitchell explains these fluctuations and
vicissitudes by means of Derrida who in turn pins them on no less than God
himself:

Derrida reinstates the ancient figure of the world as a text… but with a new twist.
Since the author of this text is no longer with us, or has lost his authority, there is
no foundation for the sign, no way of stopping the endless chain of signification.
This realization can lead us to a perception of the mise en abime, a nauseating
void of signifiers. (1986, p. 29)

In essence what I have always loved (and feared) about text in art is that the
viewer is allowed to be both Frenhofer and his dubious associate—seeing the
woman and the word ‘woman’—alike.

To me, it is clear that including language within the frame of an artwork is an
obviously aesthetic and meaningful gesture, a gesture that Craig Owens might
call ‘en abyme’, spelled differently but still indebted to Derrida. Owens
used his ‘abyme’ to explain how a mirror depicted in a photograph ‘tells us in
a photograph what a photograph is’ (1978, p. 75), pointing to its structural
presence as ‘an act of duplication, a literal folding back…upon itself’ (p. 74).
Owens’s use of the abyme points to how it is not merely tautological, restating
the same thing twice, but rather unlocking multiple representations and
structures in a single concise form. I suspect for some others text art may feel
glib, but even the simplest of rhymes or the most obnoxious of puns contain
wild and complex chains of association that, like DNA, or a centerfold, or the
‘pler’ of Owens, double back on themselves precisely so that they can encode
so much so succinctly. And so text read across the multiple axes of semantic
meaning, semiotic structure, formal presence, affective import, synesthetic
pleasure, interactivity, poetry, and myriad others seems clearly to reach far into
the pool of our collective unconscious and plumb those depths.

One reason for the difficulty in parsing text in contemporary art is that, despite
its critically-canonical, steady evolution from Fluxus and Minimalism to
Conceptualism (Kotz 2003, p. 3; Lippard 1997), this progression seemed to
halt, at least in art historical recollections, in the postmodern moment where
the photograph became paradigmatic. And yet this moment in the late 70s and
early 80s is precisely the moment when artists thought most directly about the functions of language in order to make distinctions about some of the shift ing, mutable vastness of representation in art. At that time, almost invariably art-historically geotagged to 1977’s Pictures exhibition in New York, artists asked explicitly ‘how to find forms that can address the vastness, [which] has a history that is and is not an art history, that is and is not American’ (Nesbit 2003). While artworks exploring representation through linguistic frames were abundant in the 70s and 80s, and were often ripe with text, art criticism describing those works rarely looked closely at the language presented within them, paradoxically asking questions of the art by reading its imagery like language, and yet, ignoring the answers so often provided by an artwork’s text.

So, as I started to research and write about these questions, I began thinking about appropriated language specifically. Appropriated text was my focus not only because it characterises so much of the language I use in my own work, but also because appropriation is the signature gesture of postmodern art; appropriation presents something with which viewers are acquainted, but paradoxically that element’s very familiarity seemed to prejudice viewers against it as art. The potential for appropriated language to function critically as a mirror held up to consumer culture is clear to me, in part, because artworks using language ‘remove evidence of the artist’s participation in the formation of the artwork, so that the form of the work and its content might mutually express one another without subjective comment by the artist’ (Rorimer 1989, p. 139).

Using appropriated language further extends that distance, putting the messaging of contemporary culture in dialogue with itself, becoming what Hal Foster calls ‘both a target and a weapon’ (1985, p. 100).

It is my hope, then, that the written thesis effectively maps the terrain circum scribing and contextualising my work, detailing what ‘appropriation’ was said to describe from its postmodern inception in Pictures on through the ways it has typically been applied today. The thesis tries to reconceive of these coordinates not as delimiting marks for appropriation’s map of practice but instead simply as trig points scattered across a much broader field that is still being surveyed. By denoting the emergence of postmodern appropriation in the 70s as a starting point in this survey, and then incorporating a couple of farther-flung, contemporary examples of appropriative practice, it is my hope that a more accurate, if provisional, picture of appropriation might emerge, a picture in which text appears somewhere towards the center.

So while I have not written about my artwork in that thesis, it is my hope that I have written around it, drafting a portrait of my work in that negative space. The artwork that I have realised under the umbrella of this PhD sits somewhere between the appropriations of Levine, Goldstein, and others, and the representations and reclamation of Collier and Tiravanija, in order to consider and contest the operations of language in commercial culture today.

My practice takes many forms and the work I am presenting here varies from interactive performance to an artist’s book masquerading as a monograph to neon signs, photography, video, and more.

