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WINNING THE GAME WHEN THE RULES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

Art photography and postmodernism

I would like to begin this discussion with a brief consideration of two images: one, a canonical photograph of high modernist art photography made in 1926; the other, a work made in 1979 by a postmodernist artist with no allegiance — either pedagogical, formal, or professional — to art photography per se. The first is Edward Weston’s study — one of a series — of his son Neil; the second is a rephotograph of the Edward Weston photograph by Sherrie Levine, an artist whose practice for the past six years or so has been to rephotograph photographs or, more recently, paintings and drawings by German Expressionist artists, and to present them as her own (see Frontispiece to Part 4, p. 147).

We may begin by legitimately asking what is the difference between the two works. In the context of their reproduction in these pages, there very obviously is no difference whatsoever. Were we, however, to put the actual vintage print of Weston’s Neil next to Levine’s rephotographed print and examine them side by side, a certain amount of difference would be apparent. Variations in tonality of the prints, amount of detail, sharpness and delicacy of the forms and shadows, etc., could then be easily distinguished. But inasmuch as most people who can immediately recognize Weston’s study of Neil are most likely to know it from reproductions in books and magazines, we might also say that the difference between the photograph by Weston and the photograph by Levine does not in any way represent a fundamental or essential one.

What then is the difference between these two images? We might begin by stating that while Weston is the author of the portrait of Neil, Levine is the thief, or, put somewhat less baldly, the confiscator, the plagiarist, the appropriator, the pasticheur. But to have said that is really to have said very little, because the theft of this particular image is in every sense both obvious and transparent. Even with Sherrie Levine’s name typed neatly below the image when it is exhibited, who after all would mistake Levine’s purloined Neil for the real thing?

But what do we mean when we talk about the real thing? Were we referring to Manet’s Olympia or to Vermeer’s View of Delft there would be little ambiguity. The real Olympia is installed in the Jeu de Paume, in Paris; the View of Delft in the Mauritshuis in The Hague. Both are singular, unique. The real thing in reference to Olympia would never be taken to refer to the actual model — Victorine Meurand — any more than it would be confused with Manet’s conception of a Second Empire courtesan. Still less would the real thing be conflated with the reproduction of it in Jansee’s History of Art. Similarly, although Vermeer’s View of Delft is a minutely detailed view of the city, we know the real thing is not the city, but Vermeer’s rendering of it. Are these notions of authenticity and singularity the same when we speak of Weston’s study of Neil as the real thing?

To answer this query we must begin by acknowledging that although there is but one negative of this individual study of Neil, there are any number of prints made from the negative by Weston himself. Additionally, there exist prints made by Cole Weston bearing the imprimatur of the estate, and presumably printed with the privileged knowledge and insight regarding Weston’s formal intentions that such an enterprise would imply. There is also a limited edition of prints made by George Tice some years ago, commissioned (I believe) by Lee Witkin and the Weston estate, of an extreme exactness that would have made Weston perhaps quite happy. Finally, there are the scores of reproductions of Weston’s Neil gracing everything from the cover of The Male Nude to the various monographs and exhibition catalogues on Edward Weston or the F/64 group, or the art and history of photography itself. Where then are we to locate the real thing in relation to this particular image?

Carrying the inquiry a bit further, we might here examine the nature and quality of Weston’s photograph, which may be justly described as a virtual icon of photographic modernism, an exemplar of Weston’s mature style, and a monument to the rigorous and controlled perfection of so-called straight art photography. Certainly the authority and classical beauty of this photograph derives in part from our knowledgable recognition of precisely that source of beauty Weston drew upon, viewed, framed, and represented in the person of his son Neil. It is, of course, the stylized perfection of Praxiteles’ or Phidias’ marble nudes that we see in Neil’s living torso: the flesh made art as much as the three dimensions of the body have been transformed into two. Headless, armless, legless, even genital-less, this fragment of Neil speaks primarily of pure form. Its eroticism, while present, is tamed — subordinated to the aesthetic which, in any case, constitutes the historic ground rules for the presentation of the nude. But must we not, in the final analysis, consider the real thing to be, at least in part, the living Neil in the year 1926? And does not this final acknowledgment that this originary point must be — as it is for all photography — the living world which has been imprinted on paper further problematic the search for the real thing? Sherrie Levine in fact remarked that when she showed her photographs to a friend he said that they only made him want to see the originals. ‘Of course,’ she replied, ‘and the originals make you want to see that little boy, but when you see the boy, the art is gone.’ And elaborating on this comment, Douglas Crimp has commented:

