

The Shock of the Old

By C.Carr

There was nothing new under the sun. I watched Reagan steal Truman's train ride, saw Elvis imitators, heard cover versions. I read rumors about a remake of *Zelig*. Every day was a '50s revival turning into a '60s revival. Appropriation was in the air. Got the last copy of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations* in the bookstore and opened it to read: "Why are there two towers at New York's World Trade Center?" Of course. Neither of them is the original! They signify the end of the original!

I rushed to the Modern to do research on this, but in keeping with the spirit of the trend, visited only the gift shop. I found Lichtenstein doing Matisse's in the early '60s, but they still looked like Lichtensteins. I found Claes Oldenburg turning a Picasso monument into a scaled-down leather toy. I saw everyone's *Mona Lisa*. I even happened on an article about "New England artist Hank Herron," who'd exhibited 10 years worth of Frank Stella pieces in 1971. Then disappeared. The pieces were discussed as "fakes," but then, the moment for appropriation had not yet come in '71. It has come now.

Sherrie Levine, Mike Bidlo, and Philip Taaffe are doomed to travel through life

a photograph of a photograph than it is to make a photograph of a nude or a tree." She now considers herself a still-life painter "with the bookplate as my subject matter." Last year, she exhibited watercolor copies of paintings "after" Mondrian, Leger, and others. In her current show at Nature Morte, she has 20 drawings "after" Schiele and Malevich, and two Suprematist paintings. She calls this show 1917 because the artists she's appropriated were at work then in styles considered radical, though they're wildly different. They create a dialectic as they alternate down the wall of the gallery, from Schiele's eroticism to Malevich's cool geometry.

Always she's appropriated the great Modernists—her heroes. She explains her work as being about desire and "its triangular nature." As she put it, "Desire is always mediated through someone else's desire in Freudian terms—it's the Oedipal structure." Did that mean she wished she'd made the original? Not quite: "It's an appropriation of the desire of the original artist."

To explain, she read to me from one of her press releases. Her statement described the Borges character Pierre Menard who rewrites, in the 20th century, the ninth and 38th chapters of *Don Quixote*. "His aim was never to produce a mechanical transcription of the original, he did not want to copy it. His ambition was to propose pages which would coincide with those of Cervantes, to continue being Pierre Menard and to arrive at *Don Quixote* through the experience of Pierre Menard."

So she arrives at a Schiele drawing through the experience of Sherrie Levine. It is the same project: replacing Schiele's hand with her own. She always replaces a man's hand with her own. "The art world is so much an arena for the celebration of male desire," she says. It seems to have no place for female desire, so men will be the only artists she appropriates.

Levine works at home, a fifth-floor



Sherrie Levine with *After Ilya Chashnik*

Schiele "product" they could otherwise never buy, but that's of no interest to her. "This is really my desire. I'm making the pictures I want to look at."

A critic once noted his embarrassment in looking at Levine's work—how his eyes kept going to the frame. She believes that art viewing is motivated by voyeurism and her work seduces the viewer into looking even more closely, since it's not what it appears to be. Not a Schiele. But not a counterfeit either. I like to see more than the real, and there is something

matter could reproduce the design as well as I could.

Andy Warhol said that and Mike Bidlo scrawled it across the wall last year when he recreated Warhol's Factory at P.S. 1. He hadn't seen the original Factory, but he'd read all the books. He was Andy in shades and a leather jacket. Visitors walked through a *Jackie O* room and a *Marilyn* room and a *Cow Wallpaper* room and an *Electric Chair* hallway. There was Edie! The Velvet Under-

together in all the same magazine articles, since they all make exact copies of other artists' work. And they have their nerve. But there, the similarity ends.

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The world is filled to suffocating. Man has placed his token on every stone. Every word, every image, is leased and mortgaged. We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash. . . . We can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.
 —Sherrie Levine, 1981, appropriating Franz Marc and Roland Barthes.

The first Sherrie Levine I ever saw was titled *Self-Portrait After Egon Schiele*—the melancholy Austrian expressionist clutching his genitals. This was riveting in its rudeness, a “copy” with the same subversiveness I value in any “original.” Levine was breaking the art rules—at least, all the rules I’d ever learned as a kid taking classes in mimesis—by photographing Schiele’s self-portrait from a book and calling it her own. It’s startling to think of it as a picture of Levine, wearing only an open coat and yanking at her groin—the sort of image women have never allowed themselves to make before. Such audacity was thrilling to behold in another woman, what with the art world always denying us our manhood. So to speak.

Levine has set the standard for radicality in appropriation; she was there when other artists were still doing originals, in ’81. Her early work was especially daring stuff to place in the art market: photographs of photographs (principally Walker Evans), “collages” (reproductions cut from books and magazines and glued to mats), and framed postcards of scenic landscapes. This is work that questions the very *idea* of being owned. Conceptual art did that 15 years ago by dematerializing the object into pure idea. Her work does it by rematerializing. It’s a conceptual art project that depends on the re-creation of an object.

