

Art

by Hunter Drohojowska

I probably use the word "appropriation" in art reviews and articles every week. The term is as ubiquitous as "Post-modernism" and almost as vague, a catch-all description for ideas behind much of the new art. Since there are two exhibitions this month by the founding father and mother of the term — Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger — it seemed like an, um, appropriate time to muse over the two artists' motivations.

"The newest 'ism' is plagiarism," quipped a friend, and Richard Prince himself says "appropriation" is a cosmetic word for stealing — stealing images and stealing ideas. Since 1912 artists have been appropriating photographic images — our closest facsimiles of reality — to juxtapose them with the reality of painting or words. Collage, which literally means "a gluing," was invented when Picasso stuck a bit of *trompe l'oeil* chair caning to a Cubist painting. A few years later, Berlin Dadaist Raoul Hausmann recognized the propaganda power of photographs and made political montages with photos and slogans.

Fast-forward to the 1960s and Andy Warhol, who rejected the action painters' notion of "self-expression" and selected his images from popular culture. He appropriated existing idols like Elvis and Marilyn and mass-produced them by silk-screen. Enter Pop art. Out of Pop art came Minimal and Conceptual art. Much of the work being done today is a confluence of all three movements — the source material is Pop, the political and social ideas are at root Conceptual, and the look of the work is often stripped down, elegantly Minimal.

In the midst of all this, John Baldessari was teaching at CalArts and appropriating photographs and text. His philosophy has had a singular influence on artists working with appropriated images today: David Salle, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine. Several of them studied or taught with Baldessari. (The Hollywood experience is pronounced in much of their imagery, but all of these artists achieved their reputations in New York.)

Why has this way of making art become so prevalent at this time? One explanation lies in the feeling that the cultural world is a plenum, and that the artist should now select his vocabulary from what exists as opposed to coming up with something new. As Richard Prince has written, by making it again, you make it new.

For Prince, appropriation is "collage without the seam." He re-photographs photographs that appear in magazine advertisements, cropping or altering them to draw new content from the image. The current show at the Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery through February 17 includes re-photographed Warner Brothers publicity stills of such stars as Tina Weymouth of the Talking Heads and Laurie Anderson; on the opposite side of the gallery, there are re-photographed pictures from fashion magazines. These border on the hilarious: a model in profile wears a hat so low on her face that two large holes are cut in the brim for her eyes. Another model wears huge white sunglasses with only narrow slits for vision. One very large print includes a grouping of fashion photographs cropped to emphasize the models' eyes or mouths, the

When Is "Appropriation" Appropriate?



Untitled, Richard Prince.

only evidence of their personality. All are black-and-white images photographed with color film, which gives them a nostalgic sepia tone.

So what is the difference between the intentions of Warhol and of Prince? For one thing, Warhol was distanced from his commercial imagery, while Prince is not. "In formal terms, the Pop artists of the '60s were aestheticizing the public image," Prince told the *Weekly*. "The Pop art of the '80s is a kind of anti-aesthetic approach to the subject matter. In re-photographing something, you can be the originator of the unoriginal, the closest thing to the real thing."

Warhol perpetuated fictions. Prince believes that the photographic reality that surrounds us is sufficiently fictionalized. He wants to add facts. By representing a photograph from the commercial world as his own, it becomes a separate reality. He wholeheartedly embraces the artificial as actuality, rather than commenting from a fragile pedestal. The last 100 years have been laden with artists' feelings and impressions. "That's obsolete in late 20th-century, post-industrial-revolution society," said Prince. "Artists tend to think their experiences are unique, but they are not. Why should anyone be interested in the nightmares and dreams of some German painter? I don't want to see feelings, I want to see facts."

In the context of the Post-modern belief that formal innovation has been thoroughly mined, that making something new is next to impossible, an artist like Prince looks to at least make something believable. "The desire comes from want-

ing to make something look real, to make the unbelievable even more unbelievable. How could I make anything original and expect people to believe it?" Why is appropriation appropriate? "I think you're trying to add facts to the world, a remix of fact and fiction. The task of the artist is to present some kind of reality."

This generation looks at history and sees fiction. We live in an era when it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between the real and the unreal. After all, the country that invented TV advertising now has an actor at the helm. Aesthetics reflect social, economic and historical conditions.

One aspect of appropriation is control. The commercial photographs and films that envelop us are fashioned by others. By seizing the pictures for your own use, you establish a sort of psychological control, neutralizing the power of the mass media.

Barbara Kruger's photographs, at the L.A. County Museum of Art through March 17, are appropriated from magazines of the 1950s. These massive montages, with their slogans a la Hausmann, are both political and feminist. All the photographs are blown up large in black and white, cropped for drama, and framed in red.

These towering triptychs — some six feet wide by ten feet tall — allude to billboards, movie screens and political posters. A model's face, completely hidden by her long straight blonde hair, recalls a Clairaut ad, but the text contradicts that impression: "We construct the chorus of



Untitled, Barbara Kruger.

"Why should anyone be interested in the nightmares and dreams of some German painter? I don't want to see feelings, I want to see facts."

—Richard Prince

missing persons." This ambiguity may be read literally: "We" (the men of marketing) create legions of women who are "missing" (become stereotypes, any identity having succumbed to our dictates of proper appearance).

Kruger's images and text appropriate stereotypes because of their familiarity, and the viewer is drawn in for a sucker punch. What Roland Barthes called the "rhetoric of the image" is laid bare; we see how the photographs impose their own messages.

Craig Owens said that Kruger sees that stereotypes are used in society as weapons, instruments of power. The circulation of stereotypes promotes passivity and receptivity, through intimidation. Kruger intercepts and exposes the stereotypes' dominance over an individual.

Kruger's captions use personal pronouns — "we" or "you" — to emulate the advertising parlance calculated to establish intimacy with a general audience. "You profit from catastrophe" depicts a man's bloated hand lighting a woman's cigarette. The "you" floats free of an exact identity. "You" could be the tobacco companies, the woman relishing every inhalation, or all of "you" (the viewers) who stand accused.

These appropriated photographs are Kruger's harsh reminders of our vulnerability in a media-controlled world. The photograph of a man restraining a woman who turns away from him with an expression of pleasure bears a caption that could apply to both the viewed and the viewer, a caption that cautions: "We are being made spectacles of." ■