Take It or Leave It

Institution, Image, Ideology

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Cultural Interference

The Reunion of Appropriation and Institutional Critique

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Radical change is a matter of altering the entire culture's view of reality.

GREGG BORDOWITZ

For quite some time, it seems, artistic dialogues regarding criticality—by now a go-to, if also often doubted, rhetorical marker for unflinching engagements with and examinations of culture have revolved largely around its precariousness or, more aptly, its likely demise. Indeed, two of the most prominent strains of critical practice in postwar art, appropriation and institutional critique, are by many accounts exhausted today. The former is typically posited as an operation, a kind of technique for displacement, first understood to radically lift the veil of images and idioms—extracting sign from syntax to dispel cultural myths—and allow viewers to recognize their own place in a constructed representational field. Yet with this operation considered today most often in a formal vein, images so "liberated" from their original settings are commonly regarded as utilized in the service of cultural amnesia, in the name of the perpetually circulating sign. As for institutional critique, which is by contrast largely considered a kind of articulation—an instance in which site and work meet, with the latter making evident the ideologies and infrastructures of the former—even its protagonists and champions have lately posited the genre as a thing of the past. To cite just two prominent examples, the artist Andrea Fraser

would in a 2005 essay underline the degree to which institutional critique and its techniques necessarily had to be understood as "institutionalized" themselves—belonging to a celebrated passage in art history regarded by many as bolstering figures of authority more than dismantling or problematizing them in any substantive way.¹ And before the decade was out, in 2009, one of the editors of an anthology of writings on institutional critique explicitly deemed his subject a historical one, titling his introductory essay "What Was Institutional Critique?"²

Regarding such assessments, however, it is useful to consider how *criticality* is in fact consistently under duress. The term is a moving target, historically attended by questions regarding what it *is*, whether it can be sustained, and, moreover, whether it inadvertently fuels the very entities it aims to combat. Even a cursory survey of discussions regarding institutional critique, for example, reveals anxieties around the artistic model from its beginnings. No less a figure than the artist Hans Haacke—whose long-standing commitment to rendering transparent economic, social, and aesthetic structures throughout culture has led him to be immanently associated with the paradigm—used the phrase "consciousness industry" as early as the mid-1980s to describe the sophisticated networks of institutional support necessary to make visible ostensibly adversarial

Epigraph: Gregg Bordowitz, "My Postmodernism," *Artforum 4*1 (March 2003): 228.

^{1.} Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," Artforum 44 (September 2005): 278–83, 332.

^{2.} See Blake Stimson, "What Was Institutional Critique?," in *Institutional Critique:* An Anthology of Artists' Writings, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 20–42.

avant-garde artistic gestures.³ Works seeking to emphasize the moral, political, and intellectual forces that determine and enforce culture, he observed, were nevertheless dependent on a museum or gallery platform designed to privilege aesthetic experience. Such an observation was elaborated on nearly ten years later by the art historian James Meyer in his nuanced 1993 exhibition *What Happened to the Institutional Critique?* (fig. 1). Presented at American Fine Arts in New York, Meyer's effort was intended specifically as a reply to that year's Whitney Biennial, which had, he argued, effectively thematized politics and subsequently rendered critical artwork the stuff of style, preparing it for ready consumption by the public.⁴ Notably, the Berlin-based critic Isabelle Graw would roughly contemporaneously take note of museums' increasing desire to invite artists to deconstruct institutional infrastructures and ideologies in their projects, dubbing the growing trend "subversion for hire."⁵

This seeming paradox regarding modes of criticality, far from illustrating the details of distant history, is incredibly resonant with, if not just prescient of, circumstances in art today. If Haacke decades ago was suggesting that museums were increasingly corporatized entities—at the same time that they were, ironically, pressed to narrate their distinctiveness from the rest of culture in order to maintain relevance—so today these institutions have to vie for attention with an exponentially larger entertainment industry while still needing to demarcate the function of "art" as separate from other modes of production, distribution, and consumption.6 And what arises in turn is a double-bind scenario taking the one described by Meyer to a new level: museums are compelled to highlight extreme measures by artists in order to compete with the intensity of popular culture, and yet, bracketed safely as "art," these gestures are easily digested and dismissed by the very public they set out to titillate. Again, the notion of critically engaging one's audience in art and its museum or gallery setting seems fragile at best.

Such echoes, while perhaps unanticipated in the sphere of common wisdom, make it tempting to return to the literature around institutional critique and appropriation to see what might For some time now, the Institutional Critique has been institutionalized, has itself become a tradition. The self-reflexive work of recent decades analyzed the perceptual, material, and ideological conditions of the gallery and museum. Building on this legacy, these producers interrogate an expanded site: natural history and anthropological museums, zoos, parks. The apparatus of art - the network of the gallery, critic, and patron - has become one of the many sites of analysis, inscribed in a larger social field: an institution among institutions. Influenced by contemporary activist strategies and critical scholarship, while responding to the international, dispersed "art world" of the 90's, these artists are engaged in a nomadic movement between countries, sites and professional roles. The production of gallery "art" has given way to a critical practice that makes little distinction between cultural work, pedagogy, and political action.

Fig. 1. Wall text from the exhibition *What Happened to the Institutional Critique?*, organized by James Meyer for American Fine Arts, Co., New York, October 1993

^{3.} The phrase was first coined by Hans Magnus Enzensberger in *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics, and the Media*, ed. Michael Roloff (New York: Seabury, 1974). Enzensberger's argument was that education and the mass media were exploitative hegemonic tools, designed to reproduce and magnify extant social structures. Taken up by Haacke in his 1983 essay "Museums: Managers of Consciousness," it was expanded to address more specifically the museum's unacknowledged place of authority within culture, and its tendency toward "appeasement" rather than self-reflexive engagement. Hans Haacke, "Museums: Managers of Consciousness," trans. H. Haacke and S. Lindberg, in *For Real: Works, 1959–2006*, ed. Matthias Flügge and Robert Fleck (Düsseldorf: Richter, 2006), 273–81.

^{4.} What Happened to the Institutional Critique? was on view from September 11 to October 2, 1993, and included work by the artists Gregg Bordowitz, Tom Burr, Mark Dion and the Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, Zoe Leonard, and Christian Philipp Müller.

^{5.} See Isabelle Graw, "Field Work," Flash Art 23 (November-December 1990): 137, cited in Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," October, no. 80 (Spring 1997): 102.

^{6.} The role of the museum in contemporary culture is quite complex, but for the present context, what is relevant is the double bind it finds itself in. For a recent journalistic account of the pressure for museums to compete with other areas of culture, see Judith H. Dobrzynski, "High Culture Goes Hands-on," *New York Times*, August 10, 2013. For a variety of more specialized perspectives not only on the role of the museum but also on contemporary art, see "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary': 32 Responses," *October*, no. 130 (Fall 2009): 3–124. See also the Summer 2010 special issue of *Artforum*, "The Museum Revisited," which sought to consider the institution within a setting of the recent expansion of creative industries.

be newly gleaned today—particularly when it comes to critics who, despite concerns about art's infiltration by mass culture, have lauded artists who position themselves in an expanded field with respect to art for the sake of efficacy. In a publication accompanying What Happened to the Institutional Critique?, Meyer, for his part, would ask whether "studio work, produced for display in the gallery, sufficiently questions its situation," subsequently suggesting that a "work" should be "a meeting of the demands of the site and the methods of the producer," allowing projects to unfold well outside gallery walls.7 And in a famous 1982 text (which Fraser cites as one possible inspiration for her own use of the term institutional critique), the art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh would—after first praising Dan Graham's Homes for America (1966) as a critical engagement with an institutional framework outside the gallery setting—suggest that a group of younger women artists were taking up a similarly expanded field with new gravity.8 Describing what he called a "paradigmatic shift" articulated in the work of Dara Birnbaum, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Martha Rosler, Buchloh writes: "Anyone taking the implications of the situational esthetics developed in the late '60s and '70s into account as an irreversible change in the cognitive conditions of art production would have to realize that any return to an unconditioned autonomy of art production would be mere pretense, lacking historical logic and consequence, just as any attempt to reinstitute the conventions of representation after Cubism is absurd."9

In describing these artists' individual practices, Buchloh goes on to assess how their endeavors are variously situated within and without the institutionalized art system. Yet most important in

7. See Meyer, What Happened to the Institutional Critique? (New York: American Fine Arts and Paula Cooper Gallery, 1993), 8, 14.