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For the desire that is initiated by that representation does not come to closure around that little boy, is not at all satisfied by him. The desire of representation exists only insofar that it never be fulfilled, insofar as the original always be deferred. It is only in the absence of the original that representation may take place. And representation takes place because it is 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 and in so doing has shown him what he really meant. The a priori Weston had in mind was not really in his mind at all; it was in the world and Weston only copied it.¹

But Sherrie Levine is concerned with more than making a point about the conditions of representation, more too than underscoring the rather murky notion of what constitutes an ‘original’ within a technology of mechanical reproduction. Like Melville’s Bartleby the Scrivener, Levine’s critical stance is manifest as an act of refusal: refusal of authorship, uncompromising rejection of all notions of self-expression, originality, or subjectivity. Levine, as has been pointed out often enough, does not make photographs; she takes photographs, and this act of constitution, as much as the kind of images she takes, generates a complex analysis and critique of the forms, meanings and conventions of photographic imagery (particularly that which has become canonised as art) at the same time that it comments obliquely on the implications of photography as a museum art.

In earlier work dealing with photography, Levine made copy photographs of reproductions of photographs printed in books or posters, as in the case of the Weston studies of Neil. Alternatively—for example, in her rephotographs of Walker Evans’ FSA photographs—she made copy prints of copy prints. Thus, while conceptually creating a photographic hall of mirrors effect, Levine cogently demonstrated the contradictions implicit in the assimilation of photography into traditional art discourse. In much as appropriation functions by putting visual quotation marks around the stolen image, its critical application lies in its ability to compel the viewer to see dialectically. In Levine’s rephotographs of Eliot Porter’s trees, the mere act of their confiscation, displacement, and re-presentation, enables the viewer to grasp immediately the wholly conventional (and, as Roland Barthes would have said, entirely mythological) scheme in which ‘Nature’ is made to be seen as ‘Beautiful’. Unlike the international typologies of industrial structures made by Hill and Bernd Becher, the Porter photographs are revealed as unintentional typologies; artifacts of culture no less than the Bechers’ steel mills and water towers. Similarly, the rephotographed Walker Evans photographs, whose graininess and obvious screen clearly attest to their already-produced status, underline the cultural and representational codes that structure our reading of respectively the Great Depression, the rural poor, female social victims, and the style of Walker Evans.

Levine’s refusal of traditional notions of authorship has social and political implications as well. The word ‘author’ is etymologically linked to that of ‘authority’ just as it is to ‘authorise’. Historically, the concept of the author is linked to that of property that in the production of the author comes, within the framework of capitalist development, to be understood as property. Copyright legislation protects that property, and in fact Levine’s Weston and Porter rephotographs are quite literally illegal works of art. Too, 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. Enacted against the larger art world context characterised by the cynical (and as has been often noted, predominantly male) effusions of neo-expressionist macho pastiche, Levine’s acerbic and deadpan confiscations serve efficiently to expose the hollowness as well as the specious atavism of such work. To refuse authorship itself functions to puncture the ideology of the artist as the bearer of a privileged subjectivity. Levine is thus a kind of guerrilla feminist within the precincts of the art world—a position shared by a number of other artists using photography within the postmodernist camp.