This work collected here, as disparate as it is, was all presented during the course of my PhD in solo exhibition contexts, and indeed one criterion for appearing in this book is that these works were ultimately exhibited to the public. Like many, probably most, artists, I find exhibitions to be tremendously helpful intellectually in terms of clarifying my own interests, which are recon textualised by the world when I drag my art out into it. Also, practically, an exhibition helps clear the decks, both literally and metaphorically.

But in this case, exhibiting these mostly text-based works served another key function towards completion. As in Freud’s explanation of wit, where ‘nobody is satisfied with making wit for himself. Wit-making is inseparably connected with the desire to impart it’ (2014, p. 220), there seems to be an essential final step in my own studio practice that takes the monologue of the studio and places it into the dialogue of public context. This need for the works to communicate to someone to be completed, some literally, others less so, is of course not only the structure of a witticism, but also of language itself.

Diagram of Saussure’s ‘speaking circuit’ (1959, p. 31)

This book is thus structured around four exhibitions or public performances: Target Practice, which took place at the TAEM Gallery at the University of Wollongong in March 2015; The New York Times Feminist Reading Group, which was made in collaboration with Jen Kennedy and is represented here by three performances from 2016 in New York and New South Wales; TELETHON, which was also made in collaboration with Kennedy and performed at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in March of 2017; and Damaged Goods, which opened at Cleopatra’s in New York City in February of 2017.

Target Practice was an exhibition of icons, asking what these icons mean, as they are appropriated, contextualised, recontextualised, conflated, and confused in a multiplicity of cultural environments, underscoring the fluid nature of
signification itself. The works in the exhibition were conceived as a progression, which was set in motion via an appropriation that iterated from one work to the next, for example beginning with a photographic work from 2014 titled Real Aussie Sheds, which depicted a commercial sign installed along the Princes Highway in New South Wales. The sign bears a representation of Uluru with a shed door installed in its side as if it were a giant storage unit, while the Real Aussie Sheds business slogan, ‘Solid as the Rock’, is written alongside, oxymoronically eliding the hollowness and solidness intrinsic to the nature of a storage shed, of a sacred rock.

From there the exhibition moved to two neon signs, one, The Rock (2015), presenting a acrylic-mounted photograph of an actor also with a sobriquet ‘The Rock’, posing for a promotional image in front of the Sydney Opera House, another synecdoche for Australia itself. The neon on that work traces the line of the Opera House’s roof, which then gets duplicated and repurposed to form the shape of the fins of an ouroboros of circling sharks in target (2015). The exhibition concludes with a circular, looped video (Mmm, no. 2, 2015) of footage of celebrity chefs appropriated from TV cooking shows. In the video, each chef murmurs ‘mmmm’ after tasting his or her own food, and these utterances are edited together sequentially into a single, continuous groan of onanic delight. Here the format of the ouroboros is ascribed to another mascot of consumption: the celebrity chef, who functions as a symbol of the aspirations and appetites of a globalised marketplace, where food, not merely as sustenance but also spectacle, has become a signifier of everything from wealth, sophistication, internationalisation, cosmopolitanism, nationality, provincialism, local identity, and so forth.

While in some sense the Target Practice exhibition was inspired by the ways language shifts across contexts, my ongoing collaboration with Canadian writer and artist Jen Kennedy focuses explicitly on the variety of meanings and associations a single word can hold. Kennedy and I have worked together since 2008 on creating interactive projects that serve as platforms for public discourse about contemporary meanings of the word ‘feminism’. From that collaboration, I have included two recent works here: our ongoing public performance titled The New York Times Feminist Reading Group (represented here with a performance at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, held in early November 2016, three days before the American presidential election), as well as its Australian counterpart, The Sydney Morning Herald Feminist Reading Group, held at both the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and the University of Wollongong in early 2016.

The New York Times Feminist Reading Group is exactly what it sounds like: a reading group devoted to discussing that day’s issue of The New York Times from a feminist perspective. The work combines a number of feminist meeting group models, from the consciousness-raising models of 1960s and 70s activism to the specialty seminar formats of the academic reading group to the socially-oriented book-clubs convened in hosts’ domestic spaces, while not fitting any of the above models exactly. Using the ephemeral, temporal nature of the newspaper to naturally enforce a non-heirarchical interaction between participants, ourselves included, who by definition have no more than that day to prepare or master the day’s newspaper, the changing subject matter of each performance of the Reading Group necessarily allows for participants from a broad range of backgrounds and political positions to contribute. The New York Times Feminist Reading Group allows us to examine the media landscape through the lens of feminism and also look at feminism through the lens of the media, and in this way each performance tells us something about the wide variety of what feels urgent and relevant to each participant that day.

