Confronting the Uncomfortable:
Questioning Truth and Power
Catalogue 25
Catalogue 13
Catalogue 12
This publication accompanies an exhibition
at the Yale University Art Gallery
2 September–22 October 1989

Design and typography in Stone Sans typefaces
by John C. Gambell.
Mergenthaler L300 output
by Yale University Printing Service.
Printing by Eastern Press.

Copyright © 1989 by Yale University Art Gallery
Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number 89-51445
Preface and Acknowledgments

Curating this exhibition has given me the opportunity to combine the best of two worlds. Methodologically, the thinking that structured this inquiry grew out of my training in the Department of Art and Art History at The State University of New York at Binghamton. Visually, the rich collections at the Yale University Art Gallery have allowed me to look at, and think about, a wide range of pictorial representation. It was while “getting to know” the photographic collection in the printroom at Yale that aspects of my theoretical training were called into play. Questions concerning subjectivity, identity, and the social process arose while looking at photographs either by or “about” women. Although there is perhaps no definitive way of answering questions of gender, I found that through a theoretical mode of thought I could pursue a line of reasoning that challenged established ways of looking at and thinking about visual culture.

There have been numerous exhibitions dedicated to issues of gender over the last ten years, yet it is my hope that the application of aspects of cultural and psychoanalytical theory to selected images will make evident a practical way of thinking about the role of art in defining social positions. This exhibition will, therefore, include conceptually-oriented photographs that question gender-related stereotypes and accepted forms of thinking. While the inclusion of such contemporary works may appear to be an attempt to valorize theoretical practice, the juxtaposition and comparison of these recent works with more traditional forms of photography should illuminate some of the issues at the heart of the current cultural debate. My approach in uncovering these issues may be termed post-Marxist, and defined as a process of utilizing theories from a range of “isms” to explain cultural practices such as photography. This approach is based on the intervention that Karl Marx made in the study and analysis of culture, but is strengthened and critiqued by related methods of
social investigation. The benefit of this method is that cultural practices may be ana-
alyzed without excluding the female voice and without becoming entangled in the eli-
tist, rhetorical traps of “postmodern” writing.

The opportunity to undertake this project has been made possible by Richard S. 
Field, Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs. I owe him, and the entire print-
room staff—Lisa Hodermarsky, Gary Hewitt, Lisa Sigal, and Jennifer Marshall—a debt 
of gratitude, as it has been through work on this exhibition that my own approach to 
art history and cultural theory has been defined. Having come to terms with many of 
the dense and difficult theoretical questions encountered in graduate school, I must 
thank John Tagg for the direction he provided in formulating my current mode of 
thought.

The Gallery would also like to thank those whose contributions greatly aided this 
exhibition. To the lenders and their representatives go our deepest appreciation for 
their generosity and patient help—the Museum of the State University of New York 
at Binghamton and Nancy Gonchar; the Mary Boone Gallery and Peter Opheim; the 
John Weber Gallery and Elise Goldberg; Metro Pictures and David Goldsmith, and 
especially Mr. Ford Beckman and Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Berland. And for the second 
time this year, we are reminded of the talents that make our exhibitions a reality— 
the precise and critical editing of Lesley K. Baier and the thoughtful and original 
design of John C. Gambell—and of the selfless support and devotion of Florence 
Selden (Mrs. Carl L. Selden). Her steadfast friendship has enriched the lives of many 
who have come to the Art Gallery for a year’s work or an hour’s visit.

Mary E. Law
National Endowment for the Arts Intern for 1988-89
Confronting the Uncomfortable: Questioning Truth and Power

This exhibition rests on the premise that the gender-specific attributes of masculine and feminine are socially constructed meanings that are not entirely biologically determined. Such an assertion, which questions the supposed “natural” social order, has permeated many areas of contemporary study and practice. In art, the photograph has long functioned uncritically as an accessory to the construction of social meaning. More recently, however, the photograph’s omnipresence in the modern world, and its credibility as an object of report, have made photography the medium of choice for artists intent on exposing the “real” as produced, encoded, and designed to fulfill specific interests. Because the contemporary artists represented in this exhibition challenge the status quo of sexual meaning by questioning established pictorial traditions, their work is often difficult for viewers to understand. This exhibition therefore begins with new readings of some traditional photographs, readings that should help articulate the alternatives offered by contemporary work. Such a comparative, subject-oriented approach will be augmented by a discussion of some of the theoretical models that inform non-traditional types of cultural production.

The photographer, scholar, and theoretician Victor Burgin provides a description of the “left” photographer that neatly summarizes some of the issues informing both current art production and its critical readings:

The politically “left” photographer wants to help correct society’s false picture of its actual conditions of existence, to raise such questions as: why this practice? What does it mean? What interest does it serve? Such a photographer wants to help people become conscious of the forces which shape their day-to-day lives; to realize that the

Checklist

Unless otherwise noted, photographers are American and dimensions are of the full sheet.