I chose to begin this essay with a discussion of Sherrie Levine’s work because it illustrates in a rather forceful and dramatic way that the methods and assumptions of traditional art photography and those of various artists employing photography outside the conventional framework of art photography have come to occupy antipodes within photographic discourse and practice. Levine’s work often provokes outrage, nowhere more evident than among the ranks of art photographers. If after a hundred and fifty years of upwardly mobile striving, art photography has been definitively validated as a ‘creative’ fine art, what does it mean that artists such as Levine should so energetically jettison those very values which elevated photography to parity with the other arts? Levine, now in her mid-thirties, has emerged from the art world, as have a considerable number of other artists using photography such as Vikky Alexander, James Casebere, Sarah Charlesworth, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, Cindy Sherman and Jim Welling. They are themselves linked to an older generation of artists such as John Baldessari or, for that matter, Andy Warhol. The list could easily be extended to include a wide range of artists using photography since the mid-sixties that would encompass artists as disparate as the Bechers, Victor Burgin, Jan Dibbets, Gilbert & George, Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, Ed Ruscha, Jeff Wall and William Wegman. As photography galleries have crumpled left and right (in New York in 1983, the casualty lists included Light Gallery, Photograph Gallery, Robert Samuels Gallery, and the Photographic Division of Leo Castelli) Cindy Sherman’s star, for example, has risen meteorically. As the Photography Department of the Museum of Modern Art drifts into blue chip sensibility with no less than four Atget exhibitions or feeble resuscitations of formalist schema (‘Big Pictures’), artists employing photography are in increasing numbers being absorbed into the mainstream art gallery nexus.

These two simultaneous developments—the ghettoisation and marginality of art photography at precisely the moment when the use of photography by artists has become a relative commonplace—deserves some scrutiny. In order to understand the conceptual cul-de-sac that contemporary art photography represents, it is important to trace the assumptions and claims that paralleled (and fueled) its trajectory and then to examine the merit and usefulness of these notions as they exist in the present.

It has long been an uncontested claim in standard photographic history that the work of Paul Strand done in the late teens—and more particularly, its champions by Alfred Stieglitz in the last two issues of Camera Work—signalled the coming
of age of art photography as an authentically modernist, and hence, fully self-conscious art form. For while Steiglitz himself had for most of his career made unmanipulated 'straight' prints, it was Strand's uncompromising formulation of the aesthetics of straight photography, his insistence that photographic excellence lay in the celebration of those very qualities intrinsic to the medium itself, that has traditionally been viewed as the moment of reorientation and renewal of American art photography.

Steiglitz's epithetous designation of Strand as the aesthetic heir apparent would seem a reasonable point of demarcation in the art history of American photography. For although the insistence that the camera possesses its own unique aesthetic has been asserted in various ways since the 1850s, the pictorialist phenomenon supplanted earlier concepts of photographic integrity or purity and instead established a quite different aesthetic agenda. This agenda, however, had a pedigree fully as vulnerable as that of the proto-formalist one: specifically, the presumption that photography, like all the traditional visual arts, could lay claim to the province of the imaginary, the subjective, the inventive — in short, all that might be inscribed within the idea of the creative.

The specific strategies adopted by pictorialist photographers — be they the retrieval of artisanal printing processes, the appropriation of high art subject matter (F Holland Day crucified on the Cross, Gertrude Kasebier's Holy Families, etc.), or the use of gum bichromate and other substances, with extensive working of the negative or print and the concomitant stress on fine photography as the work of hand as well as eye — are now generally supposed to constitute an historical example of the misplaced, but ultimately important energies of art photography at an earlier stage of evolution. Misplaced, because current 'markers' and print manipulators notwithstanding, contemporary photographic taste is predominantly formalist; important, because the activities and production of the Photo-Section were a significant and effective lobby for the legitimation of photography as art. Thus, if on the one hand, Edward Steichen's 1901 self-portrait, in which the photographer is represented as a painter and the pigment print itself disguised as a work of graphic art, is now reckoned to be distinctly un-modernist in its conception, on the other, the impulses that determined its making can be retrospectively recuperated for the progressive cause. Viewed from this position, photography's aspiration to the condition of painting by emulating either the subject or the look of painting was considered by the 1920s and the accompanying emergence of the post-Pictorialist generation — Sheeler, Strand, Weston and the others — to have been an error of means, if not ends.

