photographies

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 1754-0763 (Print) 1754-0771 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpho20

Not Just Pictures: Reassessing critical models for 1980s photography

Heather Diack & Erina Duganne

To cite this article: Heather Diack & Erina Duganne (2017) Not Just Pictures: Reassessing critical models for 1980s photography, photographies, 10:3, 235-243, DOI: 10.1080/17540763.2017.1340734

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2017.1340734

Published online: 10 Aug 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 81

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rpho20

Download by: [99.55.136.177] **Date:** 09 September 2017, At: 06:25

Heather Diack
Erina Duganne

NOT JUST PICTURES

Reassessing critical models for 1980s photography

Downloaded by [99.55.136.177] at 06:25 09 September 2017

On 13 February 2017, the *New York Times Style Magazine* ran an article boldly titled "These '80s Artists Are More Important Than Ever." Penned by Gary Indiana, the article is part and parcel of a resurgence of interest in the Pictures Generation and art-making practices from the 1980s, more generally.[1] For Indiana, what distinguishes the Pictures Generation, a blanket term for a group of "loosely affiliated" artists, including Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, and Robert Longo, among others, working in New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is their use of media culture as both subject and material. Predicated "by an interest in examining power and identity in a media-saturated, politically uncertain age," this practice, Indiana contends, is especially noteworthy for its anticipation of "our present bedazzlement-by-pixels." While much of Indiana's characterization rings true, his emphatic insistence on the continuing prescience of the Pictures artists is arguably as tone-deaf to the realities of the 1980s as it is to those of the present. In fact, dating back to its emergence, the work of these artists was all too frequently based on a deep *disconnect* regarding constructions of power and identity more globally.

This "coloniality of power," to borrow Argentine semiotician Walter D. Mignolo's term, and cool indifference of the Pictures Generation requires rethinking, especially in terms of the privileged position signaled by their particular embrace of postmodern thinking, which had a tendency to tout self-reflexivity and meta-critique. Moreover, though the number of artists included under the rubric of "Pictures" has expanded with each iteration, moving from Douglas Crimp's pivotal exhibition in 1977 to his revised and now canonical *October* essay of 1979, through to Douglas Eklund's large-scale Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition in 2009, a geographic and imperialist bias has been repeatedly reinforced rather than critiqued, despite postmodernism's so-called broad call for pluralism. The essays and artist portfolio collected in this special issue, which developed in part from a panel on rethinking 1980s photography that was organized for the College Art Association's annual conference in 2016, respond to such occlusions and, in so doing, complicate the historical, geographic, theoretical, and aesthetic accounts of this period.

Photography is crucial to this reconsideration of art-making practices from the 1980s for several reasons. First the medium was central to the Pictures artists, who found photography's status as a "copy" vital for the nimble ways it was embedded in everyday life and circulated through networks of mass reproduction. As Indiana points out, "the Pictures artists found [photography] the most congenial medium for what they wanted to do: to point at things already in the world, and make what they implicitly signified apparent." Second, as a form of mechanical reproduction, photography also played a central role in

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
photographies, 2017
Vol. 10, No. 3, 235–243, https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2017.1340734
© 2017 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

the theorization of postmodernism during this period. In his 1980 *October* essay "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," Crimp discusses Pictures artists Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Richard Prince as principal postmodernist examples of artists who use photography's status as "always-already-seen" to dispel such modernist myths as authorship, originality, and presence. "In their images," Crimp explains, "the original cannot be located, is always deferred; even the self which might have generated an original is shown to be itself a copy" ("The Photographic Activity" 98). Our special issue probes this elusive real by addressing international human rights conflicts for which Cold War realities were paramount and art world ambivalence was not a viable option.