In 2017 Kennedy and I undertook a residency at the Hammer Museum to realise a new performance titled TELETHON. TELETHON is also a public performance work, although of a different order. Inspired by experimental performances of the 60s, TELETHON is an-hour-long sonic transmission performance staged in front of a live audience. At heart quite simple, actors seated in a telethon set call numbers from a page ripped from the local Los Angeles white pages phone book and ask the person on the other end of the line, ‘What’s the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word “feminism”?’. The piece iterates from seemingly endless dial tones and ringing, to momentary windows into random lives transmitted by the sounds of outgoing voicemail, and then the occasional surprised response to the one-question political poll. The live performance was cacophonous, an illustration of the chaos, disparity, and heterogeneity of contemporary understandings of feminism. TELETHON was also broadcast live online and archived, and that livestream can be watched at: http://lizlinden.com/TELETHON.html.

The New York Times Feminist Reading Group and TELETHON both appropriate familiar formats and materials (the reading group and the newspaper in the former, the telethon broadcast and the phonebook in the latter) to foster potentially challenging political discourse by encouraging it in unintimidating formats. Just as appropriation uses the familiarity of elements of pop culture as a Trojan horse to allow culture to undermine itself, as they are recontextualised into art and ‘their rather brutal familiarity gives way to strangeness’ (Crimp 1980, p. 100), these performances take the difficulty of publically discussing contemporary political categories and positions and house it in an interface with which we are already acquainted. That The New York Times Feminist Reading Group and TELETHON are ultimately relational artworks, where the relationships are set in motion by language itself is of a piece with my larger practice, which inquires into the overlooked role of language in defining and enforcing neoliberal ends and biases.
**Damaged Goods** was a solo exhibition of my work at Cleopatra’s in Brooklyn, New York. At a glance, the exhibition seemed to be named after the largest works in the show, a series of prints titled *Damaged Goods (covers)*, however those works were themselves inspired by another exhibition about appropriation and consumer culture, curator Brian Wallis’s *Damaged Goods* from 1986 at the New Museum in New York.

*Damaged Goods (covers)* came about because in 2014, in searching for a copy of Wallis’s exhibition catalog for my research, I discovered a preponderance of romance, Christian self-help, and true crime novels sharing the same title as his seminal book and exhibition. Invariably these books’ pulpy cover designs featured a woman as the eponymous damaged good. Since then I have collected these books, exhibiting them side-by-side on an increasingly long shelf. In 2016 I began making large-scale prints of these covers, each presenting a book from this collection. Six works from this print series appeared in my 2017 *Damaged Goods* exhibition.

In the *Damaged Goods (covers)* prints, the books’ covers, scaled up proportionally so that their titular characters appear in larger-than-life sizes, are printed on 72-by-44-inch paper. My exhibition cloaked itself in Wallis’s title in order to reflect on how his insights from 1986 remain equally (or more) true today, a consistency that belies the inescapability of capitalism as it foments consumer culture. Appropriations, including all the appropriations in the exhibition, hinge on looking like something, and also how the commands ‘look’ and ‘like’ operate in a storefront, as an immodest commercial come-on. That the sign itself appears damaged also doubles back to the title of the exhibition and the works in the show.

While the *Damaged Goods (covers)* display women who are broken by life and lookalikes flickers forlornly in the window, the [Target Practice by Jessica Michael](#) monograph is itself marred, spoilt by plagiarism. *Target Practice by Jessica Michael* is an artist’s book of appropriated and repurposed texts masquerading as a monograph on my work by the fictionalised author ‘Jessica Michael’. The book is both an accurate description of my work and a fiction composited from unrelated texts by other writers. I have appropriated these texts, inserted my name in the place of their subjects, and ordered the excerpts in such a way that the book reads as a seamless critical essay about my own practice. *Target Practice by Jessica Michael* is therefore a book both of and about my work with appropriated text.

This book, because it is illustrated with images of my works and serves as an accurate, if forged, description of my practice, also folds into it further artworks realised over the course of the PhD that extend these inquiries beyond the works represented in this table of contents and out into the broader field of my practice. I have reproduced *Target Practice by Jessica Michael*, in its entirety within this book, *Reflections on the Word ‘Image’*, in order both to represent the artist’s book here, and to present the works within that, which in turn reflect back on other artworks and operations already described above—*en abyme*.