1. Tina Barney (b. 1945)
   *jill and Polly in the Bathroom*, 1987
   Ektacolor Plus color print, 840 x 1052 mm
   Purchased with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts,
   1989.16.1

2. Gertrude Käsebier (1852–1932)
   *Maternity*, 1897
   Gum bichromate print, 298 x 214 mm
   Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund
   1975.20

   *Lynn, Logs and Doll*, 1958
   Gelatin silver print, 191 x 242 mm
   Gift of William A. Turnage, B.A. 1965,
   in honor of Mathilde Sewall
   1977.193.41

4. Kelly Wise (b. 1932)
   *Untitled*, n.d.
   Type C Polaroid print, 127 x 127 mm
   Anonymous Gift
   1976.23.2

5. Edouard Boubat (French, b. 1923)
   *Place des Vosges, Paris*, 1979
   Gelatin silver print from the portfolio
   *Edouard Boubat*, published by Hyperion Press, 1981, 405 x 305 mm
   Anonymous Gift
   1987.76.1.8

6. Laurie Simmons (b. 1949)
   *Woman Opening Refrigerator*, 1979
   Color photograph, 154 x 235 mm
   Lent by the artist, courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York

7. Laurie Simmons (b. 1949)
   *Woman Watching TV*, 1978
   Color photograph, 146 x 223 mm
   Lent by the artist, courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York City
social order is not the natural order, and thus beyond all change, but is made by people and can be changed by them.3

In order to correct society's "false picture," it is necessary to understand that "art is constitutive of ideology."4 Ideology, or a body of beliefs, values, images, and techniques that constitute our notion of "reality," is constructed in and through representation. As one form of representation, the photograph functions as a system of signification that does more than merely mirror a set of beliefs: it actively reaffirms and contributes to their formation. To view visual representations from this perspective is to view them not as neutral objects, but as purveyors of ideological beliefs. Previous discussions of many of the traditional photographs in this exhibition have focused on their aesthetic or technical significance. The new criticism seeks instead to open a line of inquiry that suggests that the very act of looking involves a political stance. Photographs define and fix social positions because looking and being looked at inevitably involve relationships of power and submission. It is not surprising, therefore, that photographers contribute powerfully and often unexpectedly to the formation of gender stereotypes by manipulating and even programming the viewer.

Traditional photographs often reveal and confirm what author John Berger meant when he wrote, "men act and women appear."5 Berger's Ways of Seeing (1972) was one of the earliest attempts to analyze the political power of looking. His critique of women in art can be used to examine the active and passive processes of looking and being looked at. Before studying specific ways of constituting subject positions, it is useful to consider Berger's notion that every image of woman is different from, and has no equivalent to, an image of man:

Women are depicted in a quite different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the "ideal" spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him. If you have any doubt that this is so make the following experiment. Transform the woman into a man. Either in your mind's eye or by drawing on the reproduction. Then notice the violence which that transformation does. Not to the image, but to the assumptions of a likely viewer.6

One of the most notable examples of the transformation of "the woman into a man" comes from Imogene Cunningham's 1915 photograph of her husband nude, in a work entitled On Mt. Rainier (cat. 39, p. 2).7 Critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau has written that Cunningham was attempting "to take the authoritative convention of the female nude in nature, a convention underwritten by the construction of femininity as nature, and reverse its gender."8 Comparing this image with two of the female in nature, Wynn Bullock's Child in Forest (cat. 20) from 1953, and Untitled [Nude Woman on Forest Floor] (cat. 21, p. 3) from 1954 clearly demonstrates that technical and compositional conventions can make powerful statements regarding identity and social position. Cunningham's husband is depicted in soft focus and at eye level. Bullock's female figures are depicted in sharp focus and from a high vantage point. The results of these two differences alone are significant. The male nude is not subjected to the same type of interrogation that the sharp focus inflicts on the female. The viewer's dominant position in relation to the female figures contributes to this interrogation, as does the closed picture space in which the figures are placed: Bullock's figures are surrounded by vegetation which, on one level, adds to the feel-
ing of nature and the "natural" but, on another, acts as a frame that traps them in the picture space. In contrast, Cunningham's male stands in a more open and escapable landscape. The difference between standing free and lying totally exposed establishes a traditional active/passive dichotomy and poses a further problem. Why does a nude male, represented in a rather awkward and nonthreatening manner, appear less natural, less acceptable than the vulnerable and trapped female figure? Such an investigation requires an analysis of the social structures that have informed much of the Western tradition of patriarchal dominance.

Our uneasy response to the Cunningham photograph is indicative of a general resistance to the photographic representation of the male nude in Western society. This resistance was blatantly evident in 1978 when the Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery (New York) mounted an exhibition of photographs of the male nude. The media's response demonstrates how deeply imbedded society's languages and codes of propriety actually are. The Village Voice, for example, reported that "a man's body doesn't lend itself to abstraction like woman's. There are few conventions for him," while The New York Times asserted that "there is something disconcerting about the sight of man's naked body presented primarily as a sexual object." The "aesthetic" devaluation of the male nude is a common critical response, but the underlying discomfort expressed in the Times' review undoubtedly stems from the breaking of conventional social and pictorial codes. The codes and languages of visual representation often establish spatial metaphors that parallel ways of viewing the world (e.g., looking down on someone, putting things into focus). To examine how these codes operate, therefore, we must address the power structures inherent in the act of looking. That act is as important an element in determining social identity as is the subject matter of the image. Thinking about imagery from this perspective offers an understanding of ways in which gender-related distinctions are promoted and constructed.