During the 1980s, critics like Craig Owens and Jane Weinstock also took issue with the tendency to situate postmodernism exclusively within the disinterestedness of the art world and thereby ignore significant links between, as Owens elucidates, "the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation" (59). Commonly associated today with the term "critical" postmodernism (but also called "oppositional" postmodernism by Hal Foster in his introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic*), for most critics, such postmodernist practices included some form of Marxist ideology critique, though there was disagreement over how that contestation should be positioned, in terms of modernist aesthetics or sexual difference, for instance, and whether some forms, turning to Douglas Crimp's 1983 essay "Appropriating Appropriation," should be characterized as "regressive" and others as "progressive."[2] Yet what remains under-discussed in all of these accounts are practices and approaches that do not take up a distinctively critical or deconstructivist perspective and thus do not fit as neatly within the postmodernist paradigm of the Pictures Generation. We are certainly not alone in this reevaluation. In her 2015 book *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance*, art historian Siona Wilson addresses how the ascendancy of these theoretical paradigms have resulted in the occlusion of more social documentary-based practices during the 1980s. But whereas Wilson focuses on the legacy of such British artists as Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, we look at practices and attendant geopolitical conflicts taking place in contexts such as South Korea, Nicaragua, Lebanon, South Africa, and Colombia.

In turning our attention to social documentary practices from this period, we also move beyond the binary structures of art/document and aesthetics/politics that for so long have informed theoretical and historical discussions of photography from this period. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, among others, launched a series of trenchant critiques against documentary photography and photojournalism more generally. Building upon the theoretical ideas of Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, these artists and critics maintained that traditional documentary photography no longer functioned as an effective tool of political and social critique. They based this conclusion largely on how the medium had been used in an uncritical, even voyeuristic, manner. Practitioners of traditional documentary photography, they argued, questioned neither the assumed objectivity and neutrality of the medium nor the power relationships embedded within it. Even worse, these practitioners assumed these characteristics as implicit and unproblematic to the medium.

Today, these critiques have become so absorbed within mainstream photography criticism, writing, and practice that their conclusions have become widespread, if not definitive. Yet despite the many pitfalls, even dangers, outlined within them, beginning with Okwui Enwezor's groundbreaking 2002 exhibition *Documenta 11*, there has been a

Downloaded by [99.55.136.177] at 06:25 09 September 2017

resurgence of documentary practices within the contemporary art world. What accounts for this revival? Art historian and cultural critic T.J. Demos, who has written extensively about this subject, attributes this resurgence in part to historical shifts caused by the process of globalization. In his introduction to *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography* (2006), Demos draws a distinction between the 1980s, when this phenomenon was just beginning to take hold, and today. Building on the theoretical writings of both Guy Debord and Fredric Jameson, Demos contends "the dominant condition of visual experience" in the 1980s was "the spectacle," (10) or an understanding of the world "as a disorienting field of empty and fragmented signs," (7) in which actual lived experiences were supplanted by so-called representations of representations (Baudrillard, *Simulations*; Foster, *Recodings*). By the 1990s, however, that relationship to the real began to change. According to Demos, because globalization both connected "the world's distant points" at the same time that it brought about "an increase in economic disparity and military domination, giving rise to demands for equality, participation, and self-determination" ("The Ends" 7), documentary practitioners working in today's globalized economy could no longer afford to succumb to postmodernism's endless generation of the sign. They instead realized the necessity of a documentary practice that could inflect the real, albeit in ways that are "far from simple or unmediated" (Demos, *The Migrant Image* 129).

This "international return to the documentary mode in contemporary art" (Demos, *The Migrant Image* 129), as Demos likens it, highlights an important shift in global commitments to the political and social efficacy of documentary art-making practices. But in contrasting current practitioners with those working in the 1980s, Demos unwittingly simplifies, if not outright obscures, significant visual practices taking place across the globe during this decade that likewise raise doubts about the effectiveness of postmodernist critiques of representation. While certainly influential, the spectacle was not universally accepted during this time. Moreover, this analytic was by no means an international phenomenon. Turning back to the 1980s with a more global lens, in fact, points to the inadequacy of the spectacle for responding to very "real effects" of international human rights conflicts taking place throughout the globe. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau, writing in 1985 laments, "In a culture of lies (or simulations, simulacras, or spectacle) how does one represent even the possibility of historical truth?" ("Photography" 51). Our special issue takes this question as a starting point by considering a range of art-making practices in the 1980s for which representation and truth were not inescapably antagonistic.