What I have wished to argue is that the ends of mainstream art photography, what we might consider as its methods or ideology, have remained substantially unchanged throughout all its various permutations — stylistic, technological, and cultural — that it has undergone during its hundred and forty year history. Of far greater importance than the particular manifestations and productions of art photography is the examination of the conditions that define and determine them. What needs to be stressed is that an almost exclusive concentration on the stylistic developments in art photography, no less than the accompanying preoccupation with its exemplary practitioners, tends to obscure the structural discontinuity between the 'retrograde' pictorialism of the earlier part of the century and the triumphant modernism of its successors. Steichen's transparent platinum and gum print nude of 1904 entitled 'In Memoriam' might well seem on the stylistic evidence light years away from the almost hallucinatory clarity of Weston's work of the 1930s, but Steichen's 'it is the artist that creates a work of art, not the medium' and Weston's 'man is the actual medium of expression — not the tool he elects to use as a means' are for all intents and purposes virtually identical formulations. The shared conviction that the art photograph is the expression of the photographer's interior, rather than as in addition to the world's exterior, is, of course, the doxa of art photography and has been a staple of photographic criticism almost from the medium's inception. Implicit in the notion of the photographer's expressive mediation of the world through the use of his or her instrument is a related constellation of assumptions: originality, authorship, authenticity, the primary of subjectivity, assumptions immediately recognisable as those belonging to what Walter Benjamin termed the theology of art. It is the hegemony of these assumptions that integrates within a unified field the photography of Clarence White and Tod Papageorge, the criticism of Sakskehl Hartmann and John Szarkowski. Such is the continuing value and prestige of these notions in photographic criticism and history that they tend to be promiscuously imposed on just about any photographic oeuvre which presents itself as an appropriate subject for contemporary connoisseurship. Thomson and Rile, Atget and Weegee, Salmann and Russell, Missions Heliographiques or 44th Parallel Survey: all tend finally to be grist for the aesthetic mill, irrespective of intention, purpose, application or context.

Insofar as such concepts as originality, self expression and subjectivity have functioned, at least since romanticism, as the very warranty of art, the claims of art photography were a priori ordained to be couched in precisely such terms. 'Nature viewed through a temperament' could be grafted onto the photographic enterprise as easily as to painting or literature and could, moreover, encompass both maker and machine. Thus was met the first necessary condition of the genre art photography: that it be considered, at very least by its puritans, as expressive as well as transcriptive medium.

Why then the need for a pictorialist style at all? And to the extent that experiments of art photography since the 1850s had established a substantial body of argument bolstering the claims to photographic subjectivity, interpretive ability and expressive potential, why nearly half a century later was the battle refought specifically on painting's terms?

Certainly one contributing factor, a factor somewhat elided in the art history of photography, was the second wave of technological innovation that occurred in the 1880s. The fortunes of art photography, no less than those of scientific, documentary, or entrepreneurial photography, have always been materially determined by developments in its technologies and most specifically by its progressive industrialisation. The decade of the eighties witnessed not only the perfection of photogravure and other forms of photomechanical reproduction (making possible the photographically illustrated newspaper and magazine), but the introduction and widespread dissemination of the gelatino-bromide dry plates, perfected enlargers, hand cameras, rapid printing papers, orthochromatic film and plates, and last but not least, the Kodak push button camera. The resulting quantum leap in the sheer ubiquity of photography, its vastly increased accessibility (even to children, as was
now advertised) and the accompanying diminution in the amount of expertise and know-how required to both take and process photographs, compelled the art photographer to separate in every way possible hit or her work from that of the common run of commercial portraitist, Sunday amateur, or family chronicler. In this context, too, it should be pointed out that pictorialism was an international style: in France its most illustrious practitioners were Robert Demachy and Camille Puy; in Germany Heinrich Kuhn, Frank Eugene, Hugo Henneberg and others were working along the same lines, and in the States, Stieglitz and the other members of the Secession effectively promoted pictorialism as the official style of art photography. And while influences ranging from symbolism, the arts and crafts movement, l'art pour l'art, and Jugendstil variously informed the practice of art photography in all these countries, the primary fact to be reckoned with is that art photography has always defined itself — indeed, was compelled to define itself — in opposition to the normative uses and boundless ubiquity of all other photography.