If I started this essay in the studio with one linguistic confusion pinned to my wall, I have another visual reminder in my studio of productive misunderstandings. For the longest time, seven years in fact, I have had PN. Furbank’s 1970 book, *Reflections on the Word ‘Image’*, sitting by my desk. I can date this book’s arrival in the studio so precisely because I bought it on my honeymoon, when my new husband and I stopped on our cross-America drive at Booked Up, an obscure if enormous used bookstore run by novelist Larry McMurtry in Archer City, Texas. Archer City is a ghost-town and McMurtry was therefore able to buy up multiple adjacent buildings and barns, filling them with used books. ‘There were, as a result, seemingly-endless sections devoted to books about art, books of pulp fiction, critical theory, self-help, economics, you-name-it. It was impossible to get through it all in an afternoon, which was all we had until we had to drive the remaining three and a half hours before our next motel closed for the night. By inclination, I paced the poetry and literary theory aisles, walking out of Booked Up with a trousseau of books that included Furbank’s ‘Image’.'
It had what I interpreted as a wonderfully coy cover, forest green with lettering in an oversized Courier type, the words printed in olive except for ‘image’, lambent in white. (This dust jacket has since been torn apart by my toddler and so now the book sits naked on my desk, the title foil-stamped into the greying book cloth cover.) On first sight of the title, I knew this book was for me, answering precisely the questions about the text visible in art that have dogged me throughout my career; and into this PhD.

It is not an exaggeration to say that this book has inspired me every day since I bought it. I took solace in the sheer fact of its existence, feeling a surge of gratitude and fellowship every time I glanced at it on my table thinking, ‘Yes! He’s right! That’s exactly it!’ and then, renewed, turned back to my efforts to track this precise white whale that Furbank seemed to so succinctly both catch and release with his title. The book promised to resolve that headache of Frenhofer, asking us to not only read what is in front of us but to see it as well. In short, I assumed Furbank was a kindred soul disclosing, in the most economical way possible, the fact that the word ‘image’ is, among other things, an image itself. I further imagined that Furbank’s eponymous ‘reflections’ would draw out this tangle of meanings and satisfactions which has often troubled and motivated my own work, that he would allow each sense of ‘image’ to operate simultaneously, multivalently, and intuitively without closing down one function in order to express another.

That this was a complete misperception of Furbank’s title1, an almost heteronomous and utterly solipsistic confusion on my part about how ‘the word “image”’ signified for the author, misread through the lens of my own obsession with this question of why words go unremarked in artworks, is a personal joke to me now. I won’t tell you about the inevitable moment, recently, when I discovered my error. Further, I am ashamed to admit that in fact I have been clearly so enamored of my own imaginings of this book and so alarmingly desperate for it to be precisely what I wanted that I delusionally allowed my imagined version of the book to trump the real one; in the wash of other texts and concerns and occurrences over these last eventful years, I actually forgot that sometime in that first year after buying the Furbank, perhaps when I was still pregnant with my first daughter, I picked up the book and started reading it, swiftly recoiling in horror when, from page one, it became abundantly clear Furbank was not thinking about ‘image’ in the way I expected. That I then put it back on my shelf and (somehow!) suppressed that knowledge, sealing myself off from those facts in the fugue state of research so effectively that I once again, sometime into my PhD, picked up the book in the same glow of solidarity and repeated the whole sad story is both alarming and hilarious to me.

This book is a modern marvel for me now, an epistemological fetish, pointing at the almost metaphysical power of text and its signification to not only engender headaches that had the power to stop Wittgenstein in his tracks but also strong enough to induce amnesia itself. The book is, in short, a migraine.

Migraines are characterised by another symptom equally afflicting both me in my saga with Furbank and everyone facing text art as well: partial-blindness. Such ocular effects in a migraine are medically known as an ‘aura’, a Benjaminian turn of phrase that immediately returns us to the rabbit hole of mechanical reproduction and the origins of appropriation itself, and therefore feels like a further volley from my bookshelf, Furbank taunting me from the grave. *Mise en abyme*, indeed.

I have had a migraine once, last year, which was primarily alarming because of the aura that announced it, occluding the centre of my field of vision entirely, as if a diagram of my eye could map my sight, the blackness of the pupil at the centre now a negative space. It happened while I was driving to school, actually, so I pulled off the road in Nowra and tried to buy a coffee, a task made absolutely impossible by the fact I couldn’t see the person standing directly in front of me at the counter.

