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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

"REPRO ARTISTS"

(THE WORK OF CINDY SHERMAN, SHERRIE LEVINE AND RICHARD PRINCE)

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INTRODUCTION

"Cameras and recording machines not only transcribe experience but alter its quality, giving to much modern life the character of an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors. Life presents itself as a succession of images or electronic signals, of impressions recorded and reproduced by means of photography, motion pictures, television, and sophisticated recording devices....

Modern life is so thoroughly mediated by electronic images that we can not help responding to others as if their actions - and our own - were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience for scrutiny at some later time.

'Smile you're on candid camera'.

The intrusion into everyday life by this all-seeing eye no longer takes us by surprise or catches us with our defences down. We need no reminder to smile. A smile is permanently graven on our features, and we already know from which of several angles it photographs to best advantage." 1

The above quotation describes effectively an aspect of the age we live in, one which is 'thoroughly mediated', - when consciousness is formed by representations of experience, as opposed to the actual experience, it is logical that such "representations have come to constitute this generation's aesthetic vocabulary". 2

Among the artists in question, those who developed their imagemaking strategies is from media sources are, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Jimmy De Sana, Ellen Brodes, Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons - Levine, Sherman and Prince shall be discussed in the following chapters since I believe they illustrate perfectly the polarities and mid-degrees of this spectrum.

The above photographers grew up in the 1950's and 1960's; they were the first to inherit the vast store of references generated through mass media representations. It was Douglas Crimp, a New York art critic, and Thomas Lawson, an artist and writer, who were among the first to recognise the break

with former art practises that this work represented.

This seemed to reflect an aspiration towards a new level of involvement and relevance within the culture, which, as Lawson has pointed out in his article for ZG magazine ('Assessing the work of a group of young New York artists between 1975-81), art of the preceeding decade had increasingly failed to do.

The work of these artists involves the appropriation of the imagery from media sources - film, T.V., magazines, newspapers and from art itself. Kruger, Levine and Prince take these images directly; De Sana. Sherman, Brodes and Simmons are more concerned with the conventions of mass media representations, reproducing the 'look' of, for example, the movie still, soap opera, scenario or fashion and product advertisements.

This form of activity, appropriation, approximation, pastiche and recontextualization has been considered in the context of postmodernism, since such work is less concerned with traditional values of 'fine-art' photography - the photograph's value as art object the impression of personal vision - than with examining the mechanism of photographic representation. Representation is in this work not as 'realism' but as a function in itself. The work seeks to analyse the way our understanding of the world is conditioned by our representation of it.

"The centrality of photography within the current range of practices makes it crucial to a theorectical distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Not only has photography so thoroughly saturated our visual enviornment as to make the invention of visual images seem an archaic idea....Photography will always exceed the institutions of art, always participate in non-art practices". 4

Bearing in mind the above quotation and the fact that most of the artists mentioned were not educated specifically as photographers but have come from various 'fine art' backgrounds, "they do not seem to be confined by the fact of the medium".5 Many have painted, produced 'Artists' books or participated in

performance works thus their 'scavanging' cannot be confined to purely photographic areas.

Although there was no "Pop" photography as such, and as Paula Manicola points out in her essay for the 'Image Scavangers' catalogue,

"that fact may caution against overstressing the comparison".

However, 'Pop's' ironic attitude, commercial look and borrowing from popular culture's images provided a reasonable reference.

Rauschenberg, as suggested by D. Crimp, was without doubt crucial in laying the foundations for such appropriation and reproduction. As Crimp states;

"It was only with slight discomfort that Rauschenberg was called a painter throughout the first decade of his career". 6.

Since he used both paint and photographic images, Rauschenberg moved from production (combines and assemblages) to techniques of reproduction (silkscreens, transfer drawings). The Pluralist fantasy of creating subjects succumbs to, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images.

Warhol certainly has had strong influence, but the models for these photographers are less specific, they are not mega-stars but more ordinary anonymous characters.

The notion of theatricality is particularly important to these photographers, a logical notion since most of their work manifests an audience orientation as played out in much art of the early 70's, particularly performance with which many were involved.

Most of the artists work in what A.D. Coleman has called the 'directorial' mode, inter-twining the activities of film, scriptor/director, actor, art director, stage-desinger - staging scenario's that work off conventionalized representations. The characters are shown not as the photographers' alter egos

but as impersonal performers, and their actions are described in the third as opposed to the first person.

Narrative within any series is abandoned in favour of discontinuous moments, the notion that if you short-circuit the connection it leads to suspicion which in turn forces the viewer to read the images allegorically.

In her essay 'Stock Situations/Reasonable Fashions', Paula Marincola states of these photographers:

"Reading these photographs is much like flipping through a magazine or book looking only at the pictures, or channel-chasing with the sound turned off; surface continuity and accidents of sequentiality result in purely arbitrary meaning".⁷

Face to face with this almost thread-bare meaning Thomas Lawson advocates a strategy which is used in various ways by all these artists - "dialectical re-duplication" ⁸. In other words turning the means of mass media against itself by re-appropriating its images, styles and conventions of representation.

FOOTNOTES.

1. Lasch, Christopher.

"The Culture of Narcissism".

Quoted in Image Scavengers, p.4.

2. Marincola, Paula.

"Stock Situations/Reasonable Facsimiles",

'Image Scavengers' p.5

3. Lawson, Thomas

ZG Magazine.

4. Crimp, Douglas

'Appropriating Appropriation',

Image Scavengers, p.27.

5. IBIB.

6. Crimp, Douglas.

'Pictures'.

October Magazine, No. 8

7. Image Scavengers - Catalogue p.5.

8. ZG Magazine.

On the works of Cindy Sherman

"This is a stereotype of a girl who dreams all her life of being a movie star. She tries to make it on the stage, in films and either succeeds or fails.

I was more interested in the types of characters that fail. Maybe I relate to that. But why should I try to do it myself? I'd rather look at the reality of these kinds of fantasies, the fantasy of going away and becoming a star."

Cindy Sherman.1.

In terms of 'reproducing the look' - being concerned with the conventions of mass media representation - Sherman succeeds outright. Her photographs are all self-portraits in which she appears, bewigged and costumed enacting a drama whose particulars are cut short - a sense of melodrama seems to hang in the air.

Her early black and white "Untitled Film Stills" are vaguely familiar yet unforgettable, figures of innumerable 'B' movies, TV soaps and film noirs; they appeal to both the types and devices of melodrama - to feminine roles and exaggerated effects within such genres small town girl overwhelmed by the big city, rejected lover in grubby motel room awaiting revenge, the sexpot, the blushing bride.

Sherman's devices are of costume, make-up, wigs- projections of the self as self-conscious performer - yet one important aspect of her art is as Douglas Crimp says,

"not to reveal the artist's trueself but to show the self as an imaginary construct".

2.

Her first series "Untitled Film Stills" continuously forces us to recognise a particular style, even a particular director springs to mind and at the same time with a particular type of person (femininity). It is here an interesting tension takes place, a tension created, by the surface (Sherman posing) and what lies behind it. In the words of Jean-Louis Bandry,

"A surface which suggests nothing but itself, and yet in so far as it suggests there is something behind it, prevents us from considering it as a surface. 3

The recognition of style, the film, the star is our reading of the picture, we title it, the stereotypes and assumptions we attribute to it are in our head;

"In a way, it is innocent: you are guilty, you supply the femininity simply through social and cultural knowledge". 4.