It is suggestive, too, that the pictorialist and Photo-Secession period involved the first comprehensive look at early photography. Calotypes by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson and albumen prints by Julia Margaret Cameron were reproduced in Camera Work, Alvin Langdon Colburn printed positives from negatives by Julia Margaret Cameron, Thomas Keith and Lewis Carroll, and exhibitions of nineteenth-century photography were mounted in France, Germany and Great Britain. These activities were to peak in 1939, the centenary of the public announcement of the daguerreotype, and were to be matched (in fact, exceeded substantially) only in the decades following 1960.

One need not belabour the point to see certain correspondences between the art photography scene of the period of the Photo-Secession and that of the past fifteen years. If gum and oil prints are perhaps not in evidence, contemporary photography galleries and exhibitions are nonetheless replete with the products of 8 × 10 view cameras, palladium prints, platinum prints, dye transfer prints, etc. Such strategies are as much mandated by a thoroughly aestheticised notion of photography as they are by the demands of the art photography market. To those who would counter such a categorisation with remonstrations as to the increasing shoddiness of commercially manufactured materials and the need for archival permanence, I would simply reassert that the art photographer’s aspirations to formal invention, individual expression and signatural style are perpetually circumscripted, if not determined, by manufacturing and production decisions. Indeed, the very size and shape of the photographic image are the result of industrial decisions; the requirements of artists were only taken into account in camera design for a brief historical moment well before the industrialisation of photography.

When the legacy of art photography passed from pictorialism to what Stieglitz described as the ‘brutally direct’ photographic production of Strand and his great contemporaries, a crucial and necessary displacement of the art in art photography was required. No longer located in particular kinds of subject matter, in the blurred and gauzy effects of soft focus or manipulations of negative or print, in allegorical or symbolic meanings, the locus of art was now squarely placed within the sensibility — be it eye or mind — of the photographers themselves. Thus from Heinrich Kuhn’s ‘the photographic instrument, the lifeless machine, is compelled by the superior will of the personality to play the role of the subordinate’ through Paul Strand’s formulation of photography as instrumental ‘to an even fuller and more intense self-realisation’ to Walker Evans’ litany of art photography’s ‘immaterial qualities, from the realms of the subjective’ among which he included ‘perception and penetration: authority and its cousin, assurance, originality of vision, or image innovation; exploration; invention’, to, finally, Tod Papageorge’s ‘as I have gotten older, however, and have continued to work, I have become more concerned with expressing who I am and what understanding’ there exists a continuous strand that has remained unbroken from Camera Work to Camera Arts.

But if the strand has remained continuous, the quality of the art photography produced has not. Few observers of the contemporary art photography scene would dispute, I think, the assertion that the work produced in the past fifteen years has neither the quality nor the authority of that of photographic modernism’s heroic period, a period whose simultaneous apogee and rupture might be located in the work of Robert Frank. Too, it seems clear that the obscurities for the so-called photography boom may have something to do with the general state of exhaustion, academism and repetitiveness in so much art photography as much as with the collapse of an over-extended market.

The oracular pronouncements of Evans, Stieglitz, Strand, or Weston often have a portentous or even pompous ring, but the contemporary art photography scene is, I would suggest, bullied by the vitality and authority of the modernism they espoused. To the extent that a modernist aesthetic retained legitimacy, credibility, and most importantly, function as the vessel and agent of advanced art, it permitted for the production of a corpus of great, now canonical, photography. The eclipse — or collapse, as the case may be — of modernism is coincident with art photography’s final and triumphant vindication, its wholesale and unqualified acceptance into all the institutional precincts of fine art: museum, gallery, university, and art history.