It is this quality, the quality of something standing in front of you and having a meaning that you cannot entirely fix, even though you are aware that it is there, is one thing that has motivated this PhD; I wanted to put my finger on it. But in the end, again, I have worked around the problem. My written work has focused on art historical oversights of the centrality of text to appropriation, while my studio work has plunged into the sea of neoliberal language inexorably rising around us and re-presented such text in order to understand how such texts operate, and operate on us. In short the written work of my thesis focuses on the art historical outcomes of a critical blind spot for appropriated text, even as the art struggles against it.

Taken as a whole, this body of work tries to make the case for expanding the frame around what kinds of representations appropriation calls into question in order to recognise that appropriated text can tell us something timely, unique, and essential about the messages of globalisation. Both the written thesis and my studio work try to make the case for examining appropriated texts’ processes and pathways, even where, especially where, they intersect and we lose our bearings in the act of surveying them. It is tempting to liken this mapping process to the feedback loop I found myself in with Furbank, or the ouroborous Mitchell points out with Wittgenstein, or the concentric rings of Foster’s target, or the auralic discs of the migrainic eye, because it seems to repeat itself without progress. But a more optimistic and, I think, accurate

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1 Furbank’s book is actually a debate about semantics in literary theory and an objection to the way literary critics use ‘metaphor’ and ‘image’ almost interchangeably. W.J.T. Mitchell wryly describes Furbank’s treatment of the topic as ‘exhaustive’ and explains that ‘Furbank debunks all notions of mental and verbal imagery as illegitimate metaphors, and argues that we should confine ourselves to the “natural sense of the word “image”, as meaning a likeness, a picture, or a simulacrum”’ (1986, p. 13).
model for mapping the interdependent and inter-active multiple valences of meaning in appropriated text, which don’t so much repeat themselves endlessly as deviate subtly even as you follow them along, may be the Moebius strip, still doubling back on itself, but with a twist.

References


Part II
Target Practice was a solo exhibition of my work in the TAEM Gallery at the University of Wollongong from March 10 to April 1, 2015. The exhibition consisted of four works.

Real Aussie Sheds
2014
Archival pigment print (ed. 1 of 5)
51” x 34”

The Rock
2015
Neon, controller, perspex, ecosolvent printed vinyl
29.5” x 19.7” x 3.9”

target
2015
Neon, controller, sequencers, perspex
39” x 39” x 3.9”

Mmmm, no. 2
2015
Video (ed. 1 of 3)
1 minute loop
The Rock, 2015
Mmmn, no. 2, 2015
The New York Times Feminist Reading Group
ongoing since 2009
The New York Times Feminist Reading Group is an ongoing collaboration with Jen Kennedy, which we have performed in over 30 venues internationally since 2009. Documentation of three performances from 2016 follow, one in New York City using The New York Times, and two from versions of the work performed in Australia earlier that year using The Sydney Morning Herald.
TELETHON was realized in collaboration with Jen Kennedy at the Hammer Museum on March 4, 2017. TELETHON was performed live in front of a museum audience, simultaneously broadcast and archived online, and also transmitted to random members of the local population through their telephone lines. Video of the performance is available at www.lizlinden.com/TELETHON.html.

TELETHON
2017
15 callers, 15 telephone lines, telethon set, audio and video equipment, 2 videographers, Los Angeles phone book
55-minute live transmission performance
Performance documentation from the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, March 4, 2017
Photo credit: Todd Cheney
Damaged Goods
2017
Damaged Goods, was a solo exhibition of my work at Cleopatra’s in New York City from February 26 to March 27, 2017. The exhibition included the Damaged Goods (covers) series plus an artist’s book and a neon sign installation.

*Damaged Goods (Sharfeddin)*
2016
Archival inkjet print
44” x 72”

*Damaged Goods (Urban)*
2016
Archival inkjet print
44” x 72”

*Damaged Goods (Henderson)*
2016
Archival inkjet print
44” x 72”

*Damaged Goods (Tucker)*
2016
Archival inkjet print
44” x 72”

*Damaged Goods (Gallagher)*
2016
Archival inkjet print
44” x 72”

*Damaged Goods (Hampson)*
2016
Archival inkjet print
44” x 72”

*lookalikes*
2017
Neon sign and transformers
33” x 7” x 4”

*Target Practice by Jessica Michael*
2016
Digitally printed book
4.5” x 7.5” x 1/4”
Damaged Goods (covers), 2016
lookalikes, 2017
Target Practice by Jessica Michael, 2016
Target Practice

by Jessica Michael
I’m not offended by all the dumb blonde jokes because I know I’m not dumb... and I also know that I’m not blonde.

