

Appropriating Appropriation

The strategy of appropriation no longer attests to a particular stance toward the conditions of contemporary culture. To say this is both to suggest that appropriation *did* at first seem to entail a critical position and to admit that such a reading was altogether too simple. Appropriation, pastiche, quotation—these methods extend to virtually every aspect of our culture, from the most cynically calculated products of the fashion and entertainment industries to the most committed critical activities of artists, from the most clearly retrograde works (Michael Graves's buildings, Hans Jürgen Syberberg's films, Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, David Salle's paintings) to the most seemingly progressive practices (Frank Gehry's architecture, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's cinema, Sherrie Levine's photography, Roland Barthes's texts). If all aspects of the culture use this new operation, then the operation itself cannot indicate a specific reflection upon the culture.

The very ubiquity of a new mode of cultural production does, however, underscore the fact that there has been an important cultural shift in recent years, a shift that I still want to designate as that between modernism and postmodernism, even if the latter term is utterly confusing in its current usages. *Postmodernism* will perhaps begin to acquire meaning beyond the simple naming of a *Zeitgeist* when we are able to employ it to make distinctions within all the various practices of appropriation. What I would like to do here, then, is to suggest some ways in which these distinctions might be approached.

To begin, I should perhaps look more closely at the assertions of the regressive/progressive character of the uses of appropriation by the artists previously named. How, for example, can we distin-

guish Graves's use of pastiche from that of Gehry? For the sake of convenience, let us take the most famous building by each architect—Graves's Portland Public Services Building and Gehry's own house in Santa Monica. The Portland building displays an eclectic mix of past architectural styles drawn generally from the orbit of classicism. But it is an already eclectic classicism to which Graves turns—the neoclassicism of Boullée and Ledoux, the pseudoclassicism of Art Deco public buildings, occasional flourishes of beaux-arts pomp. Gehry's house, in contrast, appropriates only a single element from the past. It is not, however, an element of style; it is an already existing 1920s clapboard house. This house is then collaged with (surrounded by, shot through with) mass-produced, from-the-catalogue materials of the construction industry—corrugated iron, chain-link fence, plywood, asphalt.

Differences between these two practices are immediately obvious: Graves appropriates from the architectural past; Gehry appropriates laterally, from the present. Graves appropriates style; Gehry, material. What different readings result from these two modes of appropriation? Graves's approach to architecture returns to a premodernist understanding of the art as a creative combination of elements derived from a historically given vocabulary (these elements are also said to derive from nature, but nature as understood in the nineteenth century). Graves's approach is thus like that of beaux-arts architects, against whom modernist architects would react. Although there can be no illusion that the elements of style are originated by the architect, there is a very strong illusion indeed of the wholeness of the end product and of the architect's creative contribution to the uninterrupted, ongoing tradition of architecture.

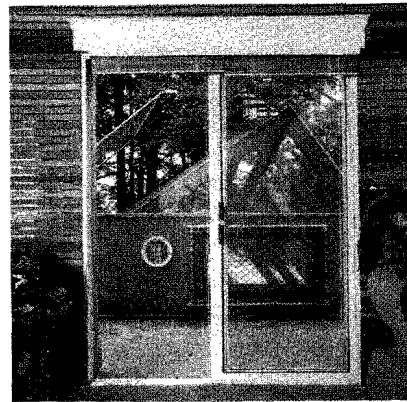
Graves's eclecticism thus maintains the integrity of a self-enclosed history of architectural style, a pseudohistory immune to problematic incursions from real historical developments (one of which would be modern architecture, if it is considered as more than merely another style).

Gehry's practice, however, retains the historical lessons of modernism even as it criticizes modernism's idealist dimension from a postmodernist perspective. Gehry takes from history an actual object (the existing house), not an abstracted style. His use of present-day products of the building trade reflects on the current material conditions of architecture. Unlike the sandstone or marble that Graves uses or imitates, Gehry's materials cannot pretend to a timeless universality. Moreover, the individual elements of Gehry's house resolutely maintain their identities. They do not combine into an illusion of a seamless whole. The house appears as a collage of fragments, declaring its contingency as would a movie set seen on a sound stage (a comparison this house directly solicits), and these fragments never add up to a style. Gehry's house is a response to a specific architectural program; it cannot be indiscriminately reapplied in another context. Graves's vocabulary, on the other hand, will seem to him as appropriate to a tea kettle or a line of fabrics as to a showroom or a skyscraper.