this vein—and perhaps very relevant for our grasp of criticality's viability and potential in the contemporary landscape—is that Buchloh first puts forward the notion of appropriation (the borrowing and recasting of existing cultural objects) within the theoretical framework that leads to institutional critique. And this is a relatively rare gesture among scholars to this day. In fact, one might reasonably argue that these two modes of artistic engagement have been sequestered from each other in the majority, if not almost the entirety, of critical writings on art since the 1970s—perhaps, after all, because one is so often understood as an operation while the other is considered an articulation, ostensibly pertaining to displacement in contrast with elucidation. To that end, even those few critics who initially sought to create connections between appropriation and institutional critique would later pull the two strands back apart, wanting to mark clear differences between the shelf life and the use value of each.10

The distinction here is key, for, as I suggest at the outset of this essay, appropriation taken up primarily as a formal or systemic operation could hardly be limited only to demythifying ends. Indeed, even while Buchloh was writing appreciatively of appropriative methods in 1982, he was already predicting their limits: his essay concludes with a roundup of the risks associated with the projects by those women artists whom he was, only a few passages before, positing as inheritors of critical legacies. These problems include, Buchloh says, Levine's potential collusion with commoditized culture and Holzer's inattention to the subtle variations in institutions' frameworks. Put another way, his argument suggests that there is necessarily a built-in ambivalence and ambiguity wherever appropriative gestures are concerned. Decontextualizing and recontextualizing an image doesn't only resituate that image but also serves to remind us that it is available to be infinitely resituated and to radically different, often radically incompatible ends. If there was or is a critical promise inherent in such destabilization, it is most usually understood as always already counterbalanced, capable of serving or producing subtle "cynical reason" or even overtly catering to capitalism. 11

^{8.} Fraser writes: "I recently discovered that none of the half dozen people often considered the 'founders' of 'institutional critique' claim to use the term. I first used it in print in a 1985 essay on Louise Lawler, 'In and Out of Place,' when I ran off the now familiar list of Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke, adding that, 'while very different, all these artists engage(d) in institutional critique.' I probably first encountered that list of names coupled with the term 'institution' in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's 1982 essay 'Allegorical Procedures,' where he describes 'Buren's and Asher's analysis of the historical place and function of aesthetic constructs within institutions, or Haacke's and Broodthaers' operations revealing the material conditions of those institutions as ideological.' The essay continues with references to 'institutionalized language,' 'institutional frameworks,' 'institutional exhibition topics,' and describes one of the 'essential features of Modernism' as the 'impulse to criticize itself from within, to question its institutionalization.' But the term 'institutional critique' never appears." Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions," 279.

^{9.} Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21 (September 1982): 48.

^{10.} See Douglas Crimp, "Appropriating Appropriation," in *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 126–48, in which the critic usefully reconsiders appropriative tactics as they are absorbed into mainstream rhetorical and visual use.

11. See Hal Foster, "The Art of Cynical Reason," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 99–124. Foster tracks some of the ways "criticality" was produced as a (failed) sign during the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Cynical reason* itself is a term coined by the contemporary philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who argued that our culture is pervaded by "enlightened false consciousness." See Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Of course, such anxieties might recall those put forward by Haacke regarding institutional critique from its inception, prompting a closer comparison of artists working in these different veins and, more precisely, of their reception. In this regard, institutional critique, as discussed above, has been variously understood as an endangered species—with usurpation or neutralization as omnipresent threats—but artists associated with it are accused of different crimes. And yet, comparing artists commonly relegated to the "appropriation" camp with those consigned most often to the arena of "institutional critique" (the verbs relegated and consigned used here to emphasize how often these are assigned rather than chosen markers), we find ourselves in the unlikely terrain of intention. Indeed, while it's been some time since advanced discussions of art culminated with arguments about the faith—good or otherwise of artists, here such motivations are taken to be key.12 Indeed, where appropriation, as a function, might be utilized critically (but is equally likely to be used otherwise), it almost goes without saying that "institutional critique" aims to be critical. There's the word, after all, embedded.

The result, then, is that the artist who wields appropriation as a tool, and yet does not achieve critical results, is regarded with suspicion by those with historical perspectives on the operation. On the one hand, given appropriation's built-in precariousness, there are nearly always questions as to the very motivation behind choosing it as a tactic. (Might failure to achieve critical results be, say, one more coy technique for attaining market success?) On the other hand, when an act of institutional critique falls short, it is more often the object (or even the context) of analysis that takes the blame. As Fraser herself puts it with regard to the role generally understood to befit the institutional critique artist, "'art' and 'artist' generally figure as antagonistically opposed to an 'institution' that incorporates, co-opts, commodifies, and otherwise misappropriates once-radical-and-uninstitutionalized practices."13 Yet, she argues, this posits the artist as autonomous and the institution as monolithic, both characterizations that radically misrepresent the complex nature of both institutions and institutional critique. Artists are as much the institution as are the bricks and mortar of any museum building; to that end, Fraser argues, institutional critique necessarily enacts a protection of, rather than an assault on, the very institution

of art. The nature of that protection is also an interrogation but one performed, as it were, from the inside (fig. 2).

But for all such distinctions in terms of the reception and art historical delineation of appropriation and institutional critique, it is all the more remarkable to see them nonetheless unequivocally granted the very same set of ancestral roots. Nearly all accounts of appropriation or institutional critique turn to the same four foundational figures—Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke—for grounding later practices. Buchloh aside, and there indirectly, not much is made of the overlap of assigned genealogy, nor are many questions asked about what might happen should the assumed trajectory be disrupted. To this end, we might query: What does it look like to more closely link appropriation and institutional critique—not to insist on their similarities but to explore their contingencies?

To answer, we should first consider more closely why the artistic models have been set apart. Ironically, one reason that appropriation's relationship to institutional critique has been little explored might be *overproximity*. While sharing presumed lineages, the two have operated as parallel strands, running alongside each other rather than intersecting. Such traditional mappings of lineage work vertically, rarely allowing for investigations of horizontal overlap, suggesting that a more complex relationship might arise between appropriation and institutional critique through a consideration of their shared—and differentiated—areas and objects of interest, instead of the *forefathers* ascribed to them both.

The title of Meyer's 1993 show *What Happened to the Institutional Critique*? is a quotation attributed to Gregg Bordowitz in Meyer's publication. Having encountered Bordowitz at an ACT UP conference in Columbus, Ohio, in February 1989, Meyer found himself newly, and profoundly, politicized (fig. 3). "How to describe . . . the pleasure of becoming aware, for the first time, of the notion of coalition building (so foreign to my graduate school discussions) and the possibility of an art, collectively produced?" Meyer narrates his enthusiasm for direct engagement around AIDS and a parallel realization of the art context's limits for enacting immediate change. "What seems useful to me now," he quotes Bordowitz as saying, "is to go out and do work that is directly engaged, that is productive—to produce work that enables people to see what they are doing, that enables them to criticize what they are doing, and moves on." 15

^{12.} On the laying to rest of reading works of art through an artist's ostensible intention or biographical circumstances, see Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 23–40.

^{13.} Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions," 280.

^{14.} Meyer, What Happened, 10.

^{15.} Ibid., 12, Citation from "Art and Activism: A Conversation between Douglas Crimp and Gregg Bordowitz, January 9, 1989," in *AIDS: The Artists' Response*, ed. Jan Zita Grover (Columbus: Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery, Ohio State University, 1989), 8.



Fig. 2. Michael Asher, Untitled installation, 2008. Metal, wood. Dimensions variable. Installation view, Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2008

Meyer's frustration with what he perceived as the art world's lump-sum approximation of presenting "politics" is, then, all the more understandable when one recognizes his immediate circumstances. An art history graduate student suddenly encountering a group of artists and critics wholly committed to making visible the cultural conditions for and constructions of AIDS (via ACT UP, he found himself in the company of Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, and Zoe Leonard, among others), Meyer began questioning the efficacy of what he deemed "classic" forms of institutional critique and advocating for "expanded" forms that addressed the exigencies and urgencies of the day. Bordowitz's dictate to privilege work that "enables people to see what they are doing, that enables them to criticize what they are doing, and moves on" suggests self-reflexive

models that must be in constant flux and can't be located solely within art's purview. "The kind of work that I do now," the artist goes on to say, "doesn't necessarily address issues of institutional critique directly but it does indirectly. . . . I have no more questions about gallery walls." ¹⁶

Interestingly, some of the targets of Meyer's dissatisfaction include artists such as those put forward by Buchloh in his essay some ten years earlier. Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Jenny Holzer were being afforded a kind of analysis that should be extended, Meyer contends, to activist materials such as posters, videos, and T-shirts, which are generally not regarded by established critics as objects

^{16.} Meyer, What Happened, 12.