The conditions surrounding and determining art photography production were now, of course, substantially altered. No longer in an adversarial position, but in a state of parity with the traditional fine arts, two significant tendencies emerged by the early 1960s. One was the appearance of photography — typically appropriated from the mass media — in the work of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol as well as its increased deployment by a group of conceptual artists such as John Baldessari. The second tendency was a pronounced academisation of art photography both in a literal sense (photographers trained in art school and universities, the conferring of graduate degrees in photography) and in a stylistic sense: that is to say, the retrieval and/or reworking of photographic strategies now both fully conventionalised and formalised, derived from the image bank of modernist photography, or even from modernist painting, and producing a kind of neo-pictorialist hybrid.

What was — and is — important about the two types of photographic practice was the distinct and explicit opposition built into these different uses. For the art photographer, the issues and intentions remained those traditionally associated with the aestheticising use and forms of the medium: the primacy of formal organisation and values, the autonomy of the photographic image, the subjectivisation of vision, the fetishising of print quality, and the unquestioned assumption of photographic authorship. In direct contrast, the artists who began to employ photography did so in the service of vastly different ends. More often than not, photography figured in
their works in its most ubiquitous and normative incarnations. Thus, it was conscripted as a readymade image from either advertising or the mass media in its various and sundry manifestations in the quotidian visual environment, or alternatively, employed in its purely transcriptional and documentary capacities. In this latter usage, it did service to record site specific works, objects or events that had been orchestrated, constructed or arranged to be constituted anew, preserved, and represented in the camera image.

It is from this welter of the most interesting and provocative new work in photography that this essay is intended to come. Although this relatively recent outpouring of art production utilizing photography covers a broad spectrum of concerns, intentions, and widely differing formal strategies, the common denominator is its collective resistance to any type of formal analysis, psychological interpretation, or aesthetic reading. Consistent with the general tenor of postmodern practice, such work takes as its point of departure not the hermetic enclave of aesthetic self-referencing (art about art, photography about photography), but rather, the social and cultural world of which it is a part. Thus, if one of the major claims of modernist art theory was the insistence on the autonomy and purity of the work of art, post-modern practice hinges on the assertion of contingency and the primacy of cultural codes. It follows that a significant proportion of postmodern art based on photographic images is animated by a critical, or, if one prefers, deconstructive impulse. The intention of such work is less about provoking feeling, than provoking thought.

In addition to the work of Sherrie Levine with which this paper opened, I would like briefly to consider here the work of four other artists who may be seen as having a shared agenda, albeit with different inflections and emphases. Appropriators all, their work nonetheless ranges from entirely unmediated confiscation, as in the case of Levine, to the recropped, repositioned assemblages of Vikky Alexander and Silvia Kolbowski, to the composed texts superimposed over Barbara Kruger's parodied images, to the heroicized fragments of glossy advertisements that Richard Prince isolates and reshoots.

What gives their work its integrity, its cutting edge, is the common enterprise of making the invisible visible - a goal whose strategies are now determined by a new arena: the world of mass produced images themselves. In contrast with many of the art movements of the earlier part of the century which promised liberation, the unshackling of vision and perception, these artists are clearly more modest in their goals, more pessimistic in what they conceive of as possible in what Guy Debord termed The Society of the Spectacle. Nonetheless, in compelling a conscious reading of the ideology inscribed in various photographic uses, and in inventing strategies that unravel the connotational structures, these artists may be seen as continuing that tradition of art making which views its mission the unmasking of appearance by revealing its codes.