Another well-rehearsed analytic during the 1980s was the politics of representation, a term often associated with the critique of documentary photography discussed above.[3] Explained more recently by John Tagg as "a rhetorical inversion of 'the representation of politics'" ("Discipline and Protest" 62), this form of Marxist ideology critique (that also drew to varying degrees on psychoanalytic theory, semiotics, and poststructuralism) hinges on the notion that photography can reveal something about the relationship between subjects and apparatuses that can be contested or undone.[4] Yet, like the spectacle, this analytic also begins to lose critical muster, especially when it is applied to international human rights conflicts in which the medium's ability to address issues around identification, belonging, and collectivity was as important as the politics of representation. To what extent, then, did the politics of belonging and the

Downloaded by [99.55.136.177] at 06:25 09 September 2017

affects it produced provide as much a framework for thinking about photography in the 1980s as the politics of representation or even the spectacle? What additional analytic models might emerge if we turn our attention to photographic practices of the 1980s outside of the United States and Great Britain? This special issue addresses such questions and thereby opens up a space for rethinking 1980s photographic practices in new and unexpected ways.

While assembling this special issue, we looked for an emblematic image. After much deliberation, we turned to Barbara Kruger, a feminist artist strongly associated with the notion of "Pictures," who was in fact not one of the five artists included in Crimp's influential *Artists Space* exhibition in 1977. The elusive subjectivities that Kruger's work engages, alongside its complex mode of interpellation, seemed apt for our project of revisiting the conceptual and theoretical framework of the Pictures Generation while looking for avenues of inquiry that would challenge prevailing narratives of photography during this period. *Your Fictions Become History* (Figure 1) reads as a particularly poignant example, evoking the pronoun "your" and its assumptive positioning.

One of our guiding questions has indeed been how fictions assume the guise of "history," asking by extension, what crucial aspects of art making and picture making have been absent from critical discourses of this period. And how the universality of terms such as the spectacle and politics of representation, which are so frequently evoked when discussing photography from this period, might be rethought.

Our special issue, then, not only proposes alternative histories for 1980s photography but also reevaluates the theoretical paradigms, especially the interrogating structures of photographic signification, so frequently evoked when discussing art-making practices from this period. The act of "appropriation," for example, as the key mode of practice during this decade, is reassessed from various angles, including putting pressure on such polarization concepts as simulation versus originality, the endgame of "the society of spectacle," and the conflation of commodities with culture. This approach is foregrounded by Jung Joon Lee in her essay "1984: A Camptown Story," in which she takes up Yongt'ae Kim's 1984 multifaceted photo collage *DMZ* of found studio portraits featuring posed American GIs and their Korean partners. Finding the deconstructive impulse of 1980s writing around appropriation and authorship insufficient as a model and approach, Lee instead turns to José Esteban Muñoz's theory of "disidentification" that references notions of performativity and the construction of identity. In this way, Lee rethinks the peculiarity of South Korean staged images in terms not only of transnational militarism but also how 1980s photography more broadly might be theorized around expanded understandings of performative subjectivities that disrupt such binary power structures as "victimized nation" and "neocolonial victimizer."

During the 1980s, the effects of digitization and the spread of networks began to take hold. Decentralized information and the rise of the virtual certainly impacted art-making practices of that decade as well as their continuing relevance for the study of news media, especially photojournalism, today. Chad Elias' "Citizen Photography in Fouad Elkoury's *Beyrouth aller-retour*" considers the limits of news media representations and their circulation in the 1980s, particularly as concerns postmodern warfare, by delving into a close analysis of Elkoury's photographic work during the Lebanese civil war. Elias' discussion of the fictive and self-conscious uses of the camera by Elkoury serve to challenge presumed meanings of the "spectacle," including the tendency to define this analytic in terms of

Downloaded by [99.55.136.177] at 06:25 09 September 2017

Downloaded by [99.55.136.177] at 06:25 09 September 2017

Fig. 1 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Fictions Become History)*, 1983. Courtesy of Milwaukee Art Museum, copyright Barbara Kruger.

doubt, disbelief, and suspicion. By contrast, Elias mobilizes Ariella Azoulay's important writings on "civil imagination" and "civil contract" as a means of expanding a notion of "citizen photography," which ultimately prompts new modes of participant viewership, belonging, and subjectivity, more broadly. In so doing, Elias offers a compelling interpretative model for 1980s photography that, given the current political climate of xenophobia, intolerance, and hate, is not only topical but timely.