Fig. 3. The direct-action advocacy group ACT UP demonstrates in front of the White House demanding more money for AIDS research, 1987. Courtesy of Associated Press Images

deserving of or requiring aesthetic attention.¹⁷ Moreover, some of the same artists—Meyer singles out Kruger and Levine—are lauded for their critical, or "resistant," strategies artistically while reaping the benefits of showing and selling their work through galleries aligned with the market, not with any political program.¹⁸ What Meyer saw

as the art context's canny ability to congratulate itself on its good politics while contradictorily refusing to engage *real* politics led him to posit a new set of conditions for institutional critique.

As crucial as Meyer's assertion was that a number of artists' practices needed to be recognized as developing alongside and in response to activism, and despite his careful reminder that "dialogues among artists are inter- and intra-generational," the young curator nonetheless posited seemingly insurmountable divisions between established and emerging critical models. 19 As discussed above, artists seen as overly dependent on the gallery scenario—both economically and contextually—were, despite efforts at deconstruction from within that system, "impotent in comparison with militant practice." 20 (It is notable, however, that

^{17.} Many, though certainly not all, of these materials were produced by artists or artist collectives, including the likes of Gran Fury, Testing the Limits, DIVA-TV, Jean Carlomusto, Ray Navarro, and Donald Moffett.

^{18.} Meyer takes special affront at Levine and Kruger showing with Mary Boone, a gallerist known for representing artists (to that point, almost entirely men) categorized as crassly commercial postmodernists, such as Julian Schnabel and David Salle. Although Meyer doesn't name Boone explicitly, it is clear that he is referring to her. He writes, "When Kruger and Sherrie Levine, held up as 'resistant' (i.e. politically aware) postmodernists by critics like Hal Foster, chose to show at the gallery that had launched Julian Schnabel and David Salle, the 'neoconservative' postmodernists of Foster's account—the political claims of their work became problematic." Meyer, What Happened, 11.

^{19.} lbid., 13.

^{20.} Ibid., 11.

as preeminent and political a voice as Craig Owens would feel quite differently; he championed efforts by Kruger, Levine, and others, claiming that they took effective aim at "an entire regime of image production.")21 And even those older artists with whom his generation felt deep affinities for their dedication to multivalent critical projects often ended up falling short on this count. As Meyer narrates it, when Bordowitz and Mark Dion, for instance, conducted interviews with a group of artists (Thomas Lawson, Dan Graham, Martha Rosler, Yvonne Rainer, and Joseph Kosuth) whom they considered "supporting models" for their own work, they were surprised to find themselves out of sync.²² Where Dion and Bordowitz emphasized (as had their teacher Craig Owens) unfixed categories, opting to inhabit several, sometimes incompatible functions at once, they found their role models effusively demarcating artistic production as separate from the rest of what they were involved in, be it activism, pedagogy, or any other activity or competency.

It is instructive to revisit Meyer's humble yet historic endeavor today, some twenty years after the fact. In addition to being prescient in assembling a group of artists who continue to be recognized for their unique and diverse engagements with institutional critique, the project, in diagnosing its own contemporary moment, provides an index for reassessing that time and then gauging what has happened since. I began this essay by rehearsing the tenuous nature of assessing "criticality" in a context—that of art, its histories, and its discourses—that equally demands and denounces its possibilities; then I suggested that displacing the foundation assumed for both appropriation and institutional critique might allow us to see both differently. I would go so far as to say that some of the impasse narrated by Meyer in 1993 was the result of his leaving relatively unquestioned a conceptual genealogy.

What I am proposing is this: while acknowledging the substantial impact of Asher, Broodthaers, Buren, and Haacke, we must enlarge and complicate the trajectory. For how would a history of appropriation and institutional critique unfold if it included not just the radical strides of conceptual practices opening up the space, place, and habitus of art and its support systems within the larger social field but also equally radical shifts in the wake of feminism, as well as civil and gay rights? To suggest this is to place Mary Kelly's insistence on the roles of desire and the unconscious within concep-

To focus, as I've done here briefly, on Kelly, Piper, and Rosler should not be seen as an attempt to replace patriarchy with matriarchy or to insist that the highlighted terms render those more typically in play outmoded. Rather, these artists and ideas are emphasized simply to reassert their importance in the field under discussion.²⁶ As crucial as stressing these canonical figures and ideas, however, is acknowledging more lateral, even informal, transmissions between practices and people. In considering the cross section of artists who can be argued to navigate the terrain shared by both appropriative operations and articulations of institutional critique, we would do well to consider the ways in which influence travels beyond being cleanly (or even messily) inherited. Recent work by Juliet Mitchell has made it possible to complicate oedipal genealogies, displacing the ultimate primacy of the parent-child relationship and ushering in new emphasis on the impact of relationships between siblings and, by extension, allies and adversaries of different stripes. Perhaps even more important, the theorist argues, than those lessons handed down are those handed across or, better, learned in tandem.²⁷

tual practice not as a corrective to foundational tenets but as a foundational tenet itself.²³ It is to heed Adrian Piper's insistence that we examine the always racialized, always classed, always gendered "margins" of art in order to understand what and how the mainstream oppresses and occludes.²⁴ And it is to recognize Martha Rosler's insistence that materials borrowed from "common culture" can act as catalysts for considering the lexicon of hierarchical behaviors put forward as natural in everyday society.²⁵

^{23.} See Mary Kelly, "Art and Sexual Politics," paper presented at the Art and Politics conference, AIR, London, 1977; published in *Mary Kelly: Imaging Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 2–10.

^{24.} See Adrian Piper, "The Joy of Marginality," originally a statement for the panel "The Ideology of the Margin: Gender, Race, and Culture," New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, May 11, 1988; published in Piper, Out of Order, Out of Sight, vol. 1, Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 233–37. In this text, Piper rejects the notion that the mainstream is capable of co-opting everything or even desires to. "Now conceptual art is back in style," she says, "but examining one's own racism is just as unfashionably marginal as ever" (236). 25. See Martha Rosler, "For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life," first written on the occasion of the exhibition New American Film Makers: Martha Rosler, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1977; reprinted in Martha Rosler, Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 3–8. 26. Looking again, then, at the so-called political Whitney Biennial of 1993, one can see that whether the artists and practices gathered there indicated a mere nod or a real commitment to difference, identity politics as such marked a culmination of questions long posed, not a turn to them.

^{27.} Juliet Mitchell, Siblings: Sex and Violence (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). See also Helen Molesworth, "How to Install Art as a Feminist," in Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 498–513.

^{21.} As described by Gregg Bordowitz, writing about Owens in "My Postmodernism," 228.

^{22.} Meyer, What Happened, 17.



Fig. 4. Andrea Fraser, Men on the Line: Men Committed to Feminism, KPFK, 1972, 2012. Performance at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 12, 2012, as part of the program Performing Histories: Live Artworks Examining the Past. Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Such an approach allows us not only to reconfigure the trajectory of both appropriation and institutional critique but also to look again at practices previously placed at odds with one another—even vying for "critical" status. How might Renée Green's Venue (1994; p. 125), in which she rents out the gallery that hosts her for fashion shows and reading groups, speak to Dara Birnbaum's PM Magazine (1982; pp. 54-55), in which fast-paced pirated images from television are framed by a suprematist-inspired environment? How might a graphically violent painting by David Wojnarowicz, titled The Death of American Spirituality (1987; p. 81), inflect a series of found advertisements, Subjective Subliminal Ads (1976-79; p. 4), by Paul McCarthy? So, too, a horizontal approach can be applied within the space of a single artist's work: what are the red threads to be pulled between Zoe Leonard's 1990 photographs of animal trophies (pp. 102-3) and her recent assembly, in Survey (2012; pp. 184-85), of some 6,388 found and stacked postcards of Niagara Falls? Or between Louise Lawler's early forays into the logic of display, in works like Slides by Night (1985; p. 69), and her recent installations, such as *No Drones* (2010–II; p. 174), which takes up the logic and legitimization of war? Or between Andrea Fraser's mid-1980s *Four Posters*, which magnified the jarring incompatibility of informational tropes within museums, and her recent *Men on the Line: Men Committed to Feminism, KPFK*, 1972 (2012; fig. 4), a performance in which she impersonates a group of men discussing, some four decades ago, their reactions to an evolving feminist movement?