Sherman stated that her black and white 'film still' photographs were more fun to do in retrospect. Easier partly because throughout her childhood she had stored up so many images of role models, however, after three years they were appearing so cliched she could not continue; realising this she had to,

"become more specific in details, because that's what makes a person different from other people. Especially details that may seem insignificant, like a scrap of paper or the kind of curtain used." 5.

The photographs after the black and white series increased in size to nearly poster format; all are made in the studio against a backdrop of projected slides, in colour.

In these 'rearscreen - projections' (as she likes to call them) the camera is trained on the head or head and upper body of the subject. This is due to her loosing interest in using locations, she wanted to imply the environment with as little as possible - becoming 'more specific in details'.

It is these details that start the reaction, the detail gives expression to the

face (the emotion) and the face gives a story to the detail. This process is practically standard issue in films, advertisements, newsphotos and media generally. For example an image of a woman's face in tears will be used by a newspaper or magazine to illustrate by impression the tragedy of a war or the emotive side of a wedding. From this face, this look, we have to read the emotion of the event, but conversely it is the event that gives emotion to the face.

I Certain works make this very explicit - for example Untitled No.96 where a girl holds a scrap of newspaper in her hand, she looks thoughtful, but whether she is happy or unhappy, worried or fine we don't know, but we will implicate 'through social and cultural knowledge'- these images not only speak to the viewer but from the viewer as well.

A cinematic equivalent to this process of using minute detail to signify emotion (as pointed out by G. Barent)⁶ is Greta Garbo's cigarette episode in 'The Devil and the Flesh' (1926). John Gilbert, her leading man plays a young officer. Dancing for some time at a party they stop for a smoke, Gilbert offers Garbo a light, she withdraws her cigarette immediately, they look at each other by the light of the match, finally a close up of Garbo's face. That small intimate gesture was by far much more suggestive than a whole love scene.

The emotions that run through all of Sherman's photographs, although unclear, are practically all suggestive of fear, suspicion, anxiety and vulnerability. This notion of vulnerability has always been associated with the erotic,

2 (Untitled No. 103 is an explicit example) through the sense of menace and woman under threat. Again we can recall a similar device which is often used in horror movies which although devoid of sexual acts imply erotica through having terrified women constantly depicted in vulnerable positions.

So many of Sherman's menacing (passive) images have a 'slight' pornographic air about them, a notion she dispells herself claiming they are of quite simple and innocent inspiration, for example of the woman in the black sheets (Untitled

3 No.93) she says;

"I was thinking of a woman with a terrible hang
over who had just gone to bed about an hour

before. Now the sun is coming up and it just woke her up. Her make-up is all smudged and she is already sticky from the heat of the day. She wakes up and looks at the sun as if she is thinking "Oh its that," or something. That is just such a simple idea but people are saying, it looks like, you know, she had just like made love".

7

I find this an unusual statement since it is of that very substance I believe her work is made of - personal perspective., In relation to details, and props being used to characterize situations, 'black sheets' and 'smudged make-up', by all means imply sexual activity. Or perhaps Sherman is bringing to the surface the abuse of such a cliché, showing how an ideology works not by undoing it but by doing it.

- 4 In her more recent work (Untitled No. 102 +) she uses a large vertical format and focuses still closer to the figure, employing a less filmatic style and less use of props, there is a more neutral presentation free of reference to archetypes.

Thus these photographs are closer to adverts than to films. Relying on clothes, lighting and facial expressions as codes we read a response, an imprint of the action, we are denied any hint of a story. Where there is just enough photographic information for us to recognise what the image is at all (as with 5 Untitled No. 110) we are forced to realize how these effects on their own conjure up a presence as with so many advertisements.

In Untitled No. 110 we are denied the face due to the darkness, all we are allowed to see is an arm, a sleeve, some cloth, golden and glowing. The viewer is pushed as far as possible even to the extent of searching the shadows for what is not there, to quote Judith Williamson;

"Femininity is trapped in the image - but the viewer is snared too."

8

Some critics seem to imply that in these later photographs Sherman is in some way moving closer to herself; I presume due to the fact she is dressed in more

contemporary clothes and is only slightly made up. I do not think it is as cut and dry as all that, I feel it underlines another aspect of Sherman's work - her wit. She continues to lead the viewer in search of the real her, which I feel is yet another red-herring, bearing in mind Crimp's statement that the art is "not used to reveal the artist's trueself but to show the self as an imaginary construct"⁹. Earlier examples of this wit can be found in for example, Untitled
6 Film Still No. 46, where all that is present is a woman in a diving mask looking up from the sea, the eyes much less the face are barely visible, and the wit is achieved by sandwiching this photograph between bold melodramatic stereotypes.

These later photographs are also pushing the issue that much further, confronting femininity/masculinity; here she takes not only another logical step but a necessary one.

Untitled No. 103 is beautifully played off against Untitled No. 104. Right beside the very sexy Monroe-type (No. 103) is a very boyish more alert photograph (No. 104). As with Untitled No. 116 and Untitled No. 112, both seem very realistic (although of course they are not) but they are certainly more straight forward, more natural than earlier set-ups. Both are dressed more contemporary and it is with these articles of clothing Sherman distinguishes
7 between femininity and masculinity. The gaze, hair, skin and pose of No. 116
8 gaze of No. 112 produce a masculine reading.

Because they are all portraits in which she appears in a range of pre-existing roles, Sherman's photographs indicate the function of types as tools, reinforcing through ritual repetition, the very generalities they embody. This fact that it is her in every photograph also undermines the idea that any one image is her, as described beautifully by Judith Williamson in 'Images of woman';

"It reminds me of the Cachet ad;
'it won't be the same on any two
women the perfume is as individual
as you are'"

This statement is then followed by many different images of women, each meant to be different (using Cachet) but what Sherman shows us is anyone can be all of them and none.

FOOTNOTES.

1. Barent, Els.

Cindy Sherman

2. Crimp, D., "Photographic Activity of Post-Modernism." October, No. 15.

October Magazine.

3. Quoted In Paula Marincola's

Stock Situations/Reasonable Facsimiles.

4. Williamson, Judith.

'Images of Women'

Screen Magazine.

5. Barent, Els

Cindy Sherman

6. IBIB.

7. IBIB.

8. 'Images of Women'

9. Crimp, D. "Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," October No. 15.

On the works of Richard Prince.

"We're customers," they say. "Our blood is anemic and white like a ghost. The Man In The White Suit is the man on the street and the man on the street is the man in the movie " And whether he's stolen or produced copied are imagined isn't the problem. It's more about has to be than how, and as long as there's an exchange that at least simulates the effect of what should be, then we're prepared to see it, support it, buy it."

Richard Prince, 1.

None of Prince's works is unfamiliar, they are taken from the classic icons of product fetishism and satisfied desire that appear in the advertising and travel leisure sections of magazines.

