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The feminism of Sherrie Levine
through the prism of the supposed “death of the author”

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Hélène Trespeuch

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An American artist born in 1947, Sherrie Levine began her art career in New York at the end of the 1970s, taking part in particular in “Pictures”, the founding exhibition of Appropriationism, organised in 1977 by the art critic Douglas Crimp in the gallery Artists Space. A committed member of this movement, she very quickly demonstrated a radical approach that she shared with Richard Prince, that of rephotography. At this time both artists based their work on existing photographs, more specifically on the rephotography of photographic prints, thereby fiercely calling into question the traditional conception of the artwork as an original production by a creator.

Taking this approach, the two artists shared – with many others associated with appropriationism, including many women, such as Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler and Cindy Sherman, but also Jack Goldstein and Robert Longo¹ – a desire to show up and deconstruct a number of stereotypes conveyed by the media and/or art. Thus, between 1977 and 1980, in her series of *Untitled Film Stills* Cindy Sherman drew attention to female archetypes of the 1950s, which she modelled herself, as they were created and disseminated by the cinema of the period, in particular by B movies. The pin-up is often featured, as is the fragile and unstable woman. Shortly afterwards, in 1980, Richard Prince rephotographed the

¹ For a detailed history of appropriationism and the work of its proponents, see the exhibition catalogue, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2009.

advertisements of the cigarette manufacturer Marlboro, which featured cowboys from the American West, in which he identified highly effective advertising strategies: although no logo was included in the images, the photographs could easily be associated with the famous cigarette brand by the public of the time, and can still even today. It thus became relatively evident that the myth of the free and virile cowboy had been exploited to help conceal the harmfulness of the product being promoted².

It was in 1980 in particular that Sherrie Levine became known with her series *After....*. In this she rephotographed reproductions of famous photographs by great photographers of the past, such as Walker Evans and Edward Weston. Although an attempt to undermine the authority of the author is clear in this approach, and thus also the originality of the work concerned, it was also her intention to question the process of the photograph becoming an image, which, itself a multiple, is a technique that allows the multiple production of images despite the loss of quality, given that the initial image is not reproduced from the original negative. Considered from this perspective, Sherrie Levine's appropriationism seems very remote from the work of Prince or Sherman, that attacks the stereotypes in our image-saturated society by which the construction of our individual identity – for both women and men – is influenced. That being the case, questioning the feminist dimension of Sherrie Levine's work may seem incongruous as it clearly escapes the awareness of the viewer, who only focuses on her shots of photographic prints. However, as she stated in 1986:

“As a woman, I felt there was no room for me. There was all this representation, in all this now painting, of male desire. The whole art system was geared to celebrating these objects of male desire. Where, as a woman artist, could I situate myself?”³

This view can be better understood in the light of the works Sherrie Levine produced in 1979: first, photographs of photographs of model mothers with their child, with the image itself cut in the shape of a child's head in profile (see the cover of *Real Life* of March 1979); second, photographs of images she found in the press or advertisements that depicted the active woman of the period, which she showed within the contour of the bust of an American president as seen on American coins (see the series *President*, 1979). Like Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine engaged in a manifest deconstruction of feminine ideals constructed by the

² The myth of the cowboy, a key figure in the construction of the American identity, has in particular been promulgated in Western films since the early 20th century.

³ Sherrie Levine, quoted by Gerald Marzorati, “Art in the (Re) Making”, in *Art News*, Vol. 85, May 1986, pp. 96-97.

media so as to better illustrate their illusory nature and commercial exploitation. In view of these earlier works, the *After...* series might also be considered from this feminist approach⁴. From that time, the artists on which Levine cast her appropriationist eye were viewed in a new light: it was no longer a case of simply undermining the originality of celebrated photographers of modern art but of positioning herself as a woman in its still overly masculine historiography.