During the 1980s, there was an entrenched suspicion about the ability of documentary photography, given its assumed truthfulness and objectivity, to function as a form of social and political critique. While "over time" this US- and British-based critique of representation has become, turning to David Levi Strauss, "enshrined as definitive" (130), parallel conversations taking place in Latin America have remained mostly obscured. Ileana L. Selejan's essay, "Pictures in Dispute: Documentary Photography in Sandinista Nicaragua," begins to rectify this problem by attending to images produced in response to conflicts in Nicaragua during the 1980s in terms of their broader global circulation. In particular, she looks at ideological debates over aesthetics and politics that played out in the wake of the Nicaraguan Revolution in relation to the documentary practice of photographer Claudia Gordillo. Based on extensive archival research as well as personal interviews with Gordillo, Selejan weaves a deeply compelling and largely unknown transnational narrative about what it meant to make globally informed revolutionary art during this period. Working in a place where advertising as well as consumer popular culture was barely visible, Selejan's essay offers an especially noteworthy case study both for rethinking US postmodernist critiques of representation and how 1980s photographic strategies of appropriation operated within and in terms of a larger global media culture that was both politically grounded and critically oriented.

Due to critical preoccupations with representation and truth, in the 1980s, photography's potential to build community, partnership, and solidarity, more broadly, was mostly overlooked, if not outright dismissed. In her influential 2008 book *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay challenges such overdetermined conceptualizations of the politics of photographic representation by arguing for "a universal citizenship: not a state, but a citizenry, a virtual citizenry, in potential, with the civil contract of photography as its organizing framework" (134). Though Patricia Hayes does not turn specifically to Azoulay's theories, her essay, "Photographic Publics and Photographic Desire in 1980s South Africa," similarly grapples with photography as a medium of transnational visual solidarity. Valued for its truth claims and realist expectations, South African documentary photography does not fit neatly into US and British critical histories of 1980s photography. Hayes side-steps this problem by positioning South African "struggle photography" not just in terms of debates over the politics of representation but, more crucially, how, through its production, circulation, and exhibition, it constituted new publics and collectivities within international solidarity networks and global struggles for human rights. Like Elias' essay, this reimagining of photography and politics in the 1980s as a form of being together in the world seem critical now more than ever.

The issue ends with a selection of images taken from Juan David Laserna Montoya's ongoing series *Extracción publicitaria* (*Advertisement Extraction*). Like the art works of the Pictures Generation, the series, which he began in 2012, takes media culture as both its subject and material. Yet whereas the Pictures artists appropriated mass media images as part of a larger visual strategy of postmodernist

Downloaded by [99.55.136.177] at 06:25 09 September 2017

deconstruction, Laserna turns to magazines so as to rethink their visual economy and, more specifically, in the case of the selected images reproduced here, the visual economy of the raised fist. Laserna appropriates this visual archetype from a variety of magazines that circulate both within and outside of his home country of Colombia. Yet rather than specify which magazine comes from where, Laserna, who uses the meticulous process of extraction or erasure, seeks to obfuscate the specificity of their original contexts. In so doing, Laserna lets go of structures of photographic signification, with which so many artists in the 1980s engaged, and instead opens up his work to other kinds of transcultural relationships and transnational modes of looking that serve, turning to Giorgio Agamben's theorization of the gesture, to "[open] the sphere of *ethos* as the more proper sphere of that which is human" (57). In short, through the repetition of these gestures of the raised fist, Laserna invites spectators to explore the possibility of a collectivity that both connects to the long history of political protest within Colombia and Latin American, more generally, also transcends it. While such global belonging, even solidarity, may seem to conflict with the well-rehearsed critical contestation and cool indifference of art-making practices from the 1980s, through this special issue, we hope a different set of networks, associations, and affiliations will emerge that have the potential to link this period to both the present and a yet to be determined future.

Downloaded by [99.55.136.177] at 06:25 09 September 2017

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1 In the US, this interest extends back to 2003, when *Artforum* published a double issue dedicated to art of the 1980s, through to the 2012 exhibition, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

2 For a good overview of these debates over the criticality of postmodernism, see Solomon-Godeau, "Living With Contradictions" 2–23.