Laura Mulvey outlines three forms of looking in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In analyzing how the unconscious structures ways of seeing, she defines the look of the camera, the look of the audience who watches, and the look of the characters at each other as three conventions that stem from the dominant order of society. Applied to a close study of specific photographs, her psychoanalytic approach (focusing on the unconscious), tempered by cultural theory (focusing on ideology), clarifies the reciprocity between looking as a reflection of the social order and looking as constituting and perpetuating that order.

The two Bullock photographs clearly illustrate the powerful effect attained by the "look" of the camera, whose angle of inspection enables the audience to look down on the figures. The resulting vantage point establishes an active/passive dichotomy, here between active viewer and passive photographed figure. Because the viewer is forced to assume the dominant and controlling stance of a voyeur, a masculine point of view is established. The implications of such a voyeuristic perspective become even clearer in Robert Doisneau's An Oblique Look, 1948 (cat. 24, p. 5). The complexities within this photograph require multiple readings of the looks exchanged between the viewer and those pictured. The camera situates the viewer inside an art shop, from which he/she watches a couple on the street viewing paintings through the shop window. The woman actively looks at an image which faces away from the viewer, while her male companion looks at an image of a half-naked woman which the viewer can also see. Immersed in her own act of looking, the woman is unaware.

8 Robert Frank (b. 1924) Movie Premiere, Hollywood, 1955 Gelatin silver print, 350 x 280 mm Purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Susan Morse Hilles Matching Fund 1981.4

9 Walker Evans (1903-1974) Girl in Fulton Street, New York, 1929 Gelatin silver print, 354 x 280 mm Yale University Art Gallery 1981.55.1

10 Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) Untitled No. 104, 1982 Color photograph, 762 x 502 mm Purchased with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, Arthur Fleischer, Jr., B.A. 1953, LL.B. 1958, and Mr. and Mrs. Sampson R. Field 1989.27.1

11 Connie Hatch (b. 1951) The De Sublimation of Romance, 1978-84 Six gelatin silver prints from a series of 24, each 280 x 355 mm Lent by the University Art Museum, State University of New York at Binghamton


13 Edouard Boubat (French, b. 1923) Torse, 1980 Gelatin silver print from the portfolio Edouard Boubat, published by Hyperion Press, 1981, 405 x 305 mm Anonymous Gift 1987.76.1.3

of this image and is excluded from the triangulated interchange between the viewer, the man, and the image of the half-naked woman. Thus the viewer is instrumental in completing the visual joke—a joke pointedly made at the expense of the woman. Mary Ann Doane, who has analyzed this photograph to critique methods of negating the female gaze, has concluded:

...she [the woman] is contrasted iconographically to the naked woman. She is denied the picturing of her desire; what she looks at is blank for the spectator. She is denied being the object of desire because she is represented as a woman who actively looks rather than returning and confirming the gaze of the masculine spectator.12

Denying women the gaze contributes to the male pleasure in looking and can, in part, be explained by the scopic impulse. Freud defined scopophilia as the taking of other people as objects, and subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.13 Women have traditionally responded to the reification that results from this controlling gaze by assuming an exhibitionist stance that Mulvey has termed “to-be-looked-at-ness”.14 This stance, which results from the dichotomy between looking and being looked at, constitutes the binary oppositions, active/passive, voyeur/exhibitionist, subject/object, and can again be seen in the following photographs.

The act of watching the male character watch a female character grants the viewer the same voyeuristic or interrogating perspective as the pictured male. For example, both Robert Doisneau’s Barbarian Prisoner and Callipygian Venus, Versailles, 1966 (cat. 25, p. 4) and Brassai’s Matisse with his Model, 1939 (cat. 38, p. 14) portray men in the act of “taking others as objects and subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.” Within both of these images, the viewer’s vantage point again completes a triangular composition and empowers him or her with the same sort of controlling look enjoyed by the male in the photograph. In Doisneau’s image, the viewer becomes a voyeur to an act of voyeurism, while in Brassai’s, he or she becomes an accomplice to an “artistic” investigation of the female form. In this respect, Doisneau and Brassai can be viewed as having taken the male-oriented act of looking itself as the focus of their work. Maintaining for the viewer an active subject position that identifies him/her with the male role, they demonstrate how the controlling male viewpoint turns the observed figure into a passive object of desire.

A more extreme method of taking the female as an object and insuring subservience to the male viewer is to limit the visual interactions between them by turning the model away from the audience. Edouard Boubat uses this form of silencing in his Hommage au Douanier Rousseau, 1980 (cat. 37, p. 6). Of concern here is not Boubat’s blatant exploitation of a pose with a long tradition in the history of art but rather the degree to which that pose dehumanizes and victimizes the now faceless and anonymous model.15 In addition to photographing the model from behind or simply turning her head away from the viewer, photographers often block her view with props or objects. This “silence through blindness” informs such works as Boubat’s Torse, 1980 (cat. 13, p. 7) and Garry Winogrand’s N.Y.C., 1972 (cat. 12, p.8). Alan Ross’s Nude, 1975 (cat. 15) exaggerates this form of silencing by narrowly restricting attention to specific parts of the model’s body. Her identity is totally lost; her body has become an “abstract” composition. Such explorations of pictorial conventions have long been condoned and celebrated by the tenets of modernism, which give primacy to qualities of form, texture, and shape. Yet an approach to the
history of art that views photography as constitutive of ideology cannot operate in a formalist vacuum. Ross’s photograph, like the others considered above, can be appreciated for its compositional and technical expertise, but it must also be recognized as ascribing cultural meanings to the term woman.