Prince first applied his procedure of practising without a licence in 1976 when he published images 'lifted' from Elvis Presley bubble gum cards ("Eleven Conversations" Tracks Autumn 1976.). He chose the images for their 'look', availability and size which perfectly fit the scan of a 35mm camera. No cropping or manipulation was needed. This process was then carried on to mass advertising images, watch ads, pens and single carefully 'posed' cigarettes (1977). He removed all surrounding text and reshot them with colour film. Although removing the text will dereferentialize the image to some extent it would be disingenuous to claim a total stripping of reference since the images are so bound within the fabric of collective mythology, this immediately guarantees an already manufactured meaning for the viewer.

In what Prince calls the '8 Track Photograph', by reference to a technological model, images are first photographed and then variously manipulated, cropped or angled, reproduced in an out of focus, in colour and in black and white. Each track comprises an independent programme or code, readily available from commercial sources and all can be easily combined; it is important that these images are not copied, but rephotographed under the rules of directorial control.

"First let me say rephotography was always a technique to make the image again and to make it look as natural looking as it did when it first appeared. It never had the trailer of an ideology. It never attempted to produce a copy a resemblance yes, but never a copy. It's not a mechanical technique, its a technological one" Richard Prince 2.

Prince projects an image of the artwork as an index for a period no longer defined by its invention of forms but of techniques and by adopting a position of a filter, an uncritical receiver Prince precludes the stamp of personality- the unique brand-image which is required to sell artwork as a commodity.

Thus by manipulating existing imagery Prince creates a reality in which the role of both creator and copyist have been replaced by the more complex one of arranger, who, working with the sophisticated technology, universally available, 'manages' the production of imagery. Process becomes part of the substance as opposed to a means of creating substance.

"I've always had the ability to misread these images and again disassociate them from their original intentions. I happen to like these images and see them in much the same way I see moving pictures in a movie." 3

Each step in this transformation process further distances the original illustration from its eventual "re-presentation," emphasizing the sense of

estrangement or unreality which is already implicit in mass media imagery.

"What's unreal for most is official fiction for me.

Its pretty much what chimnies were to the industrial revolution, they were familiar but still, they looked unreal. They have very little history to them.

Someone like De Chirico recognised this and was able to additionalise another reality onto them.

4

In 1978 he photographed a series of images of men whose strong presentational stance, recurrent throughout advertising, seemed to ratify and there by, intensify Prince's own sense of stilled pose or 'look'. Included in the series are four different couples, the males 'looking' to the left the females to the right. Each model forms an element of a set by virtue of a resemblance to others, they all share the 'look', the identification of style, this isolation of the 'look' as an element for consumption implies a degree of self-consciousness.

The date when Prince began to 'steal' images relates his strategy to two cultural developments - within consumer culture the mass marketing of fashion during the 1960's economic boom was succeeded by the fragmentation of styles during the recession. The advertizing image appeared to become more autonomous, the emphasis shifted from marketing to ideological reinforcement, the 'aestheticization of consumption.'

After his model series (1978) Prince did a series of accessories, still lifes placed 'naturalistically' against backgrounds of leaves, followed by a series of women (1979) chosen again for their 'look'. These were the first in which he actively manipulated the imagery altering colour and shifting angles, cropping forms, and generally highlighting the carefully contrived artificial naturalism.

"But ultimately their rather brutal familiarity gives way to strangeness, as an unintended and unwanted dimension of fiction reinvades them".

Douglas Crimp. 5

By this manipulation focusing directly on the commodity fetish Prince's work takes on as Crimp states;

"...a Hitchcockian dimension: the commodity becomes a clue. It has, we might say, acquired an aura, only now it is a function not of presence but of absence, severed from an origin, from an originator, from authenticity. In our time, the aura has become only a presence, which is to say, a ghost " 6.

- 9 His 'Cowboy' series of 1980-84 is designed for the casual glance, scanning rather than looking at the image. The visual potency of the Marlboro billboards, (from which he gets his cowboy's) in particular draws attention to the formal and temporal codes of the cinema screen and the Western epic. The chain of significations that tie the product to the image of the cowboy in harmony with his horse and nature is firmly set in America's fantasy of individual (male) freedom.

The 'Cowboys' look like 'normal' photographs, they were framed and matted, presented in a way in which most are presented - in a gallery on a wall, under a spotlight, but that is as far as their normality goes. Who would have thought something that familiar would have looked that unbelievable, that uncanny.

"It 's a shock. Playing the picture straight. It's what I like about social science fiction and hardboiled film noire. Even though everything is terribly exaggerated, and amplified and concocted there's always this desire to want to suspend what you know in favour of what you think".
(Richard Prince) 7.

10-13 In 1978 Prince expanded the process with images culled from travel-and-leisure advertisements (Sunsets series - 11 photographs) first shooting them in black and white and then transforming the images onto transparencies, superimposing screens, suspending them before other appropriated high-keyed chromatic sunsets, and finally, reshooting the screen in colour with a free-moving directorial eye.

In the 'Sunsets' artificiality is heightened by the angling of the camera to

focus on a detail and blur the rest, which also, contradictorily, creates the impression of cinematic action within the frozen image. Families in the surf, frolicking couples, a child clasping an inflatable dolphin; the holiday or 'holy-day' is a baptismal seaside ritual acted out against an apocalyptic afterglow, seeming somehow more real than real, more moving in their artifices than these already artificial worlds. In relation to the source for this and other works Prince avers his work is always up to date with the latest advertising campaign, a notion qualified in his book "Why I go to the Movies Alone:

"They only visited people who subscribed to magazines
They ripped the magazines to shreds and bounced the
pictures off the floor. They looked at the colour on
the pages and wondered where the yellows and reds and
oranges could go — go, meaning could they get any redder?
Could the yellow in the Cutty, get any yellower? Could
any of it get an extra, anymore? "

8

I4 In 1982, he started several series dealing with portraiture — 'The Entertainers' and 'Gangs'; 'The Entertainers' are all horizontal images of predominantly young predominately female faces set against abstract backgrounds of electric colour.

As with Sherman, Prince uses the movies as a background, an invisible background to the majority of his work. In 'The Entertainers' the background was 'The Sweet Smell of Success', in it everybody's, publicity picture is important and the triviality of the picture wasn't treated with indifference. It was this point Prince liked and in his conversation with Peter Halley for ZG Magazine he states how he worked towards the pictures;

"I started going around to niteclubs and cabarets
and I started getting these 'pics' off the entertainers
who worked there. I'd see one of these 'pics' get
into a newspaper column. Just like in the movie (The
Sweet Smell of Success). Again I started seeing it
as an unpredictably important picture even though
these pictures have always been associated with a
low-class type of advertising".

He started treating the pictures he got as portraits, he would pick out one from the number they had given him and rephotograph it, they would never come over to his studio nor would he have to meet them if he did not want to since they already had so many pictures of themselves.

The first image in the 'Entertainers' is a large colour photograph of a woman's face mounted on a glossy black wall. The black wall provides a visual link between this first dramatically coloured, large image and four large masonite boards that lean against the left wall of the gallery, devouring the viewer. On each of these boards, also on glossy black is mounted a colour portrait of an entertainer. Prince manipulated these images more extensively than is usual for him by cropping, deleting, adding colour and altering focus. It is a kind of dalliance with the remaking process, a labour of adorning the fetish object. Still, the eye catching flashiness of these five portraits, as well as the sleazy eroticism of their subject matter, is muted by the large black areas that frame them, for Prince's presentation evokes both the banal glitz of the Times Square billboard and the coolly aesthetic formalism of minimalist sculpture.