In 1984 the curator William Olander wrote passionately: "We—as artists, critics, historians, curators—must promote, encourage, and provide a sympathetic and coherent context for the production and distribution of alternative and oppositional artistic production. At the same time, we must also attempt to change the institutional structure so as to defuse its own ideological power, to transform the 'white cube' into an ongoing space of and for operational strategies, and to abandon the liberal notion of pluralism in favor of ever more radical, consistent, and authentically pluralistic strategies of 'cultural interference.'" The context to which Olander was responding was particular, and he names it as such: "I am writing this in August

1984, when Reaganomics, Reaganism, and Reaganites loom large on the national horizon for the next four years."²⁸ That so much of the work and support that Olander and others were advocating directly related not only to Reagan's neoliberal conservative program but also to related events as devastating and varied as the emerging AIDS crisis and the United States' soon-to-come-to-light involvement in the arms race goes some way in explaining the urgency with which the relationship between art and politics was consistently plumbed.²⁹ Meyer's staging of *What Happened to the Institutional Critique*? a decade later coincided with a general fatigue around political art *and*, not coincidentally, with its elevation to style.

We find ourselves today in a context described by the theorist Lauren Berlant as radically changed from any of the scenarios I have described thus far. Arguing that history has until recently proceeded as a series of ruptures, or crises, after which society readjusts its mores and expectations, Berlant claims that a new landscape has set in, one defined by crisis as a perpetual condition.³⁰ She defines our present, a direct outgrowth of the political events of the 1980s and after, as encouraging apathy and amnesia. How might strategies of criticality be defined—or even considered possible—in this new context?

Answers come from the artists themselves, whose practices track continued commitments to surveying the world around them while acknowledging something of the recent seismic shifts in that terrain. Berlant claims that "cruel optimism" (which serves as the title of her book) is the psychic mechanism that, in our current moment, allows people to irrationally hold out hope for political, economic, and public structures that have ceased to exist. Her inquiry into fantasies of "the good life" reveals that despite the foreclosure of social democracy (and all that it promised to support, from job security to

upward mobility to meritocracy), such fantasies continue to inform many people's behavior. Regardless of the implausibility of leapfrogging to a higher class, receiving basic health services, and even remaining happy in a long-term intimate relationship, entire generations remain dedicated to a fantasy of the nation-state and the social structures it perpetuates that bears little resemblance to reality. Interestingly, critical practices, as they operated three and four decades ago, can themselves become objects of "cruel optimism," totems that—for all their historical significance—must necessarily be recognized as unable to exert the same kind or directionality of force that they once did.31 The artists whose works are included in Take It or Leave It are gathered together around the intersection of appropriation and institutional critique, but they take neither of those terms as stable or invincible. Indeed, they work at the pliable hinge between them, a fulcrum that posits the ways and means of critical practices as speculative and evolving, necessarily and always.

To that end, in tracking—sometimes over forty years—the various practices of the artists brought together here, one finds what would seem to be surprising, sometimes even initially unsettling, shifts. A significant new emphasis on affect marks much contemporary critical practice, and artists are increasingly turning toward poetics, spirituality, the therapeutic, and even new tactics of essentialism and formalism in their pursuits. Yet, rather than representing a divergence from critical practice, these turns reveal significant and effective ways of reacting to a culture that is unilaterally different than it was a few decades ago. Such attentiveness on the part of artists who retain a commitment to a criticality that is perpetually understood to be at risk illustrates not cruel optimism but persistent belief—that there is always a way forward, and this usually only by making an unexpected turn.

^{28.} William Olander, review of *Art and Ideology* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, February 4–March 18, 1984), *College Art Journal* (Winter 1984): 393. The phrase "cultural interference" is cited as Buchloh's; he was one of the curators of the exhibition.

^{29.} It is interesting to note that the same year the New Museum presented the much-criticized exhibition *Art and Ideology*, it also hosted the seminal—if also highly controversial—show *Difference*, which explicitly explored the gendered nature of representation.

^{30.} See Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

^{31.} On "left melancholy," a related theory—Walter Benjamin's—regarding outdated attachments, see Rosalind Deutsch, *Hiroshima after Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Mourning in America

ANNE ELLEGOOD

We are the institution.

ANDREA FRASER

Public spaces are political arenas in which power is gained, recognized, underwritten, disputed, attacked, lost and gained.

ADRIAN PIPER

All art, from the crassest mass-media production to the most esoteric art world practice, has a political existence, or, more accurately, an ideological existence. It either challenges or supports (tacitly perhaps) the dominant myths a culture calls Truth.

MARTHA ROSLER

Stephen Prina's *The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You: Mourning Sex* (2005–7; left and pp. 162–63) has all the markings of a work of institutional critique, that loosely defined genre of contemporary art that seeks to evaluate and question the position of art in relationship to various cultural and political contexts. Looking

In 1984 the Reagan/Bush reelection campaign ran a television ad featuring the phrase "It's morning again in America," asserting that Reagan's leadership had brought renewed hope and prosperity to the country.

Epigraphs: Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44 (September 2005): 283; Adrian Piper, "Some Thoughts on the Political Character of This Situation" (1983), in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 243; Martha Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience," in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings*, 1975–2001 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; New York: International Center of Photography, 2004), 26.

beyond the frame of the artwork itself, works of institutional critique recognize that art exists within a discursive field and grapple with the concentric or overlapping circles of spatial, temporal, cultural, social, economic, and political structures—or "institutions"—that "frame" the work in other ways. Largely an outgrowth of the conceptual art practices of the 1960s and 1970s, works of institutional critique like Prina's often involve installations of (sometimes disparate) elements rather than individual, purportedly autonomous objects.²

Like other "strong" works of institutional critique (and I borrow the descriptor here from James Meyer), Prina's installation continuously calls attention to context, overtly positioning itself within its "social domain" to deflect an insular solipsism.³ It addresses modes of display and reveals aspects of the production and distribution methods that are integral to the day-to-day operations of the art world yet often remain hidden from the public, in this case by converting the crates in which the work travels into padded benches placed in the middle of the gallery so that viewers

^{1.} The now-defunct artists' collective Group Material put it perfectly in a 1983 statement: "We invite everyone to question the entire culture we have taken for granted." Group Material, "Statement," in Alberro and Stimson, *Institutional Critique*, 238–39.

^{2.} Nonetheless, works of this genre do not take the form of installation exclusively, and *Take It or Leave It* makes evident that institutional critique can also reside in an individual object, whether a painting, a sculpture, or a single-channel video.
3. James Meyer explores the distinction between "strong" and "weak" works of institutional critique in his text "The Strong and the Weak: Andrea Fraser and the Conceptual Legacy," in *Exhibition: Andrea Fraser* (Vancouver, BC: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2004), especially 20–22.

can find, as Prina puts it, "a modicum of comfort." One of three related installations, The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You: Mourning Sex shares the basic components of the others in the series: padded benches, colored walls with matching carpeting, painted text on the wall, a tall vertical painting using a window blind as its ground, a light-box image, speakers, and a sound track. Each work in the series, however, addresses different subject matter, indicated in the subtitle, thereby filling these forms with different content. Mourning Sex takes as its subject the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Its walls are painted a pale blue to match the cover of the 2006 monograph devoted to Gonzalez-Torres.⁵ A text painted directly on the wall in large white letters reads, "... things Felix forgot to tell us," a simple statement implying how much more this artist would have contributed to our culture had his life not been cut short by AIDS in 1996. Credits for the book's contributors are stenciled onto the outside of the benches, while the sound track features Prina singing a catchy pop song he wrote for Gonzalez-Torres accompanied by chords strummed gently on the guitar. The lyrics of the song are compiled from the testimonials featured in the book, like "To make this place a better place for everyone," "You're probably the first artist to get viewers to put part of a work in their mouths and suck on it ... oral gratification," "Next to torture, art is the greatest persuader," and completing the phrase on the wall, "As the things Felix forgot to tell us are true."