In the case of Richard Prince the dialectical, and hence, deconstructive readings effected by Levine's tactics, are arrived at by somewhat different means. Taking as his object of inquiry the highly mediated and technologically sophisticated advertising image, Prince has progressively sought to counter the manipulated and often synthetically composed advertising image with a comparable degree of simulation in its own appropriations. In this sense, Kate Linker has proposed that the theoretical model for Prince's practice be located in Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum, which surpasses representation and reproduction, and instead produces a synthetic 'hyperreality', a 'real without origin or reality'. Much of the power of Prince's work derives from his ability to make the concept of the commodity fetish at once concrete and visible. The hyped-up, almost hallucinatory quality of his details of cigarette ads, expensive watches, shimmering whiskey logos, et al., are made to reveal their own strategies of overdetermination. There is an obsessional quality about Prince's work which has little to do with irony (and its attendant aspect of distancing) that informs much appropriative practice. The element of nightmare that subtly attaches itself to the erotic glitter and voluptuousness of the commodity (or the ambience of the commodity) is similar in idea to the traditional Christian emblem of Luxuria — the head of a beautiful woman merging into the body of a serpent. Prince's rejection of traditional notions of authorship, while less programmatic than Levine's, have nonetheless originated in a comparable understanding of the conditions of spectacular society. Prince has quite precisely described his relation to authorship (as well as his own working method) in the following text:

His way to make it new was to make it again... and making it again was enough for him and certainly, personally speaking, 'almost him'.

The notion of identity as 'almost him' functions as an analogue to a fully conventionalised reality composed of images or simulacra; reality can no more be located in the world than 'authenticity' in the author.

For Silvia Kolbowski and Vikky Alexander the nature of their appropriations, and the operations they place upon them, mark their concerns as more centrally located within feminist discourse. Informed by aspects of psychoanalytic, linguistic, and feminist theory, Kolbowski's Model Pleasure, composed of seven discrete but integrally related images, brackets cropped close-ups of five veiled models, with a woman 'veiled' behind venetian blinds, and a single shot of a man looking at a woman 'veiled' by dark glasses. Through appropriations, cropping, positioning and serial organisation, Kolbowski contrives a critical reading of the fashion image calculated to rupture the fictions of such representation. Voceurism depicted within the series is counterpointed with the spectator's, a strategy that illuminates the larger ideological system in which the construction of the female (as different, as Other) inevitably relegates her to the object of the gaze (which is always male) rather than permitting her to be the origin of it. When the image of the woman is presented for woman (as is generally the case with fashion photography) the female viewer must inevitably project her own sexual identity within this narcissistic cul-de-sac of being locked-at, and hence existing by and for the eyes of men. Similarly, the constellation of sexual mythologies — women as emas, as mystery — that are integrally bound with objectification and oppression are literally demonstrated in Kolbowski's orchestration of images. The final image — a woman's veiled and smiling mouth, brushed by a male hand — is placed upside down, in order, as Kolbowski explains, 'to make an analogy between the feminine gaze and the woman spoken'. For central to feminist theory is the recognition that woman does not speak herself; rather, she is spoken for and all that implies: looked at, imaged, mystified and objectified.

Like Kolbowski's, Vikky Alexander's work of the past few years is grounded in a feminist critique of fashion imagery, the ideological terrain in which women
are presented not only as ritual objects, but as commodities. Alexander has set herself the conceptual problem of rhetorically re-presenting the given image in such a way that its hidden codes are made legible. Through relatively subtle interventions in the original image (cropping in such a way that the ritualised aspects of pose or ‘look’ are thereby accentuated), by repetition and/or format (diptych, triptych, etc.), Alexander compels awareness of not only the codes themselves, but the way they function.

In Ecstasy, three identical fashion photographs of a female model alone are alternated with two identical ones depicting a male and female model together. Part of the whole of the piece resides in its play with the notion of quotation itself – as it functions in language as well as tactically – as an artmaking strategy. For in the very act of describing such imagery in language, we must have recourse to the use of quotes in order to indicate its various levels of simulation. Accordingly, we would begin by noting that all the female models display an ‘ecstatic’ expression. Certainly not the expression of Bernini’s St Teresa, or Titian’s Mary Magdalene, but a more up-to-date version: the conventionalised ecstasy which has emerged recently in fashion photography; closed, shiny eyes, wet, slightly opened mouth. We would then go on to note that the couple are ‘making love’. The quotational act by which the work has been constructed is thereby made to illustrate and expose the highly mediated nature of the images’ content. The inclusion of the single model – equally ‘ecstatic’ – insures our understanding that the depicted ecstasy, no less than the depiction of the women themselves, is a spectacle. Further, the spectacle of the ecstatic woman is intimately bound with representational structures of voyeurism, narcissism and power. By de-naturing such images, Alexander unmask them.