In my discussion of the nude as fragmented, dehumanized, or anonymous, I have focused thus far on the ways in which the act of looking enhances and colors gender-related meanings. An expanded reading of these images, incorporating the theories pioneered by Jacques Lacan, can relate the critique of the look to larger issues of identity. Lacan, a French psychoanalyst who dedicated much of his life to a critical reinterpretation of Freud, attached considerable significance to the act of looking in his conception of the social order. According to Lacan, the social order is symbolically structured around the Phallus, defined both as the anatomical possession of the penis and as power. The child enters a symbolic world structured by the Phallus as his/her own look reveals the distinction between having and not having the all-important penis. Since these early stages of development are experienced just as the child learns to express its desires and frustrations by means of the spoken word, Lacan believes that identity is formulated in and through language. According to this view, the word and the image (verbal and visual language) together shape and express our world and our understanding of reality. The language of patriarchy that is determined by the presence or absence of the Phallus enables a child to grow and be formulated by the social order. For the female, the lack which her look confirms establishes her as man’s “other” and forces her to accept a language of subservience. For the male, possession of the penis entitles him to a position of authority, while his recognition that woman is lacking instills a fear of castration. One way for the male to reduce or negate this threat is to accentuate the female’s beauty, and hence his own desire, to the point where the form actually comforts.

This unconscious need to glorify the female form may, in fact, lay behind Boubat’s dramatically highlighted female torso and Ross’s accentuated breast, leg, and arm. The issue here, however, is not the needs or desires that are responsible for the creation and appreciation of such images, but rather the resultant vocabularies that the images instill and perpetuate. We might now examine ways in which these vocabularies are being contested by contemporary photographers, while we also consider the reasons for their widespread acceptance.

The pictorial languages that inform works such as Garry Winogrand’s N.Y.C. are being challenged by artists who attempt to refute the power structures imbedded in traditional photographs. Rejecting the authoritative male gaze that has long predominated within and across the practice of still photography, they make the act of looking the focus of their work in order to critique that act’s capacity to capture and objectify the female figure. Connie Hatch’s series The De-Sublimation of Romance, 1978-84 exemplifies one such attempt to reverse the camera’s accepted codes and vocabularies, while it also illustrates a trend of contemporary photographers to break from a “masterpiece” criteria and to produce bodies of work that ask multiple questions and do not function as quintessential statements. Hatch, who studied with Winogrand, here questions the power structures inherent in street photography. As Hatch’s text panel for the series declares, these power structures are formed through the act of looking: “The look, to be looked at, to look back again and again. The critical look back, the defiant look back. At the work place, the home, the same place,
the other’s place.” This text, which is an integral part of the series, opens for the viewer a range of questions while critiquing the paired images that juxtapose viewing positions: the male look at the woman, the female look away, the voyeuristic look of the viewer, and the active look of the camera. These looks cut against, challenge, and expand the more traditionally accepted camera angles and viewpoints utilized by photographers such as Winogrand. In segments 12A and B (cat. 11, p. 9) of the series, Hatch examined ways in which the look is consumed and commodified, incorporated into commercial products as a means of enhancing their marketability. The lower frame represents a movie set and illustrates all the paraphernalia needed to capture a “spontaneous” moment. The upper piece represents a display of art objects that were created to be looked at and sold. The contrast stresses that the need to look has become an obsession in modern society, and that the roles of people and objects are, at times, synonymous. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has further argued, Hatch is “foregrounding woman’s place as spectacle, as fetish, as object rather than subject of the gaze.” Hatch emphasizes these places by exposing the active look of the camera as a form of appropriation and thus of objectification. The comparison of those who will be looked at with those who refuse the look is one of Hatch’s most successful ways of highlighting the power structures enforced by traditional, male-oriented looking. This refusal is most obvious in segment 3A, in which the pictured female is looking, not at the camera or at the photographer, whose shadow appears in the foreground, but at a passing male cyclist. This subverts the classic language of voyeurism in Doisneau’s photograph (p. 4): the female figure refuses to look at the camera while she actively confronts the pictured male.

Susan Sontag has written that “to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.” Cindy Sherman attempts to fight this violation by assuming positions on both sides of the camera at once. Appropriating both the subject, or active voyeuristic position of the viewer, and the object, or passive exhibitionist position of the sitter, Sherman subverts and alters the power structures inherent in traditional photographer/photographed, viewer/sitter, director/audience relationships. In part because of its theoretical nature, her work functions on many complex, and often contradictory levels. Individually, the photographs reveal the reciprocity between pose and stereotype; collectively, these stereotypes serve to critique the processes that constitute them. For example, Sherman’s typical pictorial freezing of a moment out of context may demonstrate how stereotyped that particular depiction of the female actually is, while it also, paradoxically, perpetuates that fixed identity. As a body of work, however, Sherman’s photographs challenge the notion that identities can ever be fixed. Because she has the ability to assume a seemingly infinite number of roles and personae Sherman makes it impossible to pin down her “real” identity.