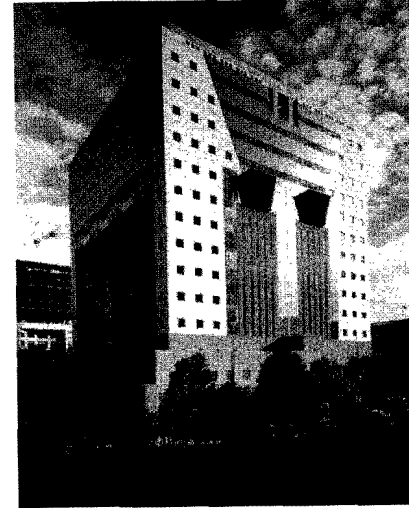
What, then, becomes of these differences when applied to photography? Can analogous distinctions be made between the photographic borrowings of Robert Mapplethorpe on the one hand and Sherrie Levine on the other? Mapplethorpe's photographs, whether portraits, nudes, or still lifes (and it is not coincidental that they fall so neatly into these traditional artistic genres), appropriate the stylistics of prewar studio photography. Their compositions, poses, lighting, and even their subjects (*mondain* personalities, glacial nudes, tulips) recall *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* at that historical juncture when such artists as Edward Steichen and Man Ray contributed to those publications an intimate knowledge of international art photography. Mapplethorpe's abstraction and fetishization of objects refer,

through the mediation of the fashion industry, to Edward Weston, while his abstraction of the *subject* refers to the neoclassical pretenses of George Platt Lynes. Just as Graves finds his style in a few carefully selected moments of architectural history, so Mapplethorpe constructs from his historical sources a synthetic "personal" vision that is yet another creative link in photographic history's endless chain of possibilities.

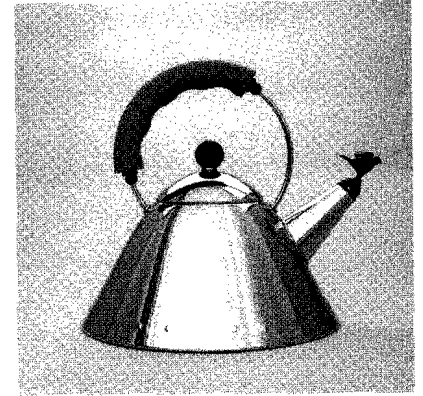
When Levine wished to make reference to Edward Weston and to the photographic variant of the neoclassical nude, she did so by simply rephotographing Weston's pictures of his young son Neil—no combinations, no transformations, no additions, no synthesis. Like the 1920s house that forms the core of Gehry's design, Weston's nudes are appropriated whole. In such an undisguised theft of already existing images, Levine lays no claim to conventional notions of artistic creativity. She makes use of the images, but not to constitute a style of her own. Her appropriations have only functional value for the particular historical discourses into which they are inserted. In the case of the Weston nudes, that discourse is the very one in which Mapplethorpe's photographs naively participate. In this respect, Levine's appropriation reflects on the strategy of appropriation itself—the appropriation by Weston of classical sculptural style; the appropriation by Mapplethorpe of Weston's style; the appropriation by the institutions of high art of both Weston and Mapplethorpe, indeed of photography in general; and finally, photography as a tool of appropriation. Using photography instrumentally as Levine does, she is not confined to the specific medium of photography. She can also appropriate paintings (or reproductions of paintings). In contrast, the rejection of photography as a possible tool guarantees the atavism of the painters' recent pastiches, since they remain dependent on modes of imitation/transformation that are no different from those practiced by nineteenth-century academicians. Like Graves and Mapplethorpe, such painters appropriate style, not material, except when they use the traditional form of collage. Only Levine has been canny enough to appropriate painting



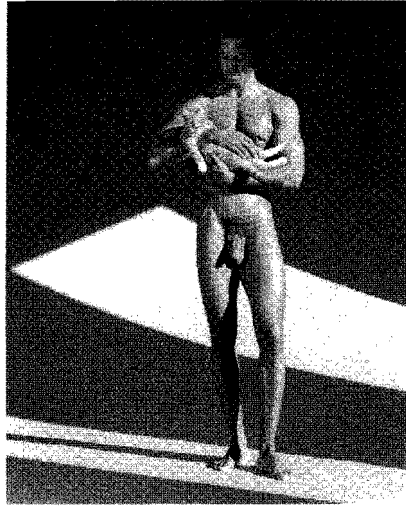
Frank Gehry, *Frank Gehry House*, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (photos Tim Street-Porter/Esto).



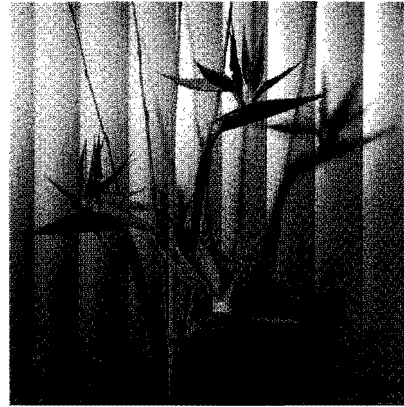
Michael Graves, *The Portland Building*, 1980 (photo Proto Acme).



Michael Graves, tea kettle designed for Alessi, 1985 (photo William Taylor).