There are two sections to 'Gangs' - Untitled, (1982-84) and Girlfriends (1984). In both of these he reveals his alertness to the culture's strategies of resemblance and appropriation and his possession of the sort of skewed vision necessary to separate cultural images from their mythic promise.

Untitled is made up of nine fragments of women's fashion photography, presented as a large 'gang' sheet. Girlfriends contains twelve photographs representative of the marginal caste of biker's women. The contextual terms of the two sections are not the same nor are their critical resolutions. Fashion models are armoured by the designs of their creators; they perform for the camera in full knowledge of their function and their audience. In contrast the Girlfriends act within a private relation that turns against them, unclothing their vulnerability in the voyeurism of the public realm - the biker's magazines from which their photographs derive.

The reuse of this format, the 'gang' shot, over such a divergent range of images (from friend to porno star to rock star to model) underscores the inter-changeability of the image in Prince's enterprise. Each photograph is for Prince simply one more image to be stolen and added to a free-wheeling catalogue

of 're-photographs'. These images are drained of sense, empty signs whose strength resides in their surfaces, in the effects presented and enhanced by their collector and 'manager'. What Prince aims for is a photography that relinquishes the invention of the new for the manipulation of the available, that eradicates the original and its copy, reality and symbol, in favour of the ecstasy of the image.

"He had to have her on paper, a material with a flat seamless surface... She had to be condensed and inscribed in a way that his expectations of what he wanted her to be, (and what he wanted to be too) could at least be possibly, even remotely realized... It wasn't that he wanted to worship her...but her image did seem to have a concrete and actual form....And what he seemed to be able to do, either in front or away from it, was pass time in a particular body state, an alternating balance which turned him in and out and made him see something about a life after death". 9

Of all his dealings with portraiture none raises as many questions, eyebrows and I5 tempers as his one of Brooke Shields (1983). This nude portrait of her when ten years old occupies, as with his other portraits series, the territory between the image of the body and the personality. In this piece there is an unexpected fusion between the two photographic genres of pornography and portraiture. It was the whole activity around the picture that appealed to Prince, it presented itself as a script or scenario. Gary Cross who originally took several nude photographs of Brooke Shields in 1973 found himself ten years later in court fighting over who owns the pictures. Cross wanted to sell his rights to the pictures to a poster gallery, however, Brooke's mother obviously recognised what some of the pictures suggested. They made her head up so that she seemed like an older girl or woman, then they went to the trouble of oiling her body to heighten and refract the presence of her/his adolescence. Thus not only do you have a fusion of two photographic genres but also of two or maybe more ages. The scenario is that you have a couple of million dollars in court costs, the management of an image, a question of ownership and a big celebrity all of which is all happening over the truth and consequences of a photograph.

Prince's appropriation of the image was strategic, art is presented as a pretext for a tabooed cultural voyeurism. The cultural paedophilia of the 1970's (Lena Zaffaroni, Jimmy Osmonds) have become the taboos of the 1980's. This is a realisation of George Bataille's formula, "transgression protects the taboo". The 'Pretty Baby' image of Brooke Shields as a child prostitute is to be discreetly forgotten in the cultural turnover of her image. Desire which was 'simulated' has been dissimulated in the cycle of fashion with the return of the taboo. Dissimulation of the image becomes it's own dissimulation, now the adult mask of glossy 1970's cosmetics seems nasty and offensive; the titillating image of the 1970's has become an image of sacrifice - of the vulnerable body of childhood to the violence of adult sexuality.

Prince exhibited the picture gilt-framed and 'by appointment only' in a self-invented gallery called 'Spiritual America' during the summer of 1983. The gallery was hardly open but always presented itself as a normal commercial gallery. Viewing by appointment only was designed to make the visitor feel guilty and he made a point of making sure the picture was for sale. The predictable thing of course was when the lawyers started calling. They assumed the gallery represented the artist and never imagined it the other way round - switching channels like that made it difficult for them to bring the version of Brooke Shields to court again.

"The creative spirit stands in the grave, in the
hidden heap, the dung hill of culture: breaking
the seal of familiarity; breaking the cake of custom;
rolling the stone from the sepulchre: giving the dead
metapher new life"

Norman O. Brown 10

Thus the desire to see it made into an explicit act of complicity with social voyeurism, the taboo which Prince offends is not that of paedophilia but the taboo of cultural disinterment. The image is a reminder of a cultural sacrifice: an image of despoilt innocence left by the low-tide of the new morality. What the old image offends is the new image of Brooke Shields.

FOOTNOTES.

1. Why I Go To The Moveis Alone

p. 88

2. Interviewed By Peter Halley

ZG Magazine

'The Body' 1984. p.5

3. IBIB.

4. IBIB.

5. "Photographic Activity of Post-Modernism",

October No. 15.

6. IBIB.

7. Interviewed by Peter Halley

ZG Magazine

8. P. 90

9. Why I Go To The Movies Alone

p. 11

10. Chapter 16 of 'Loves Body'.

Quoted in ZG Magazine. 'The Body' 1984,

p.9 - 'The Resurrection of the Body'.

On the work of Sherrie Levine

"Since the door was only half closed, I got a jumbled view of my mother and father on the bed, one on top of the other. Mortified, hurt, horror-struck, I had the hateful sensation of having placed myself blindly and completely in unworthy hands. Instinctively and without effort, I divided myself, so to speak, into two persons, of whom one, the real, the genuine one, continued on her own account, while the other, a successful imitation of the first was delegated to have relations with the world. My first self remains at a distance, impassive, ironical, and watching".

Sherrie Levine 1.

As pointed out by Crimp in his essay this statement by Levine about her work forces us to recognize, a description of something we already know - the primal scene, and a possibility of recognition being extended even further to the Moravia novel from which it was taken. Her autobiographical statement is only a string of quotations, an obscure way to define one's own work, but perhaps then we should turn to the work it describes.

In 1980 Levine showed a series of photographs of a nude youth which were rephotographed from the famous series Edward Weston took of his young son Neil. These were available to Levine by a poster published by the Winston Gallery- no combinations, no transformations, no additions, no synthesis. 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 nude photographs, that discourse is the very one in which Robert 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; (according to the copyright law the images belong to Weston but to be fair one 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). 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.

Levine has said that when she showed these particular photographs to a friend he remarked that they only made him want to see the originals. In her reply to this Levine agreed that the originals make you want to see the boy, but when you saw the boy the art was gone. For the desire that is initiated by that representation does not come to closure around that little boy, the desire of representation exists only in so far as it is never fulfilled, in so far as the original will always be deferred. It is only in the absence of the original the representation may take place. It was Weston himself who said;

"the photograph must be visualized in full before the exposure is made".

Levine has taken the master at his word and in doing so 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". Douglas Crimp. 2

Thus the main issue at stake with Levine's work is the loss of authenticity, the diminished possibilities for originality in an image-saturated, image-bound culture,³ she has written:

"A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. We can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior never original. Succeeding the painter, the plagiarist no longer bears with passions, humors, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense

Appropriation perhaps used to be called plagiarism but that was when an artist was supposed to have a personal vision achieved through private experience. Then along came 'Pop Art' and suddenly Campbell's Soup cans, Mickey Mouse and romantic comic's were the "high art" to a generation of artists. With the 1980's we have reached the stage where artistic originality is suspect, and appropriation becomes a key strategy in the repudiation of authenticity.