—Dolly Parton
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His and Hers

Fundamentally, what all artists are doing is trying to find something, and create something, that hasn’t been before. Artists engaged in this work do not necessarily know what it is they are looking for. All they can do is search through the materials, work with the process, and take the time to sort, to add in, and to take away, in the attempt to create that “something new,” or find ways of “seeing anew.” Liz Linden’s work, I believe, resides in the latter camp and her insistence on working in that zone, exclusively, points to her political commitment to the pragmatic over the utopian.
Linden’s practice, which deals with language both as a material and as a methodology asks, “Is the linguistic message constant? What is the significance of the textual matter typically presented in, under, or around an image?” Her work frequently links text and image, to study those links from a structural point of view, asking, “What is the signifying structure of ‘illustration’? Does the image duplicate certain of the information given in the text by a phenomenon of redundancy or does the text add fresh information to the image?”

Thus, though she is often working at the outset on non-linguistic substances (images from magazines, analog television signals, architectural forms, etc.), semiology is required, sooner or later, to find language (in the ordinary sense of the term) in its path, not only as a model, but also as component, relay or signified. Even so, such language is not quite that of the linguist: it is a second-order language, with its unities no longer monemes or phonemes, but larger fragments of discourse referring to objects or episodes whose meaning underlies language, but can never exist independently of it.

While Linden is concerned with the power at work in many different forms of social representations, she confesses a specific love of working with text. She explains that she feels “obliged to steal language,” not least because appropriation, in the aftermath of postmodernism and *Pictures*, was “far too often conceived of as a tool exclusively for working on images, such that today it’s the directives of language that are most often taken at face value, in art and elsewhere.” As Barthes wrote:

> Language is legislation, speech is its code.…
> To utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate.…Language—the performance of a language system—is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist.

In her works with appropriated text, Linden seeks to undo this “fascism,” to display the censorious circularity of our idiolects. Her
work suggests not only how language subjects us but how we may disarm it. Here again the tactic is subversive complicity rather than utopianism; it is within speech that speech must be fought, led astray—not by the message of which it is the instrument, but by the play of words of which it is the theater.

Moreover, Linden’s work concerns itself with instances where texts are unstable—not only because language is unstable but also because they contain discrepancies. The primary purpose of this deconstruction is to probe a text for its conflicting assumptions, premises, and self-deceptions with the intention of revealing that the text (or image) does not necessarily mean what it claims to. These discrepancies are the precise subject of Linden’s work. Linden places in contradiction certain ideological structures normally kept apart, setting them into open conflict and exposing the coercion that is usually hidden in language, which, once exposed, appears ridiculous.

Facing page: his and hers, March 9, 2008, men’s cotton t-shirt, women’s cotton sweatpants, original Kmart hangers and price tags, chrome display rack, 48”x12”x60”
Linden’s purloined images and texts have invariably been emblematic, allegorical; she does not represent women, the businessman, or movie stars, but Woman, Business, Hollywood. She is not, however, primarily interested in these subjects _per se_, but in images of them. This is the primary motive behind her strategy of appropriation, for we can approach such subjects only through their cultural representation.

Her work questions the stability of such representations, sometimes by juxtaposing...
texts and images so that they function as a palimpsest. Her blatant disregard for aesthetic categories is nowhere more apparent than in the reciprocity, which allegory proposes, between the visual and the verbal: Linden’s words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered.

The content for her work is often drawn from that aspect of our culture which is most thoroughly manipulative of the roles we play, mass advertising, whose photographic strategy is to disguise the directorial mode as a form of documentary. Linden steals the most frank and banal of this content, which registers as a kind of shock outside of its intended environment. But ultimately its rather brutal familiarity gives way to strangeness, as an unintended and unwanted dimension of fiction reinvades it. By isolating, enlarging, and juxtaposing aspects of commercial messages, Linden points to their invasion by these ghosts of fiction.
Once in her studio I asked Linden if she contemplated any new themes in her work. She grabbed a few bits of wood and, with a red magic marker, wrote on them some phrases from recent news stories that had been on her mind—and her nerves. One was “vertically integrated digital media”—“Doesn’t mean anything,” she said—from reports on the shift in direction at The New Republic, led by a C.E.O. who had promised, employing a Silicon Valley cliché, to “break shit.” Linden is irritated, in general, by “startup companies calling...
themselves the new counterculture” when it’s really “just business.”