Barbara Kruger’s work – aggressive, graphic and occasionally almost brutal – appropriates not only the images themselves, but the ‘look’, address, and discursive mode of certain types of mass media institutions (the tabloid press, the billboard, the poster). Kruger’s modus operandi consists of cunning table-turning, whereby all the communicative tools in the arsenal of power are deployed against themselves. Appropriating the disembodied voice of patriarchal authority (expressed in bold face type), Kruger then makes superpositions against found images (usually crude, rather anonymous looking ones) that are made to double back against themselves. Very rarely, this is effected by having the image in some sense contradict the text. For example, a narrowly cropped image of a man kissing the hand of an (unseen) woman is emblazoned with the text ‘You reenact the dance of insertion and wounding’ with ‘dance of’ and ‘wounding’ in larger, differentiated typeface. More typically, however, the juxtaposition of Kruger’s composed texts and found images creates new and subversive meanings for both. Thus, utilising a thoroughly stereotypical image conventionally signifying mother love – the tiny baby hand clutching the mother’s finger – Kruger distills a far more trenchant observation; ‘Your every wish (in small type face over the two hands) is our command’. Roland Barthes’ concept of caption and text functioning as anchorage and relay is nowhere more eloquently demonstrated than in Kruger’s iconic/graphic sleight-of-hands. Much of her work is extremely witty (a group of formally dressed men laughingly giving one of their number a ‘going over’ is captioned, ‘You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men’), a strategy as capable of critical analysis as any other.

Differences in emphasis, tactics and degree of appropriation notwithstanding, Alexander, Kolbowski, Kruger, Levine and Prince are artists whose concerns are grounded in the cultural, the political, the sexual. Viewed individually, collectively, or as sample representatives of postmodernist art practice, their work contrasts vividly with the parochialism, insularity, and conservatism of much art photography.

The title of this paper – winning the game when the rules have been changed – relates to precisely this phenomenon. Having achieved institutional legitimation as a fine art among the others, art photography remains rooted in a conceptual impasse of its own making. Most art photographers, particularly those established within the past fifteen years or so, and now ensconced within the photography departments across the land, give little thought to the general collapse of the modernism which provided the ballast for the triumphant rise of art photography. The teaching of photography tends to be conditioned off from what goes on in the rest of the art department. So while young painters are reading art magazines and often as not following to some degree developments in film, performance or video, photography students are reading photography magazines, disputing the merits of documentary mode over self-expression, or resurrecting onto the fourth generation an exhausted formalism that can no longer generate either heat or light.

Often the reaction of art photographers to postmodernist photographic work is bafflement, if not a sense of affront. The irony is that photography, a medium which by its very nature is so utterly bound to the world and its objects, should have had, in a variety of ways, to divorce itself from this primary relationship in order to claim for itself a photographic aesthetics.

Notes


2 The Société Française de Photographie, for example, from its inception in 1851 forbade any retouching on the photographic submissions to its regular exhibitions.


4 In 1937 the important exhibition on the history of photography was mounted at the Museum of Modern Art which resulted in Beaumont Newhall’s now standard text History of Photography. For a discussion of the significance of this exhibition, see Christopher Phillips, ‘The Judgment Seat of Photography’, October 22, Fall 1982, pp. 27–63.


6 An examination of these two related phenomena may be found in Douglas Crimp’s ‘The Museum’s Old, The Library’s New Subject’, Parachute 22, Spring 1981, pp. 32–7.