She calls what she makes still lifes, insisting, “It’s no more remarkable to make

walk-up painted in gold-leaf enamel. Here she traced the drawings in the current show from out-of-print catalogs, transferring the images to rag paper by redrawing each line through transfer paper, then retracing a third time to touch up. There may be a slight variation from the original, but this is not, she points out, a photorealist project. She likes to think of them as ghosts of ghosts. On the golden walls are a couple of the drawings she’s made. They’re always small—the size you can make at the kitchen table. People tell her sometimes that she’s doing a service, providing a Malevich or a

magicalin seeing a picture that exists twice and is both times original. As if there were a second invisible art world existing alongside the first. As if this work were the doorway to it. The language she brings to the work—the statements, the press releases—make a ticket for entrance. Without them it’s possible to pass the pictures by without hearing, “The world is filled to suffocating . . .”

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I tried doing them by hand but I find it easier to use a screen. This way I don’t have to work on my objects at all. One of my assistants or anyone else for that



SYLVIA PLACHY

Mike Bidlo with one of his Pollocks

ground singing heroism! Thirty-nine Warhol personalities played by Bidlo’s friends. And downstairs in his studio, the artist released the *Marilyn* screens to the public, inviting them to make their own Warhol prints to take home. “Warhol takes the image from pop culture and puts it into high art and so it’s my job to take it and bring it back to the people,” Bidlo says. “They loved it.”

It’s the art world as much as the art that fascinates Bidlo. His populist impulse pushes him to recreate not only modern masterpieces but incidents from the artists’ lives for all of us who missed the original. He repainted Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles* in front of the Met last year—on pieces of masonite which he then distributed to the audience. Recently he painted a *Blue Poles* in Germany “so that they could have one too. Every country should have a *Blue Poles*.” Right now he’s in L.A. painting *Guernica* while people watch. Bidlo thinks of his work as “a pie in the face of the art world—all that sacredness and hermeticism. Like *Les Femmes d’Alger* [a Picasso in 1907, a Bidlo in ’83], you can’t even smoke in front of that painting. All the classics of modern art. They’re removed from the people.”

But with the same enthusiasm that he describes giving away Warhol prints, he recalls going to the home of a collector who’d bought one of his Pollocks where everything was “white leather couches, white shag rug, and huge” with Frank Stellas and Salles and Morris Louises and an 18-foot Cy Twombly, and he was happy to see that the piece was going to someone who cared about art. “The people” would have to settle for seeing the real thing in a museum.

Bidlo’s studio on West 42nd Street looks like a mini-MoMA. A Chagall. A Lichtenstein. A Matisse. *Nude Descending a Staircase* and a fur-lined teacup in progress. Warhol soup cans waiting for their flavors so Bidlo can recreate the entire 1962 soup can show: “I’m really concentrating on the masterpieces.” Each piece is an exact replica, traced onto can-

Continued on next page

vas first from the slide, colors matched to the reproductions, and, when possible, the original checked out in a museum.

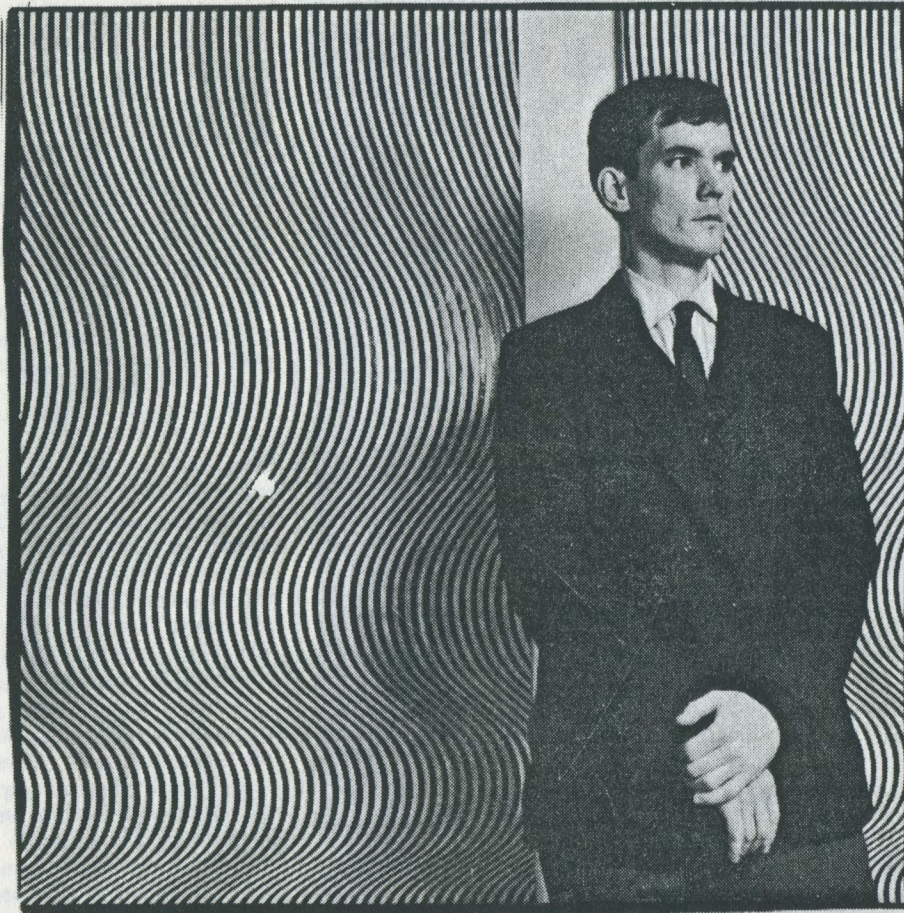
He can't, of course, trace a Pollock. That's a matter of layering the paint thinning it with just the right amount of turpentine, and staining the canvas first to simulate 30 years of aging. When I visited he showed me "the paper Pollock drew on"—he'd just found the artist's original supplier on Long Island. The Pollock masterpieces were the first things Bidlo appropriated, beginning with one for his performance/installation "Jack the Dripper at Peg's Place" in 1982. This was a remake—in a room at P.S. 1—of that art-historical moment when Pollock urinated in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace. He never saw the original room but he read the books.