She also wrote “vertical patrolling,” the practice followed by New York City police officers in the stairwells of high-rise housing projects, which had figured in accounts of the fatal shooting of an unarmed African-American man in Brooklyn. That phrase, too, struck her as anodyne words obscuring their consequences and, perhaps, as material—a verbal object—fit for her use. She plunked down the signs, as sample titles, at the bases of random sculptures in the studio. How, if at all, these matters will register in her work, she wouldn’t say. They already had, to my mind, as she retrieved the signs and tossed them on a table.

Linden’s work seeks to disorient the law, to call language in to crisis. This is what ideology cannot afford, for it tends to operate in language that denies its status as such: stereotypical language. Careful reading functions as activism in her practice, both privately and in the collaborative contexts of some of her work. Through the provocation of art and the reaction of participants, different political positions are articulated publicly through contradiction. By this direct presentation of political response outside of the popular media, her interactive work assures both its radicality and its visibility. For it operates within everyday representations and spaces but not at the positions which power establishes through them, contending that it is at such a shifting crossroads that effective resistance can be (pro)posed.

Yet, by the same token, this art cannot afford to take the demonstrations of political and institutional critique for granted, because it depends, to some extent, on critical support and positive media coverage to reinforce its status in the art world. For without specific attention to its own institution this social practice, even now well-received in the gallery/museum nexus, will be recuperated as yet another avant-gardist exercise, a mere
manipulation rather than active transformation of social signs.
The totalizing ambitions of any theory (take Marxism, for example, which claims to account for every form of social experience) is characteristic of all theoretical discourse, and is one reason women frequently condemn it as phallocratic. It is not always theory \textit{per se} that women repudiate, nor simply, as Lyotard has suggested, the priority men have granted it, its rigid opposition to practical experience. Rather, what they challenge is the distance it maintains between itself and its objects—a distance
which objectifies and masters.

Because of the tremendous effort of re-conceptualization necessary to prevent a phalloglogic relapse in their own discourse, feminist artists have historically forged new (or renewed) alliances with theory, and Linden aligns her own sensibility with theirs. Many of these artists themselves made major theoretical contributions: Linden cites filmmaker Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” as an example of one such artist who opened her own eyes to the critical potential of writing from her position as an artist.

Indeed, feminist artists often regard critical or theoretical writing as an important arena of strategic intervention: Martha Rosler’s critical texts on the documentary tradition in photography—among the best in the field—are a crucial part of her activity as an artist. Many modernist artists, of course, produced texts about their own production, but writing was almost always considered supplementary to their primary work as painters, sculptors, photographers, etc., whereas the kind of simultaneous activity on multiple fronts that characterizes many feminist practices is an ongoing phenomenon that persists from the time of postmodernism.

“I find writing productive because it allows me to pursue issues that are intrinsic to my practice, and apply my techniques across disciplines. Take clarity, which is something I think about a lot in the studio—the political stakes of clarity in representations. In certain kinds of writing,” Linden explained, “particularly in art criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning. Words like ‘depth,’ ‘virtual,’ ‘values,’ ‘human,’ ‘dead,’ ‘sentimental,’ ‘natural,’ ‘vitality,’ as used in art criticism, are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly ever expected to do so by the reader. When one critic writes, ‘The outstanding feature of
X’s work is its living quality,’ while another writes, ‘The immediately striking thing about X’s work is its peculiar deadness,’ the reader accepts this as a simple difference of opinion. If words like black and white were involved, instead of the jargon words dead and living, she would see at once that language was being used in an improper way.”

She went on: “Many political words are similarly abused. In the case of a word like ‘democracy,’ not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning. Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different. It is these kinds of shifts that my work tries to make visible."

“Right now,” she says, “I’m interested in thinking about how an existing object, image, or text, which has been muted via being presented inside a gallery, can perhaps operate in a more open-ended way than the original item itself. I’m increasingly using fewer interventions; I’m trying to be brave.”

