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VENICE BIENNALE

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SHERRIE LEVINE



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12 BERKELEY STREET
LONDON W1J 8DT
T +44 (0) 20 7491 0100
F +44 (0) 20 7491 0200
INFO@SIMONLEEGALLERY.COM

SIMON LEE GALLERY LTD
REGISTERED IN ENGLAND 4316341
GB 788 061 692

Not the Last Word

Reflections on Sherrie Levine's "After Walker Evans Negative"

JOHANNA BURTON

THE TERM *APPROPRIATION* often seems too simple to describe Sherrie Levine's practice—or at least renders her operations too static. For if the artist's reuse of objects, images, and words (now often her "own") is a common thread throughout her oeuvre, it's important to remember that such a through line also reveals the complexity of the changing contexts it traverses. This is certainly the case in Levine's project for *Artforum*, in which the source to which she returns is her "Untitled (After Walker Evans)" series—twenty-two images selected and rephotographed from the hundreds of pictures Evans produced for the Farm Security Administration between 1935 and 1938. Levine's works premiered in 1981, in the artist's first and only solo show at Metro Pictures gallery in New York; the initial reaction was a mixture of excitement and outrage, leaving behind a feeling of anxiety that I would argue has not been entirely dispelled. Though for many the series has become *the* example of postmodernist dismantling of authorship and originality, for others it is too willfully ambiguous, refusing to settle into distanced, well-behaved critique. In other words, despite the bald way in which Levine simply *took* Evans's images, there seems to be something added to them: desire or antagonism—or, better, desire *and* antagonism. But what has been adjoined cannot be quantified, much less seen, and so it tends to productively bother its viewers, even after so much time.

While making "Untitled (After Walker Evans)," Levine began conceiving another version of the photographs. But it was not until 1990 that she produced her series of "negative" images based on the first, quite literally taking the black-and-white pictures she had previously chosen from Evans's oeuvre and printing them on reversal paper. Rarely (perhaps never) exhibited, the images—though merely featuring white where black had been and vice versa—bring out the eeriness already at the heart of Evans's pictures and crucial to Levine's attraction to them. Discussing the strangely surprising effect, Levine describes them as having a kind of outdated yet futuristic look, that of old-fashioned science fiction. Now, nearly three decades after "Untitled (After Walker Evans)" and two after "After Walker Evans Negative," she returns to Evans's images once again. In her project for these pages, the artist picked seven of her earlier pictures and redid them once more in the vein of negativity, albeit using different procedures.

The images you see here are neither reproduced from Levine's own work nor even reshot again from Evans's. Instead, Levine has opted to mine the creative commons, the gates to which her work is so often discussed as opening. Acknowledging the profound shift that has occurred in conceptions of the archive, she harvests from this shapeshifting, virtual space, whose newfound parameters have changed the way we think about knowledge. Using digital means, the artist then "inverts" the images and places them in gray green grounds, thus turning to modes of reproduction and manipulation



other than those born with modernism (in fact, to modes very much of our present moment). In a sense, then, these are not proper negative images at all: The effect is the same, or at least appears the same, but the language and implications are different enough to mention. For these pictures—unpeopled yet achingly evocative (the interiors and exteriors of public buildings and humble abodes; the graves of two children, bulging and rough-hewn)—represent far more than just the artist's shifting relationship to Evans over time.

Indeed, every object Levine creates is meant to contribute to a broader intellectual and artistic project. In a 1994 interview published in the journal *October*, she hints, "[I] am always trying to find a way to fit these things into a larger framework so that the work creates an environment where each reading informs all the other readings, and the latest work informs the earliest work." Levine's practice has long performed this kind of supple, Borgesian bending-back-to-bend-forward. For her, it seems, images must be both called for (that is to say, purposefully summoned in the present) *and* capable of retrospectively revising historical narratives.

Levine's privileging of this dual operation within her work (and her work's relationship to other artists and eras) is not intended, however, to claim uniqueness for her own constant writing and rewriting of artistic and other histories. Rather, her work is a reflexive and overt reaction to the unconscious and aggressive ways in which this sort of modification is performed all the time: the ways that, in fact, obfuscations, erasures, and exaggerations are the rule of rather than the exception to so many "objective" reprisals of the past. Levine's famous (and infamous) adaptations of works by such modern "masters" as Duchamp, Mondrian, O'Keeffe, and Schiele, as well as her more generic borrowings of tropes such as the stripes of "modernist painting" and the curios of "flea-market find," have thus been timed to address specific conditions—not only those surrounding the trajectory of her own decades-long career (to continue *her* story, as it were) but those of art-historical discourse and its evolving discontents.

Presenting "negative" images in this issue of *Artforum*—one that also includes in-depth discussion of the recent exhibition "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York—resonates with our particular moment. (And presenting newly "inverted" images is richly compelling, since the word *inversion*, Levine points out, has a long history within discussions of *perversion*, most specifically in relation to same-sex desire.) A number of Levine's 1981 "Untitled (After Walker Evans)" images hang in the "Pictures Generation" show even as I write. By introducing yet *another* version of these images in *Artforum*, Levine calls attention to the ways in which her own work is asked to perform in that museal context, one where feminist discourse and issues of identity have been strikingly downplayed. After all, many of the images in "Untitled (After Walker Evans)" had also appeared in Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), that famous documentary experiment that sought to register the lives of the rural poor while reflecting on the representation of historical actors. Levine, too, considers the ways in which her own history, and that of her generation, is being written around her: Her work asks that we continue to reflect on what story is told and what aspects will inevitably need to be amended in the long run. In 1998, she asserted, "I have the same relationship to van Gogh as Pierre Menard had to Miguel de Cervantes, that is to say, I have influenced him." Just how Levine will influence her own place in the future, we will, of course, have to wait and see. □

JOHANNA BURTON IS AN ART HISTORIAN AND CRITIC BASED IN NEW YORK.

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Opposite page, from left: Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (Broad Stripe: 4)*, 1985, casein and wax on wood, 24 x 20". Sherrie Levine, *Koko (detail)*, 1991, six parts, ink on paper, each 24 x 18 7/8". This page, from left: Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (Parchment Knot: 9)*, 2003, acrylic on plywood, 96 x 48". Sherrie Levine, *Caribou Skull*, 2006, cast bronze, 54 x 31 1/2 x 25".