What is crucial to Levine's radical position is the recognition that not only has she, like Duchamp or Warhol, denied the necessity of the dialectical process for the artist in creation, but she has advanced the position a step further by denying it for the viewer as well. It is not through her denial of form that Sherrie Levine accomplishes her particular brand of depreciation, it is on a more accusatory level, for the notion of originality in art is thoroughly entangled with its commodity status as well; if we can not accept her pictures as her pictures, then we are implicitly participating in the codification of artworks according to ownership.

Quite unlike the photographs she has taken of well-known photographers (Edward Weston, Walker Evans) and paintings (Egon Schiele, Ernst Kirchner and Mondrian) the artist recently (1983) took up water colour and brush in order to replicate modern paintings, by hand, from their reproductions in expensively (and not so expensively) produced art books. This should be seen not as a replacement for her photography programme merely a new wrinkle.

She presents key works by Henri Matisse, Fernand Leger, Mondrian, Stuart Davis, Arthur Dove and William de Kooning as slightly alienated from themselves, since the trace of the artists 'presence' is obliterated by the traces of Levine's 'presence'. The photographs of the paintings she produced earlier convey the same faith towards the originals that the new works now make deliciously tangible.

In this new work it is important to note she is no longer participating in the dialogue of the 'copy' but rather in that of the 'version'. To have laboriously copied the originals in their habitat would have denied Levine's necessary lunge for freedom in favour of subjugation. To freely copy the works out of a book

acknowledges that the original's visibility slips away twice: in the mechanical process by which the reproduction is printed, and by the studio process through which Levine paints. If her earlier work seemed defensive and confrontational, these watercolours seem poignant and even blissful. Studying her version of Matisse's 'Blue Nude' one does not feel malice from the points where her contour does not agree with Matisse's in fact it is a relief to be in the presence of difference again.

It is also worth noting that Levine is not at all mechanical about the approach she takes to each individual artist, but seems to be teasing their ghosts in a good natured way.

This is all made more obvious when the artists are taken individually; her Matisse's dig into the paper negating the master's evidence of genius in his perfect line and two-dimensional form and scale is undermined by her slight crowding of the image onto the paper giving the figure a slightly claustrophobic sensation.

Her Mondrian's deflection from the original in a different manner, in the manner by which she has chosen to reproduce the inconsistencies of colour in the specific text she worked from. It is not that she has perpetrated a distortion of the original rather she has underscored the distortion engendered by a mechanical means of reference to paint one which even the most stringent of us overlook constantly with few qualms. In doing so she is also making it clear she does not wish to challenge the authenticity of the original, but wishes instead to chart the course by which the work's identity is presented through shifts of recognisability. Since none of us can own as many Mondrians as we would like, and would find a moral lapse in commissioning lifesize copies, we opt instead for a format of bound reproductions, that reduces the presence of the original to an illustration of itself. The question then becomes one of preferring Sherrie Levine over the Mondrian book, since with the former you get two artists instead of one. Levine's statement on why she takes a photograph give us the best notion of her ideology;

"Instead of taking photographs of trees and nudes, I take photographs of photographs. I choose pictures that manifest the desire that nature and culture provide us with a sense of

order and meaning. I appropriate these images to express my own simultaneous longing for the passion of engagement and the sublimity of aloofness. I hope that in my photographs of photographs an uneasy peace will be made between my attraction to the ideals these pictures exemplify and my desire to have no ideals or fetters whatsoever. It is my aspiration that my photographs, which contain their own contradiction, would represent the best of both worlds.

6

True subversions lurk in Levine's Legers-Leger whose co-opting of decorative formats in his pictures was the result of a political desire to communicate universally through art. This now comes across as 'indulgent and confectionary fluff'. Her Legers tempt the collector into a bargain: affordable 'studies' that counterfeit the inaccessible expensive originals. Her most uncanny creations are De Koonings drawings, where Levine uses pencil to trace the 'Virtuosic wanderlust' of the originals lines. Since these are drawings and not photographs the expressionist hero syndrome remanifests itself.

Levine's latest exhibition at the Baskerville and Watson Gallery (New York December '84) is entitled '1917' in which she seems to oppose attempts to stop or fix time and although where versions can connote a dead-end frustration there is enough room with the later hand-works to maneuver a footnote. Not only the past's future but also the past itself are revealed as false. Though dated '1917' some of the works copied here are earlier: Schiele's Male Nude (Self Portrait) II is a brush and ink lithograph from 1912, his 'Three Street Urchins' datds from 1910. Her studies of Suprematism, her homage to Malevich, is both a yes and no reaction to the Leningrad Institute of Art Culture's judgement, prior to Malevich's removal as director of the formal theory department in 1930, that the last painting had been painted, and there is the ironic fact that this exhibition is dated 1917 with The last Futurist Exhibition took place in 1915 - Levine perhaps, uses 'lies' to expose the lies of history.

One such lie is that the Suprematist style belongs to Malevich, if Levine's attribution of Suprematist painting to a disciple of Malevich is correct, then for the length of time we unthinkingly attributed the work to Malevich we are thieves, and of the poor at least Levine's is of the rich. Another misconception, less subtle, is that Suprematism was more iconoclastic and revolutionary than expressionism. When these two 'styles' were put side by side the Schieles seemed more shocking and bore more traces of their political beliefs - and hints of protests against those constraints - yet it is Suprematism that is remembered as a socialist experiment.

1917 was a year heavy with the triumph of the revolution, yet it was also the year when German submarine warfare and air raids reached their high point. Russia was engaged in war on its western front and revolution on its eastern. Nor was the revolution owned by Russia: that year there were clamorings for home rule in India and Catalonia, socialist revolts in Munich; the fighting of equal, direct, and secret voting in Prussia; a new Mexican constitution providing for universal suffrage; and the wreckage of the easter Rising in Ireland. Schiele was in the military.

This is what Levine's work forces us to do, once we admit ignorance - it forces us to do research and after isolating the great debate of 20th Century art - abstraction verses representation - she never lets us know which she prefers. If she told us we might not do the research, it seems to agree that contemporary art should be scholarly, critical and cross disciplinary, not just a collection of unrelated quotations. But what she makes us particularly aware of it that commodities are intrinsically linked to both alienation and freedom, while gifts entail a sense of community and obligation to others. 7

FOOTNOTES.

1. Statement 1980.

Quoted in Douglas Crimp 'The Photographic Activity of Post Modernism'.

2. IBIB.

3. Bearing in mind a feminist approach, her refusal of authorship is not in fact a refusal 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 photographs she appropriates are invariably images of the Other: women, nature, children, the poor, the insane.

4. Unpublished Statement by Artists.

Quoted by Douglas Crimp.

5. We have strategies and tactics these days rather than art movements - the latter being incompatible with the quick turnover of style that is one of the hallmarks of post-modernism.

6. Quoted in "Allegorical Porcedures": "Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary art." Artforum, Sept. 1982.

7. See : Hyde, Lewis

The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic life of Property. p. 67.

The attributes the discussed artists share are their use of mass-media imagery and the issue concerning the loss of authenticity.