This room-size immersive environment takes up questions about how an artist's work is experienced and understood after his or her death, becoming a meditation of sorts on the transposition that art undergoes from private invention to public consumption to the subject of discourse by providing another avenue—another form—to circulate what others have written about it. Prina's work operates from two opposing but deeply enmeshed positions—one intellectual (or conceptual), the other emotional (or affective). Both, it seems, reside in a temporal position of after: *after* Gonzalez-Torres's death and the textual examination and interpretation that came *after* he produced the work. The analytic aspects of Prina's work address the activities that occur around and outside the art

The benches in the installation seem to be a direct response to one of the defining features of Gonzalez-Torres's working methodology: generosity. Devising strategies that were simultaneously utterly innocuous (and therefore nonthreatening) and profoundly directed (in other words, inevitably leading to the implication of the viewer in a set of sociopolitical realities), Gonzalez-Torres embraced beauty and comfort as a way to encourage participation. He believed that art's potency and vitality reside in the exchange between the work of art and its viewer and looked for ways to amplify this potential. Yet this strategy was a means to a different end than mere insipid "engagement." Gonzalez-Torres inscribed his forms—candies that visitors are invited to consume (p. 101), posters offered as takeaways (p. 100), a billboard featuring an image of a cozy bed with white sheets imprinted with the bodies that recently slept there, or two

itself—the support system of art, we might call it, or its discursive residue—as none of Gonzalez-Torres's actual works are featured in the installation (even in the form of photographic reproductions). But in addition to the insights into the discipline of art history and the practices of museums, there is an undeniable emotional tenor to the work that quickly pushes it past a straightforward investigation of the circulation of art, the tropes of installation, and the types of information dissemination and analysis that figure prominently in how contemporary art's meanings are ascribed. Indeed it seems that Prina uses the intellectual to create the emotional, for the deep engagement and enthusiastic interpretations that emanate from the words of those committed to Gonzalez-Torres's practice are palpably present. Prina creates a conceptual framework—with its systems and structures and seemingly "dry" cerebral approach—and impregnates it with affect. Not arbitrarily, not in an overly theatrical way: rather it is as if he is simply calling attention to what is already there, using the strategy of appropriation, the naming of names, and the crediting of voices to suggest that these feelings have of course been circulating all along—and that, moreover, they originate in the works of Gonzalez-Torres themselves.6

^{4.} Stated in press release for Prina's exhibition *The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You* at Petzel Gallery, New York, November g-December 23, 2006.
5. Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Göttingen, Germany: SteidlDangin, 2006). Edited by Gonzalez-Torres's close friend and collaborator in Group Material, Julie Ault, the book deliberately takes an alternative approach to the idea of the monograph, including new commissions and reprints of existing texts by a wide variety of people—Amada Cruz, Marguerite Dumas, Russell Ferguson, Miwon Kwon, Tim Rollins, Susan Sontag, and Robert Storr, among others—along with the artist's lecture transcripts, personal correspondence, and interviews.

^{6.} Several publications over the past dozen years have delved into affect theory and examinations of the body's sensations and emotions within the context of contemporary life. See Jennifer Doyle, Hold It against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Eve Meltzer, Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Sianne Ngai, Ugly Feelings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); see also The Affect Theory Reader, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

clocks marking time side by side—with reminders of society's most urgent concerns, like the AIDS crisis, and contested debates, such as equal rights for homosexuals. His work "indicts the audience," as bell hooks put it, adding, "We are witnesses unable to escape the truth of what we have seen."

Prina allows his installation to show signs of wear—the carpet is never cleaned to ensure that it carries the traces of visitors, and the crates naturally accrue the scars of travel—and a sense of loss infuses Mourning Sex. Indeed, although Gonzalez-Torres is the subject of the work, it is perhaps his absence that is most profoundly felt, transforming the installation into a sort of eulogy or a space of mourning, as the title indicates. Gonzalez-Torres's work is both everywhere and nowhere in the installation. Eschewing the inclusion of the artist's work, Prina tries to capture something more elusive, yet perhaps more lasting, about it: its tone or the feelings that it generates. Mourning Sex encapsulates and then mirrors in its own form and content what is so powerful about Gonzalez-Torres's work and why we continue to want to experience it today. Both are quiet yet impactful, beautiful yet corporeal, comfortable yet unsettling, simultaneously present and absent. Prina's installation itself is both private and public—its idiosyncrasy a fitting approach to a contemplation of his personal relationship with Gonzalez-Torres and his practice. And yet Mourning Sex is also deeply aware of the public position of Gonzalez-Torres's work and its influence on generations of artists. Despite being a site infused with grief, the installation can also be understood as a celebration, a remembrance of an artist who in a very short career had an enduring impact on the field of contemporary art.

Indeed Gonzalez-Torres's work is pivotal to an impulse at the heart of *Take It or Leave It*: the desire of artists to insert representation, the body, materiality, and affect into a conceptual art practice committed to evaluating the ideologies inherent to the institutions that make up our society. These artists believe that art has a role to play in transforming these institutions, arguing for a politics in art that is considered by many to be either outside the scope of art's purview or largely ineffectual. And the affective qualities of their art—the emotion, the melancholy, the anger—are in fact entangled within its politics. Bennett Simpson once described the precise juxtapositions that Prina sets in motion in his work as "a specificity that is political even if one recognizes it as affect or slippage."

When asked by fellow artist Gregg Bordowitz what political art is and how it operates, Andrea Fraser wrote, "I would define political art as art that consciously sets out to intervene in (and not just reflect on) relations of power, and this necessarily means on relations of power in which it exists." Of her generation and what they believed their art could do, Sherrie Levine remarked, "we wanted to make a difference, to show some resistance to the status quo." In short, artists engaged with institutional critique, in its admittedly many forms, believe that art *matters*.

The methodology that is central to Prina's Mourning Sex—in which one artist chooses to make a work about another artist or an existing artwork—is shared by a number of works in the exhibition, including those by Tom Burr, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Glenn Ligon, John Miller, Christopher Williams, and Sue Williams. Moreover, there are projects in Take It or Leave It in which artists collaborated directly, including works coauthored by Mark Dion and Jason Simon, Jimmie Durham and Maria Thereza Alves, Robert Gober and Sherrie Levine, and Kelley and McCarthy. This interest in exploring the work of other artists or working collaboratively goes beyond personal relationships or shared interests. Indeed it surpasses acknowledgment of influence or the critical analysis of another's work, even while those impulses may figure importantly in the work. This inclination—what we might call a position of shared authorship—is, rather, ideological and conceptual. It is evident in the earliest works in the exhibition—those by Mary Kelly, Adrian Piper, and Martha Rosler—and is brought into sharp relief by the artists of the following generation—Judith Barry, Gretchen Bender, Dara Birnbaum, Jimmie Durham, Jenny Holzer, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, William Leavitt, Sherrie Levine, Paul McCarthy, Allan McCollum, and Haim Steinbach—who embraced expansive appropriation strategies by boldly incorporating existing images and forms into their works.

In part, collaboration was a way to resist the traditional notions of authorship and autonomy that had so long held sway in our conceptions of the artist's role. Sherrie Levine has said, "I enjoy collaborations with other artists... because I like transgressional boundaries, leaky distinctions, dualisms, fractured identities, monstrosity, and perversity. I like contamination. I like miscegenation." These artists believe that, as Fraser wrote of Lawler,

^{7.} bell hooks, "Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation," in Art on My Mind: Visual Politics (New York: New Press, 1995), 46.

^{8. &}quot;How Far We've Come from the River: A Conversation between Bennett Simpson and Stephen Prina," in *The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You: Stephen Prina*, exh. cat., Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (Cologne: König, 2008), 142.

^{9.} Gregg Bordowitz, "Tactics Inside and Out: Gregg Bordowitz on Critical Art Ensemble," *Artforum* 43 (September 2004): 212–17.

^{10. &}quot;Sherrie Levine Talks to Howard Singerman," Artforum 41 (April 2003): 190.

^{11.} Sherrie Levine, "Production Notes," Artforum 46 (October 2007): 331.

"artistic endeavor is always a collective endeavor." This notion of the "collective" is more than a fact of collaboration among artists, although it bears mentioning that the collective activities of artists who formed groups in the 1970s and 1980s were integral to the contemporary art practices of the period. 13 Fraser's reference to the collective here is a deliberate alignment with perspectives on authorship that were central to the articulation and framing of postmodernist practices. Critical of modernism's continued perpetuation of the idea of the artist as an enlightened "genius" whose self-expressive work is transcendent, timeless, and universally understood, these artists argued that, by contrast, art is pregnant with layers of historical and contemporary references, an inevitable amalgamation of what came before. While its sources may be direct and identifiable or fragmented and distanced, art is derived from a shared, collective field of images, forms, and knowledge.