Recognizing that the status quo between active male and passive female has resulted in a fixing and categorizing of social positions, Sherman began her career by focusing on the structure of the grade-B movie (1977–80). Because the plots of such films rely on the use of stereotypical roles and prototypical characters, she was able to recreate instantaneously recognizable narratives based on female types. According to Sherman, the Film Stills “should trigger your memory so that you feel you have seen it before.” Untitled Film Still No. 84, 1978 (cat. 31, p. 10), which bears all the
marks of an actual film clip, was, as are most of her images, conceived, acted, directed, and photographed by Sherman herself. The Sherman in this *Film Still* is, however, markedly different from the woman in her *Untitled No. 104, 1982* (cat. 10, p. 13). Technically, the later work reflects Sherman's move to large-scale color photography while it also demonstrates a conceptual shift. At this later stage in her career Sherman is concerned with developing characters who are meticulously complex and evoke a variety of responses from the viewer: pity, desire, victimization. The focus is now not so much on memory and recognition, but on emotional identification. Due to the serial nature of Sherman's method of challenging reality, it is necessary to see several examples of her work in order to understand the ultimate message: a requirement which again undercuts the status of the "masterpiece." The viewer must recognize that the brunette housewife picking up groceries and the adolescent girl reflecting on a romantic encounter are the same woman. On a theoretical level, Sherman's work questions the authority vested in forms of objectification, exploitation, and consumption, while it also challenges the believability of the photograph. As Craig Owens has written: "Sherman's women are not women but images of women, specular models of femininity projected by the media to encourage imitation, identification: they are, in other words, tropes, figures."

A Lacanian reading of the subject/object positions questioned by artists such as Sherman might conclude by finding these dichotomies inevitable, based on language's tie to the Phallic order and its role in formulating human identity. A cultural approach would go beyond this reductive view and question the way languages are formed and perpetuated through ideology. One of the first studies to deal with the roles cultural practices play in shaping ideology, and hence views of reality, was undertaken by the Italian Communist leader Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s and 1930s. Gramsci's studies opened an inquiry into the ideological sectors of society, which enabled cultural institutions (such as the family) to be viewed in terms of their relationships to larger issues of power. Because Gramsci worked within the Marxist tradition, these ideological sectors remained, for him, dependent on the economy. Yet he was able to expand the concept of political "hegemony," traditionally used to define dominant forms of political leadership, to include cultural and ideological values as determinants of morally acceptable behavior. Gramsci's theory underscores the power of cultural practices to produce relationships of domination and subordination through agreement and acceptance. Negotiation at the ideological level results in a so-called "collective" and "national-popular" will based on a voluntary acceptance of prescribed views of reality. This will, which tends to present the social order as a naturalized whole, has been described by Joseph V. Femia as something which is subtly instilled by the "moulding of personal convictions into a replica of prevailing norms."

Critical approaches to the formation of normative roles inform the work of artists such as Laurie Simmons who, like Sherman, undermines the inevitability of fixed social positions. Whereas Sherman questions the status quo by appropriating the controlling and curious gaze, Simmons creates tableaus in which plastic, toy women perform their "appropriate" tasks. In such staged vignettes as *Woman Watching TV*, 1978 (cat. 7) and *Woman Opening Refrigerator*, 1979 (cat. 6), the "typical" housewife is depicted in roles that even a toy woman could undertake. By placing a doll in traditional female situations, Simmons openly challenges the way women are perceived.
and the limited roles they are assigned within a strongly patriarchal social order. Simmons's disdain for these socially constructed roles is conveyed by the grossly artificial colors of the settings and by the disproportionate relationship between the dolls and the household objects surrounding them. Often the very profusion and exaggerated size of these objects seem to disenfranchise the doll despite its placement in a supposedly "female" arena. The high gloss of Simmons's deeply saturated, and richly colored images challenges deep seated beliefs that photography inescapably records the real and conveys the truth. Ironically, based on their seductive gloss, Simmons's images themselves function more as objects of desire than as reports of reality.

If we are able to consider visual representation as a means of shaping prevailing norms, then we can also view it as contributing to a "language of femininity." Many of the traditional photographs discussed here defined that language narrowly, maintaining the order between the sexes by restricting women's options for change or movement. The constitution of a structured and dominant language also normalizes given views of the world, views that often build moral or ethical boundaries. This common language may explain the willingness on the part of women to pose for, and/or to photograph, images such as Libby, 1971 (cat. 22, p. 17) by Judy Dater, or Somnolent Staircase, n.d. (cat. 23, p. 16) by Karen Truax. In both works the model exposes a breast while she looks away from the camera, allowing herself to be unabashedly taken as an object. Images such as these are produced in and through a society long controlled by a deep-seated male hegemony. This dominant order is so deeply ingrained that woman's assumption of a "to-be-looked-at-ness" appears to be one of the few viable positions she can hold, based on the choices that the available "language" offers her.