Sherman's imagery is such that she is posed, consumed and photographed so as to resemble women in situations common to the '40's and '50's movies -or rather, the types of women (call girl, the other woman) showing the self to be an imaginary construct of others, in the realm of psychology and sociology. When Prince 'steals his imagery, already within the public domain, it goes beyond being a critical intervention in consumerist pleasure they seduce the viewer into a re-enactment of that pleasure, a re-enactment even more disturbing for - sited within the confines of a gallery - it is legitimated by its application with the authority of fine art. And with Levine's versions of images with historical/cultural significance the flow is halted long enough to reflect the vacuity underpinning the experience of art as a smooth continuum.

Since the loss of authenticity is synonomous with the reproductive process it will prove important to give a historical account of this process. Works of art have always been reproducible, man-made artifacts can always be simulated by man; in order to practice their craft pupils made replicas, masters used them for diffusing their work and others for their own gain, but mechanical reproduction of art works provides another angle. Historically it happened sporadically but with great intensity; the Greeks know of only two reproductive techniques, founding and stamping, but with the woodcut graphic art became mechanically reproducible for the first time. This reached an essentially new stage in the nineteenth century with the appearance of lithography. But only a few decades after its invention it too was supassed, this time by photography. For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction the hand was free of the most important artistic functions, henceforth the onus was upon the eye looking through the lens.

Reproduction has freed the work of art from its dependance on ritual. From the photographic negative one can make any number of prints, to ask for an 'authentic' print makes no sense, but once the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the whole function of art is reversed, instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on politics. 1.

The camera is the tool of appropriation, of reproduction, appropriation is

culture with a massive appetite, devouring every image to cross its path. A defining characteristic is that it knows no bounds: high art and low, masterpieces, corporate logos, sentimental greeting cards and grisly war footage all become fodder for its insatiable appetite - a disturbing condition if viewed in Nietzsches light of, 'where everything is permitted nothing is worth doing'.

In the beginining, appropriation appeared to be a fairly straightforward spin-off of conceptualism - a way of questioning the concept of originality or exposing the stranglehold of the personality cult on modern art. Today while this critical function still asserts itself the pervassiveness of appropriated imagery in the work of the discussed artist suggests it has been transformed into positive content - the choice of what to 'scavage' as the eighties version of the signature style.

"It is no longer a question of imitation nor of reduplication, nor of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real itself to create a hyperreal". Jean Baudrillard

This edge of reality in contemporary culture has been dissolved in a hybrid of truth and fiction. For Baudrillard (in 'The Prussion of Simulacra') the twin concepts of hypereality and simulation are the factors that distinguish our culture from any link with the past:

"Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country all of 'real' America which is Disneyland...Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real".

Video, computer technology, and the world of advertis - ing have all had an impact in the creation of these fictive worlds of simulation where fiction confronts fiction in a battle over 'reality'. Art has become an

interesting lense on the realities/fictions of image culture.

FOOTNOTE.

1. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin.



