Sherrie Levine/Matrix 94
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After Claude Monet (#1), color photograph, 1982

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Sherrie Levine, for nearly a decade, has delivered a lively and provocative examination of the nature of the visual art object and the broad range of meanings ascribed to it by the culture in which we live. Her photographs, drawings and paintings explore concerns central to the post-modern dilemma. Said Levine in 1981, "The world is filled to suffocating. Man has placed his token on every stone. Every work, 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. A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture."

Levine approaches such concerns as originality and innovation, mechanical reproduction of images, and art as a commodity in ways which have genuinely startled and stimulated her colleagues and the general public. Her strategies have involved taking photographs from book reproductions of photographs by already well-known photographers such as Walker Evans, Eliot Porter and Edward Weston. Equally audacious and unprecedented are her hand-rendered watercolors also based on reproductions found in art books, of works by Henri Matisse, Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Joan Miro, Egon Schiele and others. Most recently she has painted a series of eccentric easel-size paintings which do not copy but rather simulate the look of various modernist painting styles.

The forty quotational works on view in MATRIX, color photographs of art book reproductions made by Levine in 1982, have a particularly strong resonance when exhibited in a traditional art museum. Their mannerly, rhythmic installation belies the many ironies Levine has embedded in these works and the long list of questions which they ask.
Said Levine in 1984, "For the last four years I have considered myself a still life artist - with the bookplate as my subject." Whatever subtle photomechanical deviations happen to reside in the published bookplate are reproduced and faithfully incorporated into the content of Levine's still lifes. Without regard for the size of the original paintings or even the size of the bookplate reproductions themselves, Levine alters each to fit an equal format. All have been domesticated to Levine's purposes.

Included here are fifteen works entitled *After Claude Monet*, ten works entitled *After Ernst Ludwig Kirchner* and fifteen works entitled *After Piet Mondrian*. Levine intentionally chose three artists representing three very different philosophies of modernism: French impressionist Monet's exploration of visual perception, German expressionist Kirchner's interest in strongly emotive content and style, and Dutchman Mondrian's pursuit of spiritual content through reductive abstraction. Levine has chosen titles which, beginning with the word "After," acknowledge the chronological precedence of these artists and allude to the widely accepted practice in the history of art of making copies "after" established masterpieces. Her choice of these three artists credits the impressive legacy of modernism as both a foundation and a foil for today's artists. It is noteworthy that Levine's titles acknowledge only the names of these well-known artists and exclude any information about the titles, dates, medium or measurements of the original paintings themselves. The emphasis here is on the dominance of the modernist ideal of individual creative genius. Her works themselves, the result of a sequence of translations from oil paint to lithographic dyes to photographic inks, tend to flatten out and homogenize the originals. The results, assisted by Levine's choice of titles, offer up "generic" Monets, Kirchners and Mondrians. The installation as a whole, strategically placed within the museum context, reads as a roomful of generic Modern Master reproductions.

Levine has consistently selected the reproductions of works by male artists only. In open resistance to male domination in all aspects of the history of art, Levine taps these images to be her "subjects." She invites us to cast our gaze, from still one more step removed, on her objectifications of these images. Despite previously held affections, the viewer becomes an aloof voyeur, bearing witness to our growing disillusion with the premises of modernism.
Levine has respect and admiration for the artists whose work she incorporates into her own. Her melancholy argument is not with the art itself but rather the way in which it is used by our culture. The disappointments and concerns expressed in her work are not limited to the art world. One infers from Levine's work a concern for Western society at large.

Much of what we know about art comes from our study of reproductions. This convention is so widespread and so ubiquitous that, until recently, it has been seldom questioned or analyzed. It emerged in Levine's work as a fitting topic for an artist's consideration. (At about the same time, other artists such as Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman began to explore the political meanings of a range of media images which saturate our lives.) While the original painting might be the source, the reproduction itself is often "the famous reality." That is, the reproduction (in the form of bookplates, slides or posters) is very often our own "original" experience of a well-known image. This was true for Levine who, growing up in the Midwest, had limited direct access to the many modern works which appealed to her.
In copying previously reproduced copies and openly acknowledging her strategy, Levine raises questions. What is originality? What is authenticity? After all, not only is she copying an image but she is copying a strategy, Marcel Duchamp's breakthrough presentation of "ready-made" objects. As Andy Warhol used Campbell soup labels as icons of popular culture, so Levine uses reproductions of paintings by Monet, Kirchner and Mondrian as icons of the art world.

Playful and witty, these works joust with conventional notions of the authentic and the original. Part of a continuing dialogue, Levine's own work has already had a great influence on a generation of artists slightly younger than she, and her works are, in fact, unprecedented (i.e. "original") in the history of art. Few would dispute that this exhibit offers a chance to see "authentic" works by Sherrie Levine. Ironically, she has expanded our notions of what "originality" can mean in art.

Levine astutely calculates into her work all of these various meanings, embracing also consequent ambiguities and contradictions. The work itself is structured to allow for multiple interpretations, to allow cross-currents to co-exist and to welcome the additional meanings an interested observer will embroider upon Levine's own presentation.

Sherrie Levine was born in 1947 in Hazleton, Pennsylvania and grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. She attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison where she received a B.A. in 1969 and an M.F.A. in printmaking in 1973. She has lived in New York City since 1975 and is represented by the Mary Boone Gallery.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of Contemporary Art
Works in MATRIX:

After Claude Monet, 1982, color-coupler prints, 20" x 16" each. A series of fifteen numbered photographs.

After Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1982, color-coupler prints, 20" x 16" each. A series of ten numbered photographs.

After Piet Mondrian, 1982, color-coupler prints, 20" x 16" each. A series of fifteen numbered photographs.

These works were made by the artist while in residence at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design during the summer of 1982. They were made with the assistance of photographer Allison Rossiter.

Lent courtesy of the artist

Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

3 Mercer Street, NYC '77, '78; Hallwalls, Buffalo '78; The Kitchen, NYC '79; The Merinoff Studio, NYC '81; Metro Pictures, NYC '81; A & M Artworks, NYC '82, '84; Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, Los Angeles '83, '85; Baskerville & Watson Gallery, NYC '83, '85; Nature Morte Gallery, NYC '84; Block Gallery, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL '85; Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles '86.
Selected Group Exhibitions:

Artists Space, NYC Pictures '77; Padiglioni d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy Horror Pleni '80; The Kitchen, NYC Pictures and Promises '81; Documenta 7, Kassel, Germany '82; Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Image Scavengers: Photography '83; Oberlin College, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin Art and Politics '84; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington Content: A Contemporary Focus, 1974-1984 '84; New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC Difference: On Sexuality and Representation '84; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC Biennial '85; Museum Ludwig, Cologne Europais/Amerika '86; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston As Found '86, Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture '86; Sixth Biennale of Sydney, Australia '86.

Selected Bibliography by Levine (and Interviews):

Carr, C. "What is Political Art...Now?" The Village Voice (October 15, '85), p. 73+.
Nagy, Peter (moderator). "From Criticism to Complicity," Flash Art no. 129 (Summer '86), p. 46+.

Selected Bibliography about Levine:


Lichtenstein, Therese. "Sherrie Levine," *Arts Magazine* vol. 59 no. 4 (December '84), p. 34.

Brooks, Rosetta. "From the Night of Consumerism to the Dawn of Simulation," *Artforum* vol. 23 no. 5 (February '85), p. 76+.


Foster, Hal. "Signs Taken for Wonders," *Art in America* vol. 74 no. 6 (June '86), p. 80+.
