

# APPROPRIATING APPROPRIATION

DOUGLAS CRIMP

O

ver the past few years it has become increasingly clear that 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. For appropriation, pastiche, quotation—these methods can now be seen to 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' buildings, Hans Jurgen 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' texts). And if all aspects of the culture use this new operational mode, then the mode itself cannot articulate a specific reflection upon that culture.

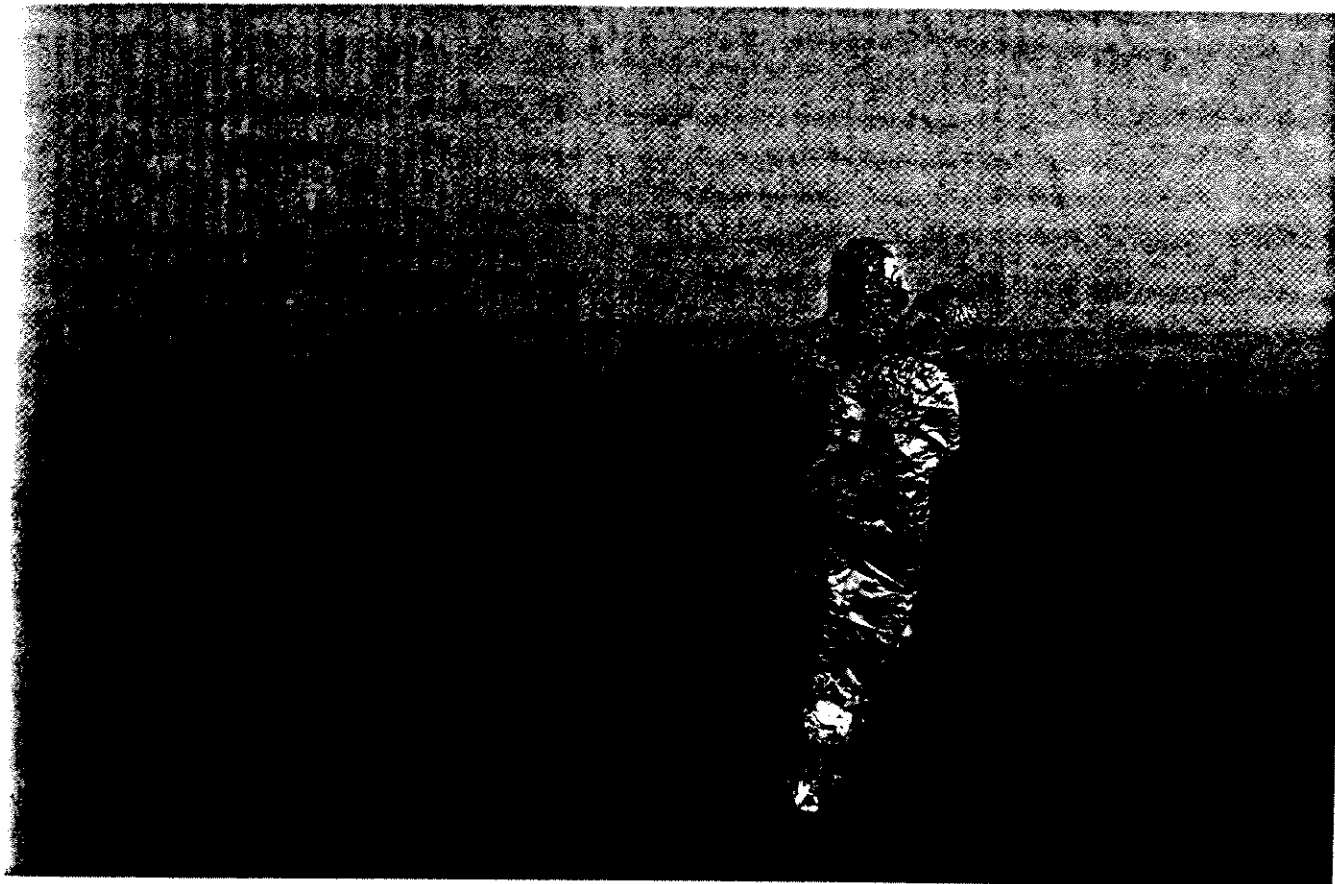
On the other hand, the very ubiquity of a new mode of cultural production does underscore the fact that there has been an important cultural shift in recent years, a shift that I still want to designate as that between modernism and postmodernism, even if the latter term is utterly confusing in its current 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 named above. How, for example, can we distinguish Graves' use of pastiche from that of Gehry? For the sake of convenience, let's take the most famous building by each architect—Graves' recently completed 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 a particular brand of classicism, an already eclectic classicism, to which Graves turns—the neo-classicism of Boullée and Ledoux, the pseudo-classicism of Art Deco public buildings, occasional flourishes of Beaux-Arts pomp. Gehry's house, by contrast, appropriates only a single element from the past. It is not, however, an element of style; it is an already-existing 1920s 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, then, immediately obvious: Graves appropriates from the architectural past; Gehry appropriates laterally, from the present. Graves appropriates style; Gehry, material. In what different readings do these two modes of appropriation result? Graves' approach to architecture returns to a premodernist understanding of the art as a creative combination of elements derived from a historically given vocabulary (they are also said to derive from nature, but nature as understood in the nineteenth century). Graves' approach is thus equivalent to that of the Beaux-Arts architect, against which the modernists would react. Although there can be no illusion that the elements of style are originated by the architect himself, 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' eclecticism thus maintains the integrity of a self-enclosed history of architectural style, a pseudo-history immune to problematic incursions from real historical developments (one of which would be modern architecture itself if considered as more than merely another style).