When I pressed her on this bent toward minimalism, she explained “When I’m making work, of any kind, I try to keep in mind at least four questions: What am I trying to say? What gestures will express it? What image or element will make it clearer? Is this element fresh enough to have an effect? And I should probably ask myself two more: Could I put it more succinctly? Have I made anything that is avoidably ugly?” She shrugs. “I guess that’s where the minimalism comes in.”
Linden shares with her predecessors Sherrie Levine and Alfred Stieglitz, and even Richard Prince, the desire that art will offer something more than life can provide, and like them, she is severe in the economy of her gesture, refusing to admit anything superfluous into her works. The work is supremely elegant in that nothing is out of place or wasted, and appropriation is the simplest way to show the elements, again, so that we can see them afresh.
Linden shares the strategy of appropriation with many other feminist artists, as appropriation continues to be used neither to bracket nor suspend the referent but instead to problematize the activity of reference. Most of these artists work with the existing repertory of cultural imagery—not because they either lack originality or criticize it—but because their subject, feminine sexuality, is always constituted in and as representation, a representation of difference. It must be emphasized that these artists are not primarily interested in what representations say about women; rather they investigate what representation does to women.
It is precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that Linden’s appropriations are staged—not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting, or invalidating others.

“I use appropriation to make works that undermine themselves. I want to put a picture on top of a picture, or a text on a text, so that there are times when both pictures disappear and other times when they’re both manifest; that vibration is basically what the work’s about for me—that space in the middle where there is no picture.”

That middle: Realizing that you will have to go elsewhere to find a silence that corresponds to you. This is no doubt what being contemporary is all about. Artists share the same quality of silence, expressed according to different accents and sensibilities, and through these silences their background and vision of the world appear.
One day, I had lunch with Linden. “When skill is out of the picture, and it is in most of my works, then you’re left with the concept,” she said. “My metaphorical cutting and pasting is an acknowledgement of this. The moving of information is an artistic act in and of itself.”

A contemporary artist, operating what Linden calls “an art machine,” is more collagist than an artist in the customary sense. “Context is the new content. How I make my way through this thicket of information—how I
manage it, how I parse it, how I organize and distribute it—is what distinguishes my work from someone else’s.” At lunch, Linden describes appropriation as quotation, a Trojan horse: “The quotation is a disguise at its most efficient and perhaps at its most extreme. Quotation, moreover, offers one of the great advantages of disguise: license to express oneself in terms otherwise impossible.”
Signs

American art of the present is situated at the crossing of institutions of art and political economy, of representations of sexual identity and social life. More, it assumes its purpose to be so sited, to lay in wait for these discourses so as to riddle and expose them or to seduce and lead them astray. Its primary concern is not with the traditional proprieties of art—with refinement of style or innovation of form, aesthetic sublimity or ontological reflection on art as such. And though it is aligned with the critique of the institution of art based
on the presentational strategies of the Duchampian readymade, it is not involved with an epistemological investigation of the object or a phenomenological inquiry into subjective response.

Linden uses many different forms of production and modes of address (photography, collage, monoprints, digital prints, artist’s books, video, critical texts, sculpture, installation, collaboration, performance, etc.), and yet all her works are alike in this: each treats the public space, social representation or artistic language in which she intervenes as both a target and a weapon. This shift in practice entails a shift in position: the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular.

However faced with such a reading, Linden is quick to emphasize the humor in the work: “While, yes, my work is fundamentally concerned with making power structures visible, it is important to me that my work doesn’t alienate the viewer, which is why I work with very familiar content. I share that with other artists using appropriation. We play with the signs and images of the commercial world, which have formed all of us since we grew up watching television and being online. Art changed, for us, from being something weighty and formal and self-important to art that was more playful: fast, ironic, even cartoon-like.”

Linden likes to think of her work as diagrammatic, directing viewers’ attention elsewhere. In a blunt, “stupid way,” she says—adding, “I’m not afraid of stupid”—it serves “a conscious effort in my art to get at the act of looking. Luckily this gets all messed up, because I don’t want my work to be literally about any one thing.” I deduce a stratagem: one thing in thought that is another in reality, forcing a pause in the information tornado of our time. “At first,” she explains, “the critics didn’t
realize that my works were factual. They weren’t made up. Nothing I’ve ever done was made up because I felt if I made it up, it was inferior.”

These works display, usually on their surfaces, the maleficent estrangements that are overtaking the present; they also show, usually through studied indirection, openings toward the creation of beneficent values, however odd or unlikely they may at first seem. These are the two great things art can do, and do at the same time. Art does so both as overt showing and as inference, as a kind of withholding that slowly unfolds, from within its processes. These practices are its “truth,” one that does not exist within categories, or between them, but uncategorically.
Jessica Michael’s *Target Practice* is a monograph on the work of artist Liz Linden.
Reflections on the Word 'Image'
by Liz Linden

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