3 The term politics of representation first appeared in the subtitle to Allan Sekula's 1978 essay "Dismantling Modernism," and in James Donald's introduction to the special issue of *Screen Education* 36 (Autumn 1980), which included John Tagg's essay "Power and Photography." In a footnote to her essay "Who is Speaking Thus?", Abigail Solomon-Godeau further associates this term with Victor Burgin's 1977 essay "Looking at Photographs" and his 1980 essay "Photography, Phantasy, Function," as well as with Martha Rosler's 1981 essay "In, Around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)."

4 Victor Burgin likewise makes this distinction between the politics of representation and the representation of politics (see "The Absence of Presence" and *Between*).

References

Agamben, Giorgio. "Notes on Gesture." *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. Trans. Vincenzo Binetti, and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. 49–60.

Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books, 2008.

Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer." *Reflections*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1978. 220–38.

Burgin, Victor. "Looking at Photographs." *Screen Education* 24 (Autumn 1977): 17–24.

———. "Photography, Phantasy, Function." *Screen* 21.1 (Spring 1980): 43–80. doi:10.1093/screen/21.1.43

———. "The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Postmodernisms." *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*. London: Macmillan, 1986.

———. *Between*. Oxford: Black, 1986.

Crimp, Douglas. *Pictures*. New York: Artists Space, 1977.

———. "Pictures." *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88. doi:10.2307/778227

———. "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism." *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 91–101. doi:10.2307/778455

———. "Appropriating Appropriation." *Image Scavengers: Photography*. Ed. Paula Marincola. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1982. 27–34.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995.

Demos, T.J. "The Ends of Photography." *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography*. London: Phaidon, 2006. 6–10.

———. *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Eklund, Douglas. *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009.

Enwezor, Okwui, et al., ed. *Documenta 11. Platform 5*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002.

Foster, Hal. "Postmodernism: A Preface." *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983. ix–xvi.

———. *Recodings: Essays on Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985.

Indiana, Gary. "These '80s Artists are More Important than Ever." *New York Times Style Magazine*. 13 Feb. 2017. <https://nyti.ms/2kC7R5T>.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

Mignolo, Walter D. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Owens, Craig. "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism." *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983. 57–82.

Downloaded by [99.55.136.177] at 06:25 09 September 2017

Rosler, Martha. "In, Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)." *3 Works*. Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981. 59–88.

Sekula, Allan. "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)." *The Massachusetts Review* 19.4 (Dec. 1978): 859–83.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Photography at the Dock." *The Art of Memory: The Loss of History*. Ed. William Olander. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985. 48–52.

———. "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics." *Screen* 28.3 (Summer 1987): 2–23. doi:10.1093/screen/28.3.2

———. "Who Is Speaking Thus?" *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. 169–83.

Strauss, David Levi. "Troublesomely Bound up with Reality: On the Aestheticization-of-Suffering Critique Today." *Words Not Spent Today Buy Smaller Images Tomorrow: Essays on the Present and Future of Photography*. New York: Aperture, 2014. 130–5.

Tagg, John. "Power and Photography – Part I. A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law." *Screen Education* 36 (Autumn 1980): 17–55.

———. "Discipline and Protest: Thinking Photography after Foucault." *The (Un)Becomings of Photography: On Reaggregating and Reassembling the Photographic and Its Institutions*. Ed. Lars Willumeit. Krakow: Fundacja Sztuk Wizualnych, 2016. 57–61.

Weinstock, Jane. "A Lass, A Laugh, and A Lad." *Art in America* 71.6 (Summer 1983): 7–10.

Wilson, Siona. *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Heather Diack is assistant professor of Contemporary Art and the History of Photography at the University of Miami. Recent publications include essay contributions to *"Human Systems" as Cultural Ready-mades: The Work of Douglas Huebler, Photography and Doubt*, and *The "Public" Life of Photographs*. Her current book project is entitled *Marks of Contingency: The Photographic Conditions of Conceptual Art*.

Erina Duganne is associate professor of Art History at Texas State University and a member of Borderland Collective. She is the author of *The Self in Black and White: Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography* and a co-editor of *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*.

Downloaded by [99.55.136.177] at 06:25 09 September 2017