As a comparison between a few traditional, black-and-white "reports" and Tina Barney's Jill and Polly in the Bathroom, 1987 (cat. 1, p. 11) demonstrates, color and surface texture can significantly influence the way a photograph is read. In Boubat's Place des Vosges, Paris (cat. 5, p. 12) two young girls are learning the language of femininity. Standing next to two fashion models, the girls imitate their fashionable "look." Although they have begun to assimilate the pose and stance of the models, they have not yet learned to look away from the camera. Boubat's photograph can be read as an overt depiction of ways in which femininity is learned and perpetuated. Images that confirm standards of beauty or appropriate feminine "jobs"—Robert Frank's Movie Premier, Hollywood, 1955 (cat. 8), Joyce Baronio's Bathing Suit Contest, 1976 (cat. 29), or Gertrude Käsebier's Maternity, 1897 (cat. 2), provide women with role models and help codify the languages that structure norms of feminine behavior. An initial reading of Tina Barney's work may also uncover "typically" feminine roles and situations, yet because this bathroom scene is accentuated by unnaturally rich and effervescent color, the stereotypes call attention to themselves. The pink walls, the pink robes, the pink floral curtains, the beauty accessories, present such an overwhelming statement when seen together that the viewer may stop and question the scene rather than accepting it as a portrayal of a real situation. The viewer may even discover that this reality is not his or her reality, that this language is not his or her language, and may, therefore, challenge photography's truth value.

It has only been within the past ten years that female artists have investigated how patriarchal thinking has fashioned a pictorial language of hegemony. Sherrie Levine's disrespect for male authority manifests itself through her appropriation of
the work of the “great masters.” Interestingly, one of the artists she chose to copy was the Russian Alexander Rodchenko, who dedicated much of his career to challenging traditional poses, viewpoints, and camera angles (most of these photographs were made during the 1920s and early 1930s).26 In Untitled (After Alexander Rodchenko: 6), 1987 (cat. 36, p. 15), Levine is rephotographing Rodchenko’s photograph while appropriating the scopic impulse that initiated the original composition. The gaze captured here was originally directed toward a figure observed from an overhead vantage point. Levine’s photograph is an attempt to expose the pose of the male artist-genius as paternalistic through the photograph’s new place as one of a series, and because the very act of “stealing” another’s work prompts outrage. In so doing, as in all her work of this sort, Levine also questions artistic originality and creative authorship.27 Levine’s photograph of Rodchenko’s portrait acts as both a statement about vanity and as a commentary on the difficulties artists face when striving for originality in contemporary society. By appropriating the work of an artist who had already established a place for himself within the history of art, Levine questions the forces that sanction specific canons and traditions and grant prominence to selected artists.

Levine’s mode of investigation, which she first introduced in the early 1980s, opened many conceptual avenues of exploration while ironically winning for her the same sort of authority that she had set out to challenge. In reaction, Levine dealt with her own notoriety by self-consciously changing her artistic approach to focus not on appropriation, but on creation. Her recognition that photographic traditions were being traded, just as she had quite literally appropriated Rodchenko’s role, leaves open the question of how to make political statements without succumbing to a system that privileges the “master” and the “masterpiece.”28

This investigation has thus far examined the consequences of the act of looking at and thinking about visual imagery by contrasting traditional and contemporary photographs. The issues of concern to theoretically-oriented photographers are not, however, limited to the exposure of myths concerning the male artist-genius. Many photographers are involved in exploring the mass media’s role in shaping views of reality. Victor Burgin, for example, contrasts found text with found imagery, both elements taken from the mass media and juxtaposed as a means of unsettling their accepted believability. Burgin’s placement of text directly on the imagery disrupts the viewer’s belief that works of art are precious objects, while completely integrating visual and verbal languages. In Framed, 1977 (cat. 28) from the series US 77, the text in the lower right corner describes a woman’s frustration with attempting to capture a specific look. It is contrasted with a poster of the quintessential icon of American masculinity, the Marlboro man. The absurd combination of these two statements—one masculine and visual, one feminine and verbal—provokes a questioning of how important socially contrived standards of masculinity or femininity are and why they are so controlling. Viewed on its own, this image makes a powerful statement, yet it also acts as one “chapter” in a series which questions “The American Dream,” and American values. Burgin’s juxtapositions were, perhaps, best summed up by Laura Mulvey when she wrote that they emphasize “the trap of sexual identity as destiny.”29

This same ironic treatment of sexual identity, with increased hostile overtones, informs the work of Barbara Kruger. Kruger also uses found imagery, which she overlays with words and slogans to craft statements attacking the inequalities of the
status quo. In such early works as *Untitled (My Hero)*, 1986 (cat. 27), constructed from sheets of ribbed plastic lenses and thus termed Lenticular, a moving viewer glimpses two separate images. The rebellious flavor of juxtaposed text and image is enhanced by Kruger's decision to make “art objects” out of material traditionally used for inexpensive and novelty gifts and cards. Both methods and materials combine to subvert the values of today’s consumer society by clearly commodifying art itself. Kruger is very articulate in discussing how her work relates to both the history of art and to the production of meaning:

> Basically I want to be effective in making changes in power relations, in social relations. And my area of acuity is working with images and words. I grew up looking not at art but at pictures. I'm not saying it's wrong to read art-history books. But the spectators who view my work don't have to understand that language. They just have to consider the pictures that bombard their lives and tell them who they are to some extent. That's all [Kruger's emphasis] they have to understand.³⁰