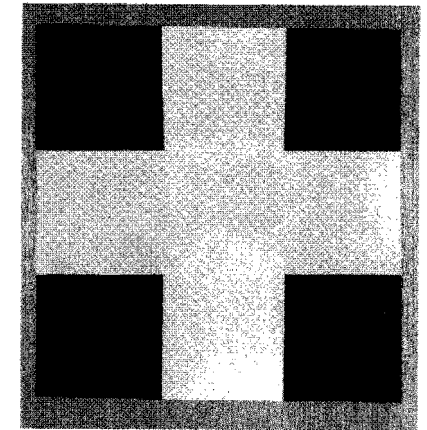
Robert Mapplethorpe, *Thomas and Amos*, 1987 (photo courtesy the Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe).



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Bird of Paradise*, 1981 (photo courtesy the Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe).



Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (After Alexander Rodchenko: 3)*, 1987 (photo Zindman/Fremont, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery).



Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (After Ilya Chasnick)*, 1984 (photo Zindman/Fremont, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery).

whole, in its material form, by staging, in collaboration with Louise Lawler, an exhibition at/of the studio of the late painter Dimitri Merinoff.

The centrality of photography within the current range of practices makes it crucial to a theoretical distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Not only has photography so thoroughly saturated our visual environment as to make the invention of visual images seem archaic, but it is also clear that photography is too multiple, too useful to other discourses, ever to be wholly contained within traditional definitions of art. Photography will always exceed the institutions of art, will always participate in nonart practices, will always threaten the insularity of art's discourse. In this regard, I want to return to the context in which photography first suggested to me the moment of transition to postmodernism.

In my essay "On the Museum's Ruins," I suggested that Robert Rauschenberg's works of the early 1960s threatened the museum's order of discourse. The vast array of objects that the museum had always attempted to systematize now reinvaded the institution as pure heterogeneity. What struck me as crucial was these works' destruction of the guarded autonomy of modernist painting through the introduction of photography onto the surface of the canvas. This move was important not only because it spelled the extinction of the traditional production mode but also because it questioned all the claims to authenticity according to which the museum determined its body of objects and its field of knowledge.

When the determinants of a discursive field begin to break down, a whole range of new possibilities for knowledge opens up that could not have been foreseen from within the former field. And in the years following Rauschenberg's appropriation of photographic images—his very real disintegration of the boundaries between art and nonart—a whole new set of aesthetic activities *did* take place. These activities could not be contained within the space of the museum or accounted for by the museum's discursive system. The crisis thus precipitated was met, of course, by attempts to deny

that any significant change had occurred and to recuperate traditional forms. A new set of appropriations aided this recuperation: revivals of long-outmoded techniques such as painting *al fresco* (albeit on portable panels to ensure salability) and casting sculpture in bronze, rehabilitations of *retardataire* artists such as nineteenth-century *pompier*s and between-the-wars realists, and reevaluations of hitherto secondary products such as architects' drawings and commercial photography.

It was in relation to this last response to the museum's crisis—the wholesale acceptance of photography as a museum art—that it seemed to me a number of recent photographic practices using the strategy of appropriation functioned. Thus, Richard Prince's appropriation of advertising images, his thrusting unaltered pictures into the context of the art gallery, exactly duplicated—but in an undisguised manner—the appropriation by art institutions of earlier commercial photography. In like fashion, it appeared that the so-called directorial mode of art photography (which I prefer to call *auteur* photography) was wryly mocked by Laurie Simmons's setup shots of doll houses and plastic cowboys or by Cindy Sherman's ersatz film stills, which implicitly attacked *auteurism* by equating the known artifice of the actress in front of the camera with the supposed authenticity of the director behind it.

Certainly I did not expect this work simply to function as a programmatic or instrumental critique of the institutional force of the museum. Like Rauschenberg's pictures, all works made within the compass of existing art institutions will inevitably find their discursive life and actual resting place within those institutions. But when these practices begin, even if very subtly, to accommodate themselves to the desires of the institutional discourse—as in the case of Prince's extreme mediation of the advertising image or Sherman's abandonment of the movie still's *mise-en-scène* in favor of close-ups of the "star"—they allow themselves simply to enter that discourse (rather than to intervene within it) on a par with the very objects they had once appeared ready to displace. And in this way the strat-

egy of appropriation becomes just another academic category—a thematic—through which the museum organizes its objects.¹

A particularly illuminating example of the current conditions of art is provided again by the work of Rauschenberg. In his recent work he has returned to one of his early interests—photography. But now he uses photography not as a reproductive technology through which images can be transferred from one place in the culture to another—from, say, the daily newspaper to the surface of painting—but rather as an art medium traditionally conceived. Rauschenberg has become, in short, a photographer. And what does he find with his camera, what does he see through his lens, but all those objects in the world that look like passages from his own art. Rauschenberg thus appropriates his own work, converts it from material to style, and delivers it up in this new form to satisfy the museum's desire for appropriated photographic images.

Notes

1. The reference here was pointed: this essay was written for the catalogue of *Image Scavengers: Photography*, part of a double exhibition also including *Image Scavengers: Painting*, presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, December 8, 1982–January 30, 1983, using “appropriation” as an organizing theme.