Many of us grew up learning about art not from art but from *Life* Magazine, that is. There we saw Pollock, standing over a canvas in his T-shirt with a can of house paint and a brush in midmotion. Artist as hero. Painting as heroic gesture. Bidlo says some people think he's into hero worship. But he isn't. He reads from a sketchbook: "Modern ritual of exorcism and homage. Has something to do with freeing yourself from your father, something to do with making the painting come alive again. I want to paint the intrigues of the myth while at the same time becoming free of its bondage."

All progress and change in Art is toward the one end of Art as Art-as-Art.
—Ad Reinhardt

A show very important to Philip Taaffe happened at the Modern when he was 10 years old. He never saw *The Responsive Eye*, but owns the catalog with its cover by Bridget Riley, and its reproductions of work by Ad Reinhardt and other post-painterly personalities.

"There is a certain need to see this



SYLVIA PLACHY

Philip Taaffe with *Adam/Eve*, appropriated from Bridget Riley

"Seeing it here is not good enough. So it is my responsibility as an artist to see that this privation is ended." Riley was part of the Op movement, art so voraciously appropriated by 60s mass culture onto miniskirts and shopping bags that it seems to have lasted for about 10 serious minutes.

Taaffe's recreated this vertigo-inducing imagery in his quest to make "experiential" work. The *Adam/Eve* diptych in his current show at Pat Hearn Gallery corresponds to Riley's *Fall*, but he's en-

be more cinematic, more physically involving."

Since anyone staring at an Op painting will experience afterimage, he's built that into the work too by adding some pale secondary color. Another of his Riley reincarnations has a yellow background in homage to Ad Reinhardt's yellow paintings. And he's treated his exact copy of an Ellsworth Kelly abstraction as a backdrop to an arrangement of Duchamp's "stoppages"—because he was drawn to Kelly but found him "overly luxuriant or

trying to correct or update his sources. No. These were paintings about paintings. Objects seen for what they were, then interpreted.

Taaffe gave me a Xerox from the journals of Myron Stout, an abstract painter I'd never heard of before, though apparently he had a show at the Whitney. Taaffe loves Stout; he's made no changes whatsoever in those paintings. And this journal passage is very important to him, the one about the artist accepting his limitations and figuring out how to operate within them. Taaffe began appropriating in 1983 and he'd been so influenced by Stout in the work he did before, that he felt he had a certain right to simply make a Stout. More vitality in that than in simply allowing yourself to be influenced.

Doing the Stout paintings, he said, was like painting atoms. That line between the black and the white had to suggest infinity. Taaffe admires Stout for working up to 14 years on a single 25-by-19-inch picture. Since the pictures were so "emotionally and physically demanding" he'd probably make only one or two more of each himself. His Riley paintings are made with linoleum block carvings—hand-printed, then tediously glued onto the paper, cut, and painted. He doesn't work from a slide, just figures the patterns out mathematically the way she did, since the images come from wave motion theory.

Taaffe sees appropriation as a way of "pulling something through time—what we should be seeing, what we should be doing—and dealing with our own feelings of impotence or incapacitation when compared to the brilliant accomplishments we have knowledge of." Where Levine's work is a private empowerment, and Bidlo's a public celebration, Taaffe's reconstructions are an homage to icons that never were. "In a sense, I'm completing their project, or renewing their project," he says.

"Theirs was incomplete?" I ask.

work. I wanted to will it into existence. He gestured toward a Riley catalogue.

larged it from 54 to 88 inches square to give it "a more environmental quality, to

overly materialistic or too self-enclosed or too self-referential." I asked if he was

It was complete, but not quite up to the needs of our present situation." ■

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