An early and highly influential articulation of this position was a text written by Douglas Crimp to accompany the exhibition *Pictures*, which he curated at Artists Space in New York City in 1977. Like other young critics and art historians of the period, Crimp found inspiration in the structuralist and poststructuralist writings of French theorists, particularly Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, both of whom wrote in the late 1960s of what Barthes provocatively called "the death of the author." Intent on dispelling the mythology around the artist as an individual whose output must be understood solely through the lens of his experiences, tastes, and preoccupations, both Barthes and Foucault recognized that cultural production is influenced by numerous sources

and is thus subject to a proliferation of meaning. Looking to the author as the source of a work's meaning was viewed by Barthes as a lazy, a convenient habit of critics as a means to avoid any true engagement with interpretation. He wrote: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God') but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture." ¹⁶

In his essay "What Is an Author?" Foucault similarly took issue with modernism's reliance on notions of individualism and authenticity, quoting Samuel Beckett's query "What does it matter who is speaking?"17 In his earlier book The Order of Things, Foucault argued for the study of discourses, in which wide-ranging materials drawn from different periods, cultures, and positions related to a specific topic are gathered together to provide more complex and layered understandings. Foucault was principally drawn to discursive writings by figures like Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, whose works he considered generative. Rather than locking in meaning, in other words, their thinking and writing encourage more discourse, even allowing for "difference" in the form of subsequent texts that take up diverse, even opposing positions and arguments. Although there are important distinctions, Foucault's claim that the author does not come before the work—is not the one who establishes meaning—resonates with Barthes's insistence that meaning in fact resides with the reader, who will interpret the work within the specifics of time and place—in other words, cultural context-including the individual's personal experiences and particular knowledge bases. Barthes succinctly and forcibly asserted the power of the "reader" (the viewer, the receiver, the active participant in the work) when he notoriously concluded, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."18

Crimp found correlations between the arguments that these theorists were making and the work he was seeing by a young generation of artists, who were freely borrowing images (or "pictures") from cultural sources—films, newspapers, television, advertising, and books—in works that, while produced in a variety of mediums, were largely influenced by the enormous impact of photography and "mechanical reproduction," to borrow Walter Benjamin's term, which offered ease of circulation and a capacity for infinite

^{12.} Andrea Fraser, "In and Out of Place," in Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 17; first published in Art in America 73 (June 1985): 122–29.

^{13.} These organizations include ABC No Rio, ACT UP and its offshoot Gran Fury, the women's collective A.I.R., Asco, COLAB (Collaborative Projects), General Idea, Group Material, the Guerrilla Girls, the National Art Workers Community, Watts Towers Arts Center, the Woman's Building, and more.

^{14.} During this time, Artists Space, under the leadership of Helene Winer, was perhaps the space most supportive of this new generation of artists who were exploring appropriative gestures. Winer went on to found, with partner Janelle Reiring, the gallery Metro Pictures, which has a long history of engagement with these postmodern artists and those of a younger generation who engage critically with appropriative strategies and the influence of photography. Two years after the *Pictures* exhibition, Crimp updated and slightly altered his text for publication in *October*. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88; reprinted in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 175–87.

^{15.} Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1967), in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday, 1977), 142–48.

^{16.} Ibid., 146.

^{17.} Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 101.

^{18.} Barthes, "Death of the Author," 148.

duplication.¹⁹ *Pictures* included the work of just five artists—Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith—but Crimp quickly came to realize that the exhibition, and his expository text about it, had zeroed in on what was arguably the most "radical innovation," as he later described it, of the time, encompassing the work of numerous other artists.²⁰

Crimp's essay goes a long way toward defining characteristics of postmodernism as a theoretical break with modernism (not strictly a chronological shift), which would continue to be articulated and debated by a number of historians and critics in his peer group, many of them involved in the estimable publication *October*.²¹ One of Crimp's central arguments was that these postmodern artists (many later dubbed the "Pictures" generation in direct reference to Crimp's show) were not interested in the type of "topographical" investigations of the surface of artworks that had become the defining aspect of Greenbergian modernism but were rather intent on "uncovering strata of representation" with a marked skepticism with regard to origins brought about by their awareness that "underneath each picture there is always another picture."²²

Because of their embrace of borrowed images and existing forms and styles, these artists have frequently been discussed in terms of their use of the strategy of appropriation. Although the practice of appropriating—which carries with it a number of lively connotations, including borrowing, stealing, pilfering, fleecing, quoting, excerpting, copying, repeating, and confiscating—is now so widespread among artists that it sometimes hardly seems worth mentioning, it is important to emphasize that acts of appropriation by this generation of artists were ideologically driven, compelled by their desire to critically address facets of our society, including how identity is constructed, who has access to the power of self-representation, and the signification of images beyond their surfaces. In this sense, their use of appropriation must be understood as radical and radically different from how it had been



Fig. 5. Andy Warhol, Race Riot, 1964. Oil and silk-screen ink on canvas. 30 x 32% in. (76.2 x 83.5 cm). The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

implemented in the past. In pop art, for example, the use of found images ultimately functioned primarily as an innocuous commentary on the ubiquity of printed media, a gesture that was quickly embraced by the art market. Of course, artists had been borrowing images at least since Picasso and Gris collaged newspapers onto their canvases, if not before, and using mass-media or iconographic images not only was a cornerstone of the pop art paintings of Andy Warhol (fig. 5), Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist but also was a central component of the works of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

What was foregrounded for this new generation of artists, however, was an intention to articulate our *shared* relationships to these borrowed elements and the power of visual imagery to inform our beliefs and establish our collective priorities. Moreover, they sought to acknowledge that their work has meaning only in relationship to other art and to things outside of art, to the *context* in which the work finds itself—in short, as something that circulates within cultural and social *institutions*. So while some artists featured in *Take It or Leave It*—particularly those considered part of the "Pictures" generation—are more typically categorized as "appropriation artists" (a classification, it should be remarked, that many of them

^{19.} Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217–51.

^{20.} Crimp's revision to his original text added a discussion of Cindy Sherman's work.
21. Primary contributors from this peer group to theorize about postmodernism include Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Craig Owens. Others outside the *October* inner circle have also been central to these debates, of course, including the postcolonial theorists Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, and the gender studies and feminist psychoanalytic scholars Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, as well as many artists who have published writings on related topics, such as Mike Kelley, Mary Kelly, Thomas Lawson, and John Miller.
22. Crimp, "Pictures," in Wallis, *Art after Modernism*, 186.

reject as too reductive or polemical²³), this exhibition argues that they are in fact engaged in a type of institutional critique. Although some critics have acknowledged connections among specific artists in the exhibition,²⁴ the tendency in the historical writing to separate appropriation artists, who emerged primarily in the late 1970s, and those identified with a later period of institutional critique (called "expanded" institutional critique by James Meyer²⁵), many of whom came onto the scene in the late 1980s or early 1990s, largely misses the point. For all these artists, it was critical to bring questions of representation into art and to make evident that knowledge can never be acquired apart from the circumstances of its production and sites of consumption or display. Their aim is to open up discourse and to debate the role of art and, of course, of artists. And while some of the artists gathered here directly address the institutions of art—as when Andrea Fraser, Mark Dion, Jimmie Durham, Fred Wilson, and others consistently bring to light how ideology infuses every facet of the museum and its (visible and invisible) operations-all of them challenge and, it should be emphasized, try

23. In a March 1985 interview with Jeanne Siegel, Sherrie Levine said, "I never aspired to belong to a school of appropriators. 'Appropriation' is a label that makes me cringe because it's come to signify a polemic; as an artist, I don't like to think of myself as a polemicist." "After Sherrie Levine," in Art Talk: The Early 80s, ed. Jeanne Siegel (New York: Da Capo, 1990), 154.