FIG. I

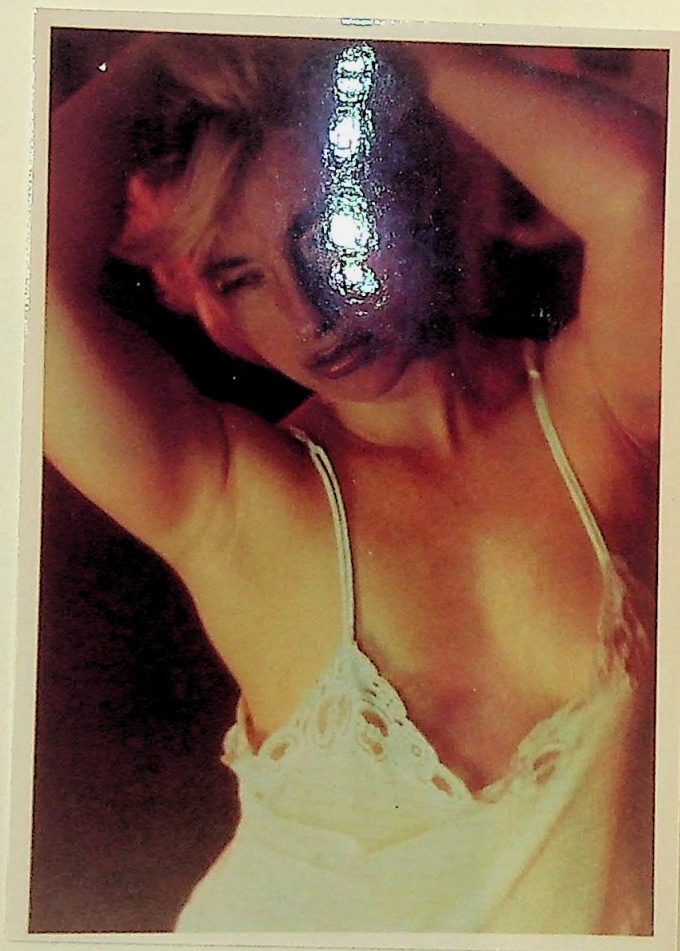


FIG. 2



FIG. 3

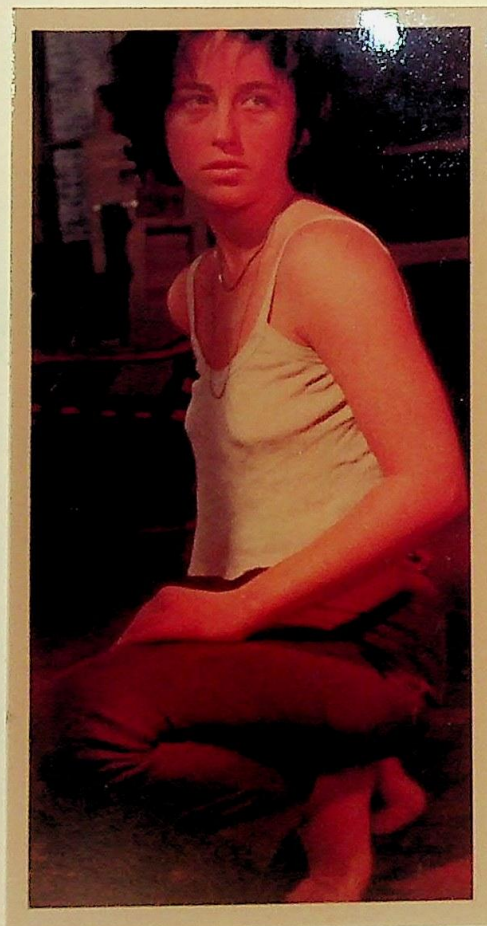


FIG. 4

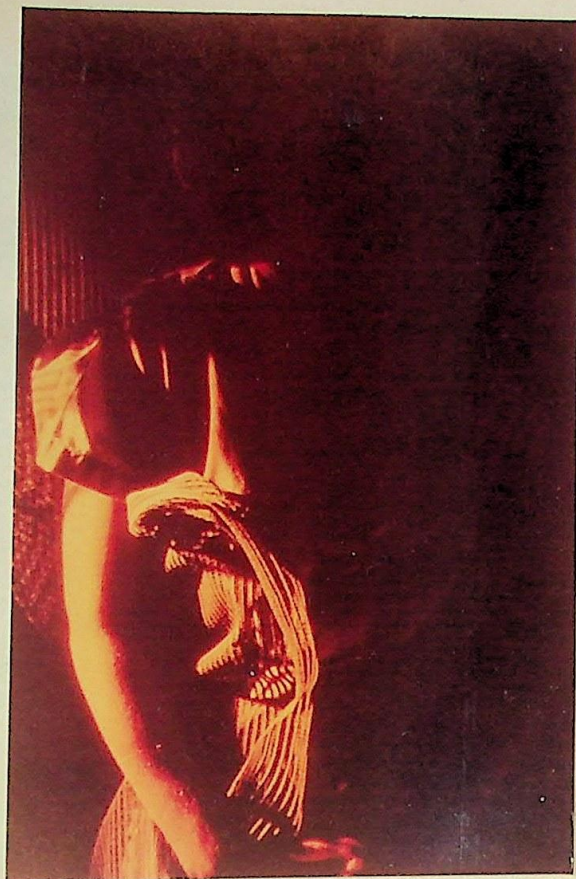


FIG. 5

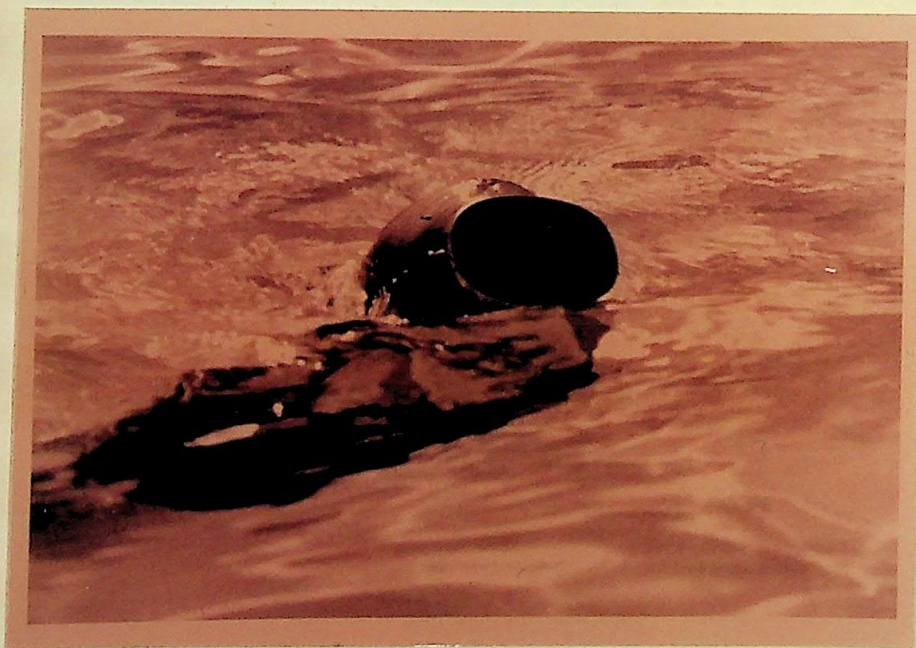


FIG. 6

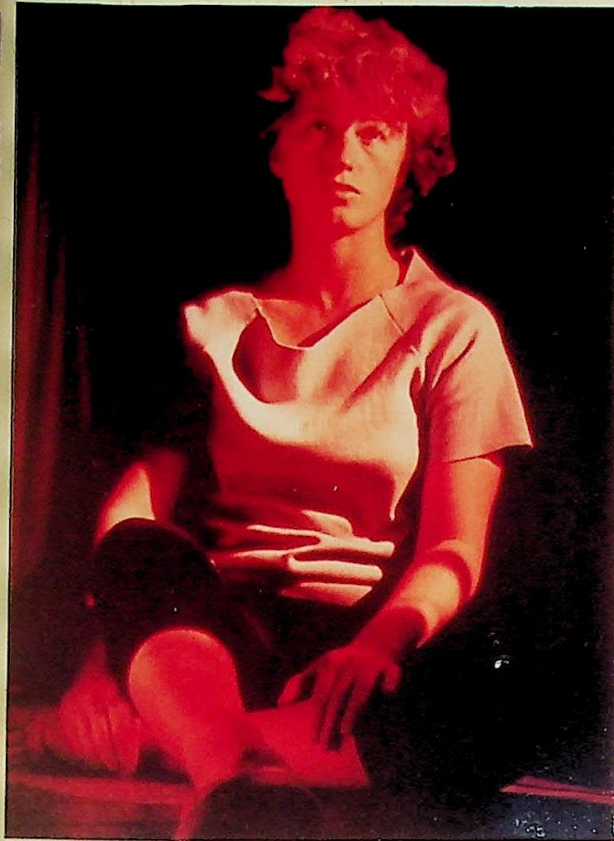


FIG. 7