Does Sherrie Levine's series *After...* deserve the description "feminist"? Probably, but it is certainly less direct than the earlier generation. With regard to this, Douglas Eklund, the curator of the exhibition "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984", which was held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2009, rightly made reference to two other appropriationist artists:

"Sherman and Laurie Simmons have both commented on the divide between them and the elder generation of more explicitly feminist artists. 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. To say you were a feminist woman was for them redundant. To make their art explicitly feminist seemed like allegiance to a cause that did not account for the specificity of individual experience. [...] These younger women artists were part of feminism's second wave; for them, gender and sexuality were part of a larger nexus between representation and power [...]."⁵

This description is suited equally well to Sherrie Levine, who belongs with others to the group of "theoretical girls" identified in 1978 by the photographer Jeff Wall.⁶

This decision to not (or no longer) develop an explicitly feminist art, but instead favour a subversive art necessitating a certain cultural baggage on the part of the viewer, was one of the criticisms most frequently directed at the art of Sherrie Levine, or at least it was one of the

⁴ See Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art" [*Artforum*, 1982], p. 135: "Enter the female dandy, whose disdain has been sharpened by the experience of phallographic oppression, and whose sense of resistance to domination is therefore more acute than that of her male colleagues, if they still exist." See Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism", Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), p. 73: "[...] is her refusal of authorship not in fact a refusal of the role of creator as 'father' of his work, of the paternal rights assigned to the author by law? (This reading of Levine's strategies is supported by the fact that the images she appropriates are invariably images of the Other: women, nature, children, the poor, the insane...). Levine's disrespect for paternal authority suggests that her activity is less one of appropriation – a laying hold and grasping – and more one of expropriation: she expropriates the appropriators."

⁵ Douglas Eklund, "Image Art After Conceptualism: CalArts, Hallwalls, and Artists Space", *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, op. cit., pp. 143-44.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*

limits that was often pointed up. Indeed, how is it possible to develop an effective critical discourse by elaborating work that proves, in more than one way, to be coded, non-universal? In order to grasp and appreciate the critical and feminist force of the *After...* series, viewers must necessarily know the history of photography during the first half of the 20th century in order to understand appropriationist logic; similarly, in order to fully grasp the scope of her technique of rephotography, they had also to be aware that Sherrie Levine was taking a feminist stance.⁷

According to artist Martha Rosler, who in contrast was then engaging in an explicitly political art, the use of appropriation prevented Sherrie Levine's critical and, in particular, feminist aspirations from taking a convincing form. In 1982 she remarked on appropriationist techniques in general, though without mentioning Sherrie Levine by name, saying that "[...] replicating oppressive forms, whether by quoting them directly or through the fashioning of simulacra, may replicate oppressiveness".⁸ For the critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau, on the other hand, Sherrie Levine's work is indeed highly critical but that this critique is restricted to the world of art. In her article *Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics*, Solomon-Godeau points out that it is above all a question of a critique within an art world that has remained overly modernist, that is to say that it celebrates originality, autonomy and the aura of the work of art, and, more specifically, of a radical challenge to the modernist conception of the art of photography. She notes in passing that the feminist dimension of Sherrie Levine's work "[...] represented a theoretically more sophisticated and necessary departure from the essentialism and literalism prevalent in many of the feminist art practices that emerged in the Seventies".⁹ However, no analysis of this supposed feminist component of Sherrie Levine's work is offered.

Considering this theoretical debate of the 1980s objectively, it is especially interesting to note that most of the articles written about Sherrie Levine at the time (and still today) discussed the artist's reasoning, intentions and ambitions, in other words her position as an artist, all the while pointing up her radical undermining of the power of the author. This contradiction deserves study and to be considered in relation with the text to which Sherrie Levine and her

⁷ See, for example, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics", *Social Text*, no. 21 (1989), p. 207: "As the photographic work of Sherrie Levine clearly demonstrates, the critical specificity of such practice is only operative, can only be mobilized, within a particular context".

⁸ Martha Rosler, "Notes on Quotes" [1982], *Decoys and Disruptions, Selected Writings, 1975-2001* (Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 2004), p. 139.

⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

commentators identify most to theoretically justify her use of appropriationism: *The Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes, published in 1968.¹⁰

It should be recalled that in this essay the French theoretician refers predominantly to literature and, more specifically, to modern literature. Nonetheless, it is true that his arguments can be extrapolated to the visual arts. According to Barthes, the consecration of the author is a phenomenon that appeared in the modern era and was challenged by modern literature at the start of the 20th century by authors such as Mallarmé, Valéry and Proust, in whose polysemous, intertextual works the unique voice and unequivocal viewpoint of the author did not exist. This death of the author – the basis of his argument – is at the cost of birth of the viewer, something that Roland Barthes delights in. He says:

“Once the Author is distanced, the claim to “decipher” a text becomes entirely futile. To assign an Author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing. This conception is quite suited to criticism, which then undertakes the important task of discovering the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is found, the text is “explained”, the critic has won; hence, it is hardly surprising that historically the Author’s empire has been the Critic’s as well [...]”

Thus, although Barthes attacks the myth of the originality of an artwork, and the tabula rasa celebrated by the avant-gardes, he does so to better celebrate a work that generously offers itself to the reader or viewer, though without necessarily being easy to understand or undemanding: that is to say a work whose various facets are not revealed purely by the words of the Author, or the knowledge that the reader/viewer has of the Author’s way of thinking. In this respect, Sherrie Levine’s work seems very distant from Roland Barthes’ stance. Indeed, the works in the *After...* series is based on a confrontation between two authors: Sherrie Levine with Walker Evans, Sherrie Levine with Marcel Duchamp, etc. While her intention is to call into question the domineering position of the most famous male artists in the history of modern art, she clearly does not do so to efface herself in their presence but to rival them by means of her radical and subversive artistic action.

¹⁰ See in particular Sherrie Levine’s “Statement” of 1982, in which she imitates and appropriates Roland Barthes’ text *The Death of the Author*, which she concludes as follows: “A painting’s meaning lies not in its origin, but in its destination. The birth of the viewer must be at the cost of the painter”. Sherrie Levine, “Statement”, in *Style* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1982), p. 48. In Barthes’ text, the last sentence reads “the birth of the reader is at the cost of the death of the author”. This reference to Barthes’ essay is reported in, for example, the introduction to *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984, op. cit.*, p. 17.

The domineering nature of their authorial position is conveyed by the relative silence of her works, whose appreciation by the viewer depends fundamentally on his or her interpretation of the work's explanatory details – the name of the artist, the title of the work chosen by the artist, and the year of its execution. It is these that provide the information necessary to avoid the viewer being duped into thinking that the works are simply bad copies of famous photographs.

The feminist force that Sherrie Levine packs into her works is necessarily limited by her choice of rephotography as a technique, which hinders the “birth of the viewer”. By turning away from rephotographing women's magazines, she chose to abandon that part of her production in which the feminist dimension was most explicit, the one that did not demand very complex deciphering by its (American) audience. However, beginning with *After...*, the Author began to prevail over the viewer. The issues in play crystallized around the head-to-head of the artists' names (Levine vs. Evans), which also happens to be a gender clash (female artist vs. male artist) and periods (modernity vs. “postmodernism”). To use Barthes' terms, all these elements compel a “safety catch”, and require these works to be viewed through the prism of the artist (her person, identity, ambitions, etc.). Her works cannot be independent because their highly ambiguous nature might cause the viewer to read them wrongly, and not just fail to notice an important characteristic – that of appreciating the works' original forms. In consequence and unsurprisingly, in his famous essay *The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism*, which was supposedly one of the few at the time to take an interest in appropriationist women artists as women, the critic Craig Owens perfectly falls within the critical logic that Roland Barthes considered obsolete: he “gives an Author to a text”, underlining the need to analyse the feminist dimension of the works by female appropriationist artists for the very reason that they are women. Does this mean that the feminist force of a work is incompatible with the author's deliberate self-effacement? This is an interesting question but it deserves proper study. This article limits itself to remarking that Sherrie Levine both announces and claims to represent Barthes' death of the author, while maintaining her own authorial authority in a devious manner, thereby estranging the dismantlement of the myth of originality from that of authorial authority. This paradoxical

attitude had the merit of revealing the feminist input to her thinking, but the drawback of impeding the full birth of the viewer, including his or her freedom and pleasure.¹¹

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¹¹ In 1973 Roland Barthes published a short essay called *Le Plaisir du texte*, in which he already questioned the death of the author. See in particular the television interview of Roland Barthes on 19 March 1973, accessible on the site of the INA: <http://www.ina.fr/video/CPF10005880> (consulted 16/02/2017).