24. The distinction is often generational, so that artists are grouped and discussed among others considered to be in their peer group (as in the 200g exhibition The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) while the bridges between artists of different generations are often neglected. James Meyer has linked practices like Fraser's to Lawler's in, for example, his text "The Strong and the Weak," and both "movements" are commonly discussed as being rooted in the conceptual art practices and early forms of institutional critique of the 1960s and 1970s. But it has been the artists themselves who have largely made the meaningful connections between their practices explicit, especially those of the younger generation acknowledging the influence of the earlier generation. See Andrea Fraser's texts on Louise Lawler and Allan McCollum, respectively, "In and Out of Place" and "'Creativity = Capital'?," in Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 17-27, 29-35. Rirkrit Tiravanija notes his debt to artists of the 1980s, stating, "I felt the influence of people like Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Martha Rosler, and Barbara Kruger who dismantled cultural productions," in "'80s Again," Artforum 41 (March 2003): 190. Glenn Ligon mentions the text-based practices of Kruger and Holzer as formative in his interview with Patricia Bickers, in "A Body of Work: An Interview with Patricia Bickers," in Glenn Ligon: Yourself in the World; Selected Writings and Interviews, ed. Scott Rothkopf (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2011), 160. As a critic, John Miller has written insightfully on Jenny Holzer-see "Drawings That Question Diagrams (Jenny Holzer)," in The Price Club: Selected Writings (1977-1998), ed. Lionel Bovier (Geneva: JRP; Dijon, France: Presses du Réel, 2000), 13-17-and on Adrian Piper-see "The Dancer, Not the Dance," in The Ruin of Exchange: And Other Writings on Art, ed. Alexander Alberro (Zurich: JRP/Ringier; Dijon, France: Presses du Réel, 2012), 65-73. 25. Meyer, "The Strong and the Weak," 20.



Fig. 6. Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, 1970 (detail). Performance documentation: 5 gelatin silver prints. 16 x 16 in. (40.6 x 40.6 cm) each. Generali Foundation, Vienna

to *improve* the institutions that support art, calling on them to address societal ideological constructs and their biases.

As previously noted, conceptual art was foundational to the artists in Take It or Leave It, both as a respected influence and as a precedent with discernible limitations that they were intent on addressing in their own works. The earliest works in the exhibition—by Mary Kelly, Adrian Piper, and Martha Rosler—take up significant working methods established by conceptual artists: the use of systems, the juxtaposition of language with (often photographic) images, the dematerialization of the art object, and the resistance to singularity in favor of seriality key among them. The seemingly "objective" approaches employed by artists associated with conceptual art—such as Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Huebler, and Sol LeWitt-were adopted by these early feminist artists and then inscribed with subjectivity, ideology, and critiques beyond the disciplines of linguistics and semiotics so favored by the conceptualists to include, notably, psychoanalysis, gender studies, cultural theory, and postcolonial studies.

While Piper's works of the 1960s and early 1970s used maps and graphs to address abstract formal questions, her allegiance to evaluating the very definition of art, which became the primary activity of

conceptual art, rapidly began to expand to include positioning herself as the subject. Once her body and identity started to figure in her examinations of time and space, she could not ignore the fact of her body as a gendered, racial entity. By the mid-1970s Piper had moved beyond the solipsism of conceptual art26 to create works in which she evaluated cultural biases based on identity by performing publicly and gauging people's reactions. In her radical series The Mythic Being (1973-75) and Catalysis (1970; fig. 6), for example, she dressed in drag as a young man of color or transformed herself into a grotesque outsider by soaking her clothing in vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod liver oil and riding the subway or hiding an audio recording of very loud belches in her clothing while she studied at the library. The notion of catalysis became a defining feature of Piper's work, as she not only acknowledged the impossibility of reading art outside of politics but also dedicated herself to using her art to create change, an endeavor that she remains very much committed to today. As she said: "I'm not interested in doing subtle, understated work. I'm not interested in an ambiguous message. . . . we've had 400 years of racism.... I am committed to using my work as a catalytic tool of political change."27 Her Vanilla Nightmares series from the late 1980s (p. 91) presents provocative stereotypical imagery drawn directly onto pages of the New York Times alongside headlines such as "For the White Farmers All's Well in Zimbabwe" and "Affirmative Action Upheld by High Court as a Remedy for Past Job Discrimination" or ads for flights to the Caribbean or Poison perfume. Both the fears and the fantasies that people hold about the black body are confronted in these works, which Mary Anne Staniszewski aptly described as revealing "the obscenity of racism." 28

As has been frequently noted, Piper's works often address the viewer directly, her language intentionally saturated with the pronouns *I* and *you*. This is a pronounced feature of *Cornered* (1988; p. 83)—in which the artist calls out viewers on their likely racism despite the fact that, given the country's history of miscegenation, most Americans have black ancestors—and is perhaps best illustrated in the words of her Mythic Being character: "I embody everything you most hate and fear." The strategy of direct address is also evident in such pronouncements as Barbara

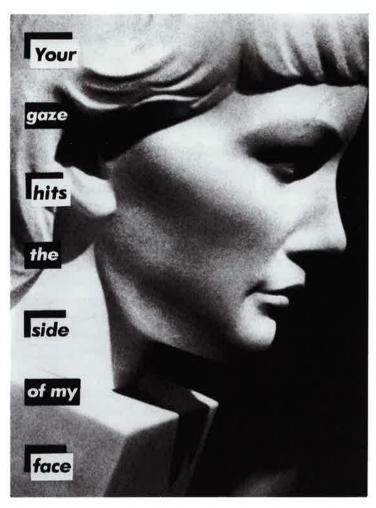


Fig. 7. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*, 1981. Photograph. 55 x 41 in. (139.7 x 104.1 cm)

Kruger's "Your gaze hits the side of my face" (fig. 7) and Jenny Holzer's "You are the past present and future" from her Truisms series, started in 1977. Discussing Kruger's use of language, Craig Owens writes: "The address of Kruger's work is always genderspecific; her point, however, is not that masculinity and femininity are fixed positions assigned in advance by the representational apparatus. Rather, Kruger uses a term with no fixed content, the linguistic shifter ('I/you'), in order to demonstrate that masculine and feminine themselves are not stable identities, but subject to ex-change."²⁹

^{26.} As Piper put it, she wanted "art for art's sake" to be replaced with "art for people's sake." Adrian Piper, "Some Thoughts on the Political Character of This Situation" (1983), in Alberro and Stimson, *Institutional Critique*, 243.

27. Adrian Piper, quoted in Mary Anne Staniszewski, "Race against Time," in *Pretend* (New York: John Weber Gallery, 1990), unpaged.

28. Ibid.

^{29.} Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 184.

As Kobena Mercer has pointed out, Piper's work is often mischaracterized as being angry, accusatory, or aggressive toward her viewer. And while there is no doubt that the artist is angry about the lingering racism and sexism in our culture—and why shouldn't she be?—Mercer argues that she in fact implicates herself in her work and embraces self-reflection.³⁰ This self-reflection is a facet of the destabilizing impulse noted by Owens, for at the center of these practices is the refusal of an authoritarian determination of a universal self. Moreover, the situations that Piper creates between the viewer and the work (and, indeed, between the viewer and the artist when she uses her own recorded body and/or voice to speak to the onlooker) are decidedly intimate. The one-on-one construction of much of her work does not treat the viewer as a generalized being but rather as an individual with a particular background and identity. Piper is also a Kant scholar and professor of philosophy, and her arguments are reasoned and logical statements on topics about which she is highly informed, yet the intimacy of the exchanges she constructs encourages a decidedly emotional experience. Viewing Piper's work can be in turn upsetting, confusing, off-putting, and even joyful (when you consider a work like Funk Lessons [1983]). One can feel anger, outrage, sympathy, and defensiveness, which makes the work contrast sharply with the "emptiness" that conceptual artists like Yves Klein and Robert Barry trafficked in.31

This move from a model of inward-looking conceptualism to one that deliberately brings emotion, in its many forms, into the work is pivotal, for it not only differentiated the work from its precedents in conceptualism—as well as from the work of some of the male artists associated with early institutional critique, like Daniel Buren and Michael Asher—but it was also a strategy embraced by other artists of Piper's generation as well as those that followed. At the risk of generalizing about an admittedly diverse group of artists, these artists saw no advantage to stripping their identity as sentient beings out of their work. Yet this desire to include aspects of their experiences—to allow some of their personal feelings to emanate from the work—was not for purposes of "self-expression" (as it had come to be understood particularly through genres like abstract expressionist painting) but rather to identify themselves as subjects always in the process of becoming and, moreover, as subjects who are informed by history, society, and culture.