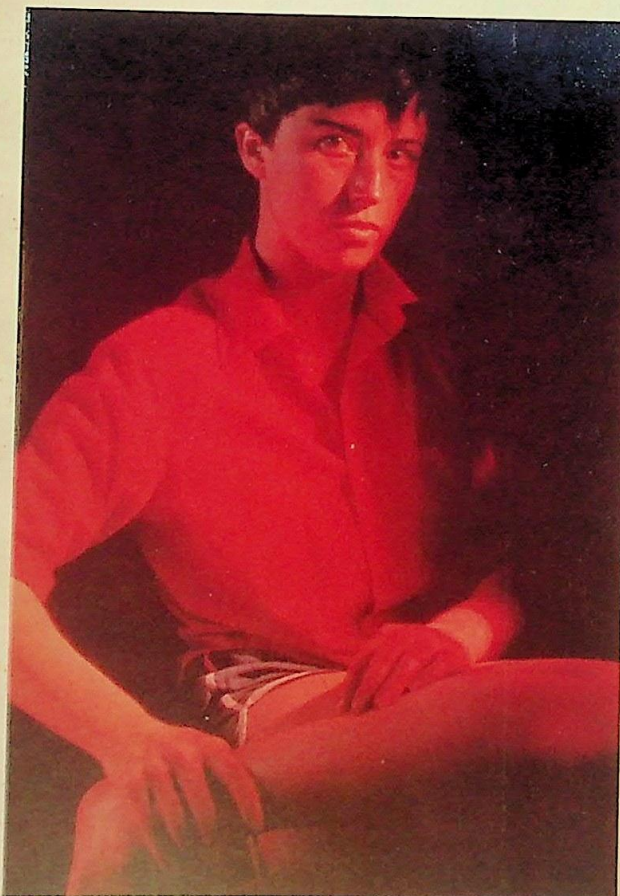


FIG. 8



FIG. 9



FIG. 10

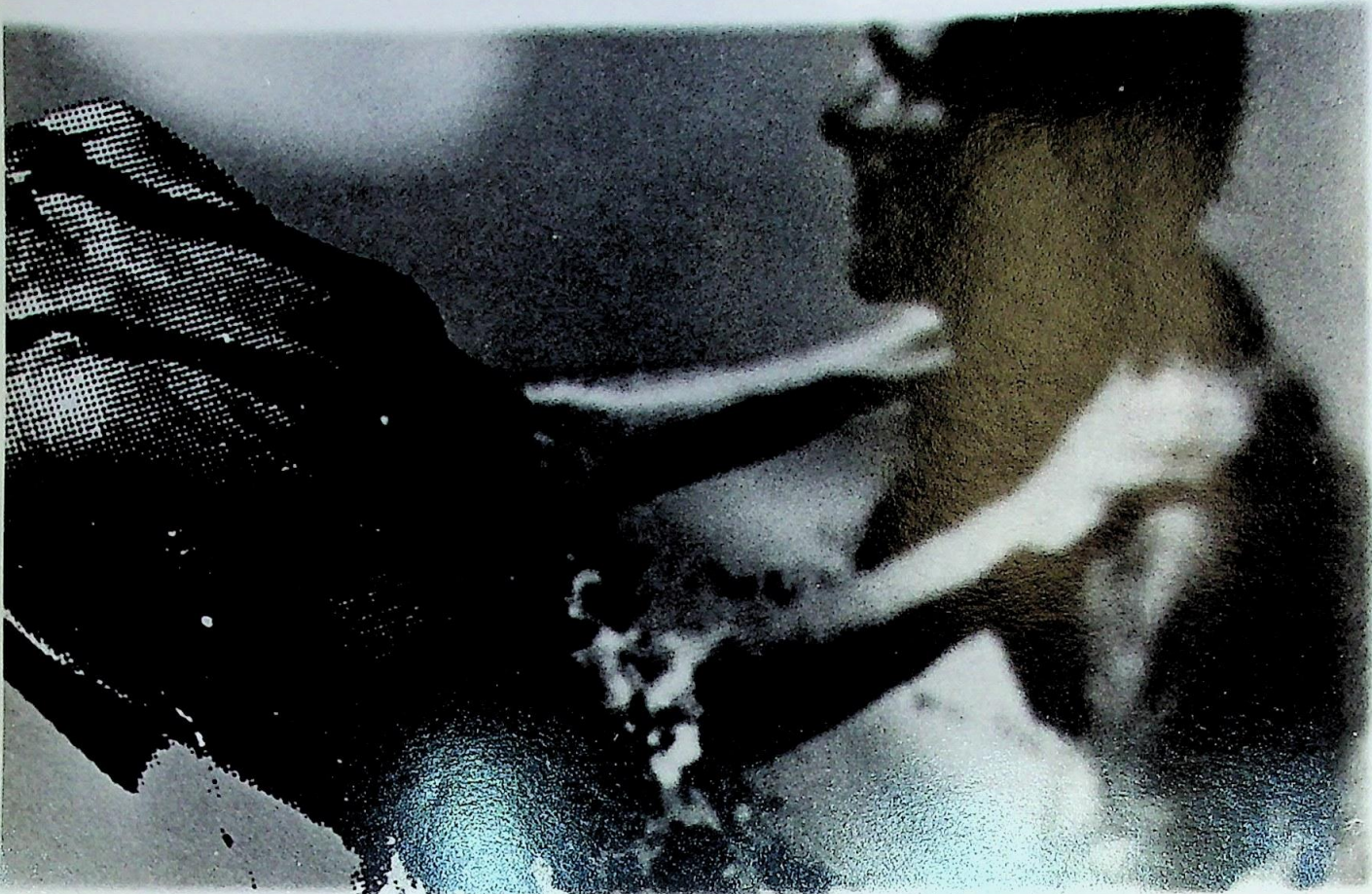


FIG. II



FIG. I2



FIG. I3



FIG. I4

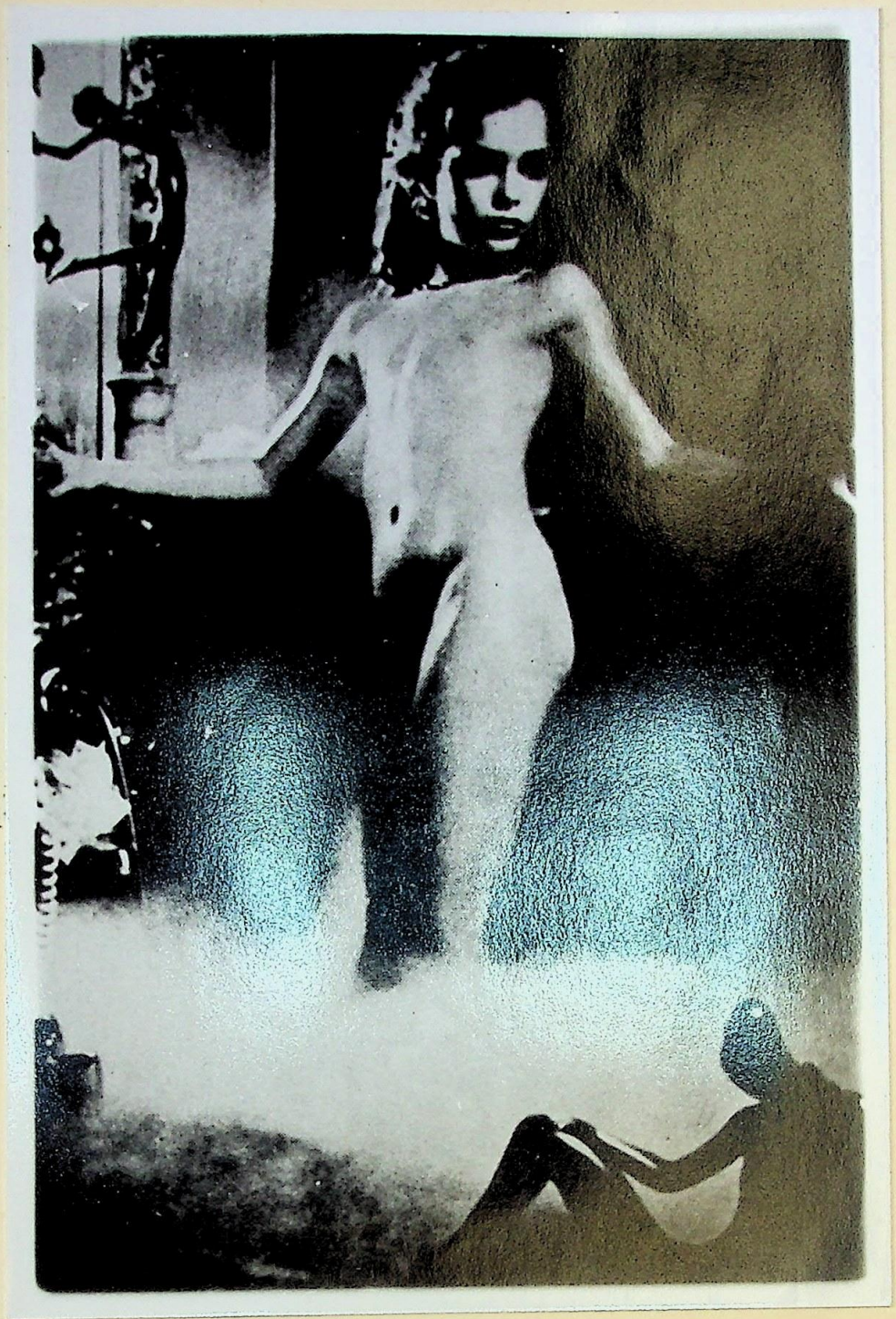


FIG. 15



FIG. I6



FIG. I7

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