Gehry's practice, by contrast, retains the historical lessons of modernism even as it criticizes its idealist dimension from a postmodernist perspective. Gehry's house takes from history an actual object (the existing house), not an abstracted style. The present-day products of the building trade reflect nothing other than the material conditions of the present moment in history. Unlike the marble that Graves uses, 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 remains a collage of fragments, declaring its contingency as would a movie set seen on a sound stage (a comparison which this house

JIMMY DE SANA  
*Aluminum Foil*, 1980



directly solicits), and these fragments do not add up to a style. Gehry's house is a unique response to a particular architectural program; it cannot be indiscriminately reapplied to another situation. Graves' vocabulary, on the other hand, will seem to him as appropriate to a teapot 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 their intimate knowledge of international art photography. Mapplethorpe's abstraction and fetishization of objects thus 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 house, Weston's nudes were 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 upon 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). It is, by contrast, the rejection of photography as a tool that guarantees the atavism of the painters' 30

recent pastiches, since they remain dependent upon 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 herself has been canny enough to appropriate painting whole, in its material form, by staging an exhibition at/of the studio of the late painter Dimitri Merinoff.



SHERRIE LEVINE  
*After Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*  
1982  
Original in color

RICHARD PRINCE  
Untitled, 1982



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 an archaic idea, but it is 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, always participate in nonart practices, 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:

While it was only with slight discomfort that Rauschenberg was called a painter throughout the first decade of his career, when he systematically embraced photographic images in the early '60s it became less and less possible to think of his work as *painting*. It was instead a hybrid form of *printing*. Rauschenberg had moved definitively from techniques of *production* (combines, assemblages) to techniques of *reproduction* (silkscreens, transfer drawings). And it is this move that requires us to think of Rauschenberg's art as postmodernist. Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fantasy of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined.

When I wrote that paragraph two and a half years ago, what had struck me as crucial about Rauschenberg's early '60s works was their destruction of the guarded autonomy of modernist painting through the introduction of photography onto the surface of the canvas. This was important not only because it threatened the extinction of the traditional production mode, but also because it questioned all the claims to authenticity according to which the major social institution of art—the museum—determined its body of objects and its field of knowledge. (When the determinants of a field of knowledge begin to be broken down, a whole range of new possibilities for knowledge opens up, a range that could not even 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 esthetic operations and activities *did* take place.

These activities could not be contained within the space of the museum or accounted for by the museum's system of knowledge. The crisis thus precipitated was met, of course, by all manner of attempts to deny that any significant change had occurred and to recuperate traditional forms. A whole new set of appropriations aided this recuperation: appropriations of long-outmoded techniques such as painting *al fresco* (albeit on portable panels, of course) and casting sculpture in bronze, rehabilitations of *retardataire* and reactionary 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 of unaltered pictures into the context of the art gallery, exactly duplicated—but in a determinedly degraded 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' setup shots of dollhouses 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 instrumentally or even didactically in its response to the institutional force of the museum. Like Rauschenberg's works, all works made within the compass of the present art institutions will inevitably find their life and their resting place within those institutions. But when those 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 strategy of appropriation becomes just another academic category—a thematic—through which the museum organizes its objects.

A particularly illuminating example of the current conditions of art is provided again by the work of Rauschenberg. In his latest work he has returned to one of his early interests—photography. But not photography 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 a painting—but rather photography 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.