Because the visual arts can be likened to languages, questioning how those languages are constructed and used has become the focus of much contemporary thought and has, perhaps, been responsible for the increased use of the written word within contemporary art. The photography of Louise Lawler investigates how works of art reinforce certain value structures and construct specific languages within the context of museums, the discipline of art history, and the art market. Lawler's photographs are often taken inside museums and then paired with texts that question how the museum setting changes, alters, and influences the works of art which it collects. Not only does Lawler take the museum establishment to task for the mechanisms by which it sanctions the art it displays, but, even more profoundly, she questions the interpretive value of the way the work is exhibited. Lawler's *Sappho and Patriarch*, 1984 (cat. 26, p. 1) depicts a gallery space holding two classical sculptures: in the background a male bust acts as the work’s focal point, while the full-length and foregrounded female, despite her size, retains a place of less visual significance. The viewer is forced to look past Sappho, who looks out of the picture space, to reach a visual resting place with the forward looking male bust. The sexual tension resulting from this dichotomy is accentuated by the spatial correspondence between Patriarch's phallic-shaped pedestal and Sappho's oval-shaped laurel wreath. On the mat framing the photograph, the artist has inscribed the question, "Is it the work, the location, or the stereotype that is the institution?" Because it is an integral part of the work, the question raises multiple issues concerning the designated values of the objects: to what extent are these values influenced by the legitimizing force of the museum and the physical staging of the installation? Such questions concerning the exhibition space are enhanced by the sanctuary-like mood created by the rich blue tones and high gloss of the Cibachrome, and by the very choice of representing Greek sculpture. Most important, the notion of the classical constituted by the sculpture and the setting powerfully contributes to the female's “natural” and subservient place, a place challenged by the accompanying text. By challenging the nature of the institution through an image loaded with issues of sexual tension, power, and legitimation, Lawler leaves the viewer to question multiple concerns both personal and institutional. This image, like those of Cindy Sherman and others, is dependent on the viewer's insight and again firmly establishes him or her as the true subject of the photograph.
The complex issues addressed by Lawler concern the forces that shape particular “pictures” of reality. Her emphasis on a specific cultural institution, the museum, recalls many of the issues raised by French historian Michel Foucault in his inquiry into organized forms of social life—-institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons. Particularly applicable is Foucault’s analysis of Jeremy Bentham’s (1748–1832) plan for a prison—The Panopticon. Bentham’s plan was based on his belief that the power of the overseer’s gaze could be strengthened by manipulating architectural arrangements to create spaces of vulnerability and spaces of control. Foucault was able to extend Bentham’s conclusion that the gaze was a viable means of maintaining order by applying his principles to a range of social organizations (e.g., the church, family, hospital). Elaborating upon Gramsci’s definition of hegemony, Foucault understood that cultural institutions played a role in shaping the balance of power, yet went beyond this determination to study the subtleties that structured those institutions. By delving deeply into the nature and structure of specific organizations, he was able to uncover determinant methods for instilling and enforcing relations of power. Foucault’s demonstration that the workings of the Panopticon acted as a societal microcosm has initiated the study of power relations within visual imagery. Using Foucault’s perspectives and strategies, imagery can be seen as being caught in a reciprocal relationship with the powers that structure views of reality. Lawler addresses these same subtleties by critiquing the way viewing spaces influence interpretation. Like the photographs we have considered, the museum itself creates spatial metaphors that substantially construct our views of the world: the segregation, and subsequent isolation of types, periods, and masters within various and isolated galleries. Lawler’s work thus brings the arguments set forth here full circle, to a point that again requires the viewer to question the structures that have contributed to a collective conception of reality.

The purpose of this essay/exhibition has been to compare and contrast traditional and contemporary photographs as a means of addressing issues of gender. Because these issues are shaped by established views of reality, the inquiry has necessitated a presentation of methods of questioning established beliefs that have determined the “true,” the “real,” and the “natural.” These methods, which often include the use of the written word, alter, highlight, and challenge traditional pictorial codes and languages. The readings presented here are by no means intended to replace or substitute for existing or commonly practiced ways of viewing works of art. They have been applied with a two-fold purpose: first, to allow the viewer to expand and enrich traditional readings of works of art; and second, to provide some aid in understanding the conceptually-oriented work of the past decade. It is important to recognize, however, that these newer, unorthodox approaches to art can themselves be problematic. As discussed previously, the more Sherrie Levine’s “radical” procedures were recognized and appreciated, the more her work was commodified, collected, and circulated. Ultimately she was accepted into the same photographer “star” system that she set out to question. As a result, the viewer might rightly ask whether this co-opting of tradition really does alter the work’s political message, while considering how an artist might make political statements without becoming assimilated into the very system being challenged. A further problem arises from thinking about the museum’s role in the validation and interpretation of art. Can the collection and exhibition of art occur without making political statements or privileging specific
practices and artists, just as this exhibition itself does? Finally, when bringing theoretical investigation to the interpretation of art, the viewer must evaluate the original contexts of those theories and whose interests they fulfilled.33

Having challenged ways of thinking and seeing, and having demonstrated some of the ways in which structures of domination are inscribed in representational forms, I hope to have left the reader with the tools needed to continue such an analysis. Keeping the following questions in mind should influence the way works of art are read: how has the camera angle positioned me? how am I directed to look? is the image being presented as an ultimate statement or does it incite me to ask additional questions? how does my look relate to the looks within the frame? and how does the physical location in which this image is seen influence what is seen and how it is interpreted? Finally, it is important to remember that most discussions of the images in question have been written from a specific perspective to satisfy specific interests. When challenging society’s “false picture” of its conditions of existence, therefore, the viewer/reader must be as critical of discourses surrounding the imagery as he/she is of the imagery itself.
Notes


6. Berger, 64.

7. Due to space limitations, Cunningham’s photograph is being used as an example of male nude photography. An extended comparison of this work to Bullock’s would have to account for issues such as the historical relevance of Cunningham’s use of soft focus, the “wild” look of her husband, and contemporary public reaction. Whereas additional pieces of male nude photography do exist, much of it is recent and is often dismissed as being pornographic or labeled “homosexual.” Because of Cunningham’s status as a “known” artist, her photograph fulfilled the requirements determined by my choice to compare and contrast “accepted” and traditional works of art to new works.


11. Ibid., 362–73.

12. Doane’s argument is discussed in Pollock, Vision and Difference, 85.


15. Boubat is referring to the work of Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), nicknamed le Douanier because he was a retired customs officer. Rousseau is known for his “exotic” images of romantic and mysterious jungle scenes. It might be noted that the tiger in Boubat’s photograph actively looks at the viewer. This playful addition is not part of the more traditional history of nudes seen from the back, as seen in well-known works by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) or Diego Velázquez (1599–1660).

16. Lacan also privileged the act of looking in his discussion of the mirror phase in an infant’s life when he or she recognizes an image in the mirror as his or her self. This image, which appears whole, presents a greater unity than the actual motor capacity of the child will allow. The resulting dichotomy between thought and ability leads to frustration and feelings of inadequacy that will influence development. For more on the mirror phase, see Jacques Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1966). See also Jane Gallop, Reading Lacan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

17. For further discussion of the Phallus and the Castration Complex, see Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection.


22. To fully comprehend the nature and significance of Gramsci’s work, one must understand something of the Marxist tradition from which he grew. In brief, the significance of Marx’s work lay in its break with traditional modes of thought that posited the origin and the end of all meaning in a single power: God or the “Ideal.” For Marx, it was the material means of production that determined the social totality. The primacy that Marx gave to production resulted in his conception of the “Base and Superstructure” model as a determinant structuring device and explanation for cultural formation. According to this model, the spheres of politics, the state, and ideology are dependent on the economy. The French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser
[in his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” in Lenin and Philosophy, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 121–73] described this relationship as constituting a “metaphor of topography” in which the economy (or infrastructure) acts as a base that supports the upper floors, or superstructures. Changes or fluctuations within the base therefore directly influence the superstructures. The problem with reducing all significance to the economy is similar to the essentialist conceptions of humanist and idealist models that Marx rejected. Marx simply shifted the point of origin from the Idea to the economy—to the base from which the superstructures were given subordinate and reflexive positions. All social and ideological relationships are therefore caught in a position of being either have or have not, depending on their relationship to the base. These polarizations, just as those posed by Lacan, reduce all meaning to a single point or origin, and result in a single form of questioning.


24. It is interesting to note that the mounted moose in the Dater photograph returns the gaze as did the tiger in the Boubat photograph (cat. 37).


26. For more on Rodchenko, see Alexander Lavrentjev, Rodchenko Photography (New York: Rizzoli, 1982).


28. For more on Levine’s decision to change artistic styles, see her interview in Artnews 85 (May 1986), 90–99.


31. Foucault describes the Panopticon in “The Eye of Power” in Power and Knowledge, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 147: “The principle was this. A perimeter building in the form of a ring. At the centre of this, a tower, pierced by large windows opening on to the inner face of the ring. The outer building is divided into cells each of which traverses the whole thickness of the building. These cells have two windows, one opening on to the inside, facing the windows of the central tower, the other, outer one allowing daylight to pass through the whole cell. All that is then needed is to put an overseer in the tower and place in each of the cells a lunatic, a patient, a convict, a worker or a schoolboy. The back lighting enables one to pick out from the central tower the little captive silhouettes in the ring of cells. In short, the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer’s gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection.” For more on Foucault, see Mark Poster, “Two Discourses on Sexuality,” in Foucault, Marxism and History (New York: Polity Press, 1984), 121–45.
32. The most dramatic “model” for modern art can be seen in Alfred H. Barr’s catalogue cover for the Museum of Modern Art’s 1936 *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition. The flow chart, which maps out Barr’s perceived image of the history of modern art, depicts the “periods” and “isms” as progressing in a systematized fashion. This chart is reproduced in Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 51. For more contemporary criticism of the museum, see C. Duncan and A. Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” *Art History* 3 (1980), 448–68. For a more detailed look at how photographic history has been formed, defined, and categorized, see Christopher Phillips, “A Mnemonic Art?” *October* 26 (1983), 35–63.

33. For example, the theories formulated by Gramsci and Lacan have enriched my analysis of this exhibition, yet both thinkers structured their arguments around binary oppositions that in some way established have/have not dichotomies. While such a structure constructs manageable ways of organizing ideas, it also privileges specific areas; for Gramsci sanction was given to the economy, for Lacan it went to the Phallus. The danger for feminists of falling into this trap is that woman often becomes man’s inferior other; without questioning how that position came into being, it may come to be seen as woman’s natural place.