What is noteworthy about Kelly's Post-Partum Document, as well as the vast majority of her other work, is that the physical body is absent. Or to be more exact, it is not pictured, not represented in a visual form, the form we have grown to expect representation to manifest. The body—both the artist's and her son's—is, of course, the subject of the work, but Kelly has chosen not to make it the object of the gaze. While a great deal of early feminist work in the United States—by artists such as Eleanor Antin, Carolee Schneemann, Barbara T. Smith, and Hannah Wilke (fig. 8)—challenged the lack of images of women by women in art (there is obviously no dearth of images of women by male artists in the history of art) and the types of stereotypical pictures of women that circulate widely in the larger culture by putting the female body (usually the artist's own) at the center of the work, Kelly sought to represent the female—to represent herself—by distinctly other means. While the work's ostensible subject is the physical and psychological develop-

An affective quality is also injected into the conceptual systems of Mary Kelly's six-part, 165-piece Post-Partum Document (1973-79; pp. 38–39, 46–47), a complex and deeply influential work that documents the first six years of her son's life up to the point when he learned to spell his own name and therefore became a subject of language. Using a different discipline to structure each section of the work—including pediatrics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, linguistics, and literature—Kelly presented a systematic analysis of everything from her son's appetite and digestion to his growing awareness of sexual difference, resulting in a detailed documentation of subject formation. But, as Eve Meltzer has noted, Post-Partum Document is far from sterile or cold in its articulation of this abundance of information. Alongside the graphs, diagrams, and exacting account of Kelly's child's behaviors are things like handwritten entries from the artist's diary and shit-stained diapers, which add a distinctive corporeality and psychological vulnerability. Meltzer notes the oscillation between theory and aesthetics that marks Kelly's work, describing the ways in which desire and affect function in relationship to representation, and points to what the artist herself surely discovered in the course of making the work: "Post-Partum Document tells us something that Lacan works hard to keep under wraps: complexity itself, scientism itself, and hyperbolic cerebralism are themselves generative of affect."32 Despite its embrace of the visual languages of the sciences, the work also incorporates what Meltzer calls "the imaginary" and reminds us of how deeply personal and intimate the "documentation" that Kelly chooses to share with us is.

³o. Kobena Mercer, "Decentering and Recentering: Adrian Piper's Spheres of Influence," in *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective* (Baltimore: Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland, 1999), 53.

^{31.} See Ralph Rugoff, "Touched by Your Presence," *Fri*eze, no. 50 (January–February 2000), https://www.frieze.com/issue/article/touched_by_your_presence/.

^{32.} Meltzer, Systems We Have Loved, 173.



Fig. 8. Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah*, 1978. Black-and-white photograph. 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm). Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles

ment of the artist's son, in fact the subject is Kelly herself, as the title indicates (the term *postpartum* refers to the period after parturition, or giving birth, and thus refers to the mother rather than the newborn infant). Kelly's work negotiates and formalizes her experience of becoming a mother, and as Meltzer points out, the question at its heart is "What am I?" Or, put another way, how has my subjectivity changed now that I am a mother? Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* ambitiously documents the institution of motherhood,

addressing the social structures that can simultaneously support it and inscribe long-held assumptions and normative behaviors while also evaluating her very personal experiences of raising a child.

Absence of the body is also an oft-noted aspect of Martha Rosler's The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems (1974–75; pp. 40-41), a work that, like those by Kelly and Piper, is indebted to conceptual art yet skeptical of it. It consists of more than twenty black-and-white photographs (a deliberate borrowing of the ostensibly objective style of documentary photography) of New York's Bowery, a neighborhood notorious as a gathering place for the homeless. But rather than feature the down-on-their-luck "bums" known to occupy this zone of the city, Rosler includes only the residue of their presence alongside a remarkably long list of colloquial terms for alcoholics and states of drunkenness, such as wino, lush, sloshed, and soused. These instances of absence are no doubt a reaction to the problematics of representation—both in art and in popular culture. Rosler has said of her Bowery project that it was a response to the "victim" photography so often embraced by documentarians and revered as bringing to light social injustice and disempowerment while actually serving to keep the status of those who are marginalized as "other" intact. The lack of bodies in the work is an antidote to what she has described as "the indignity of speaking for others" and the "poverty of representation" that fails to provide genuine visibility or "objective truth" even when its purported aim is to do so. But this sense of absence can also be understood from other perspectives, in particular, as the expression of artists who have themselves felt invisible. The void of representation that they have experienced may be mirrored in the work or, in some instances, vehemently rejected and replaced with a flagrant insistence on presence. Throughout her career, Piper has called attention to her race repeatedly, in part because she is light-skinned enough to pass for white. Reflecting her experience of often being misidentified as white, her work points to the instability of identity and the trouble with relying on, or prioritizing, the optical. In this case, the void of misrepresentation, or the lack that occurs when one is overlooked or assumed to be something that one is not, is filled. This is true for many other works in the exhibition, which make visible—sometimes in lively forms that embrace the abject, the "obscene," or the inappropriately "emotional"—that which has been ignored and marginalized or made invisible in order to perpetuate societal myths or maintain the status quo.

Craig Owens skillfully articulated the reasons why we must consider the work of women artists when we evaluate postmodernist practices beginning in the 1960s and 1970s:

It is precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged—not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others. Among those prohibited from Western representation, whose representations are denied all legitimacy, are women. . . .

However restricted its field of inquiry may be, every discourse on postmodernism ... aspires to the status of a general theory of contemporary culture. Among the most significant developments of the past decade—it may well turn out to have been *the* most significant—has been the emergence, in nearly every area of cultural activity, of a specifically feminist practice.³⁴

Thus, to start our selection of works for Take It or Leave It chronologically with Kelly, Piper, and Rosler—and to follow with those of Barry, Bender, Birnbaum, Holzer, Kolbowski, Kruger, Lawler, and Levine—is to argue for the centrality of the work of feminist artists, and the discourse surrounding it, from the 1960s to the 1980s and for its influence on all contemporary art to follow, most certainly that of the subsequent generations of artists represented in the exhibition, including Nayland Blake, Tom Burr, Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, Robert Gober, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Renée Green, Mike Kelley, Glenn Ligon, John Miller, Cady Noland, Stephen Prina, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Christopher Williams, Sue Williams, Fred Wilson, and David Wojnarowicz. 35 By deciding to begin the exhibition after the first wave of institutional critique,36 we have perhaps embraced the position of coming after—after modernism, after the death of the author, after conceptualism—and the temporality that inflects works such as Prina's *Mourning Sex*, after Gonzalez-Torres's death; Kelly's Post-Partum Document, after giving birth; Glenn Ligon's Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book" (1991–93; pp. 114–15), following Mapplethorpe's Black Book project; Kelley and McCarthy's Fresh Acconci (1995; p. 134), restaging some of Vito Acconci's early performances; and just about everything Sherrie Levine has ever done (pp. 156–57). This "afterness" reflects a desire to rescue the past for the present, a process that Owens attributes to allegory, which is marked by its tendency for one image to double for another, or to be read *through* another—in other words, for forms of appropriation to complicate meaning, embrace fragmentation, and detach from origin.³⁷

While modernism remains in the present, always focused on the object before it and how it might, in and of itself, leave behind the past and propel art forward (the avant-garde), postmodernist practices like those engaged in institutional critique want to keep history alive in the present. By recognizing that we are connected to the past, that we come after, the artists featured in Take It or Leave It reveal the ideology of history—its rather chaotic position as an accumulation of unstable memories and complicated events—and offer forms of revision. They approach their work as something in between. Levine describes her work as an "easy flow between the past and the future, between my history and yours," and Prina's work has been characterized as a "relay race" that looks backward in order to look forward.38 Interestingly they often look to the recent past, considering it to be vital to our understanding of the present. We can see this in a number of works in the exhibition in which artists explore the works of those who came just prior to them (or, in some cases, are part of their own generation), as in Prina's dedication to Gonzalez-Torres or Ligon's response to Mapplethorpe's project. This commitment to the recent past is also apparent in the topics the artists choose to address, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush presidency, gun control, gay marriage, violence against women, religious zealotry and intolerance, nefarious banking practices, the recent economic collapse, and life in America more generally.

As Jennifer Doyle explores in her book *Hold It against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, work that combines identity, politics, and emotion often pushes people past their comfort zone and is deemed "difficult." In her study, Doyle prioritizes work that is primarily performance-based (in part because it has suffered the most critical and institutional neglect), much of it scapegoated during the culture wars, maligned by the media as

^{34.} Owens, "Discourse of Others," 168, 170.

^{35.} Some of this influence can be seen in specific works by artists, such as Glenn Ligon's Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features / Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features (1998), a riff on Piper's work of a similar title, and John Miller's untitled painting (1986) of a Yvonne Rainer performance featured in the exhibition. Mike Kelley speaks specifically to the influence of feminism on his practice in an interview with Lynn Hershman from 2006; see http://lib.stanford.edu/files/WAR_kelley.pdf.

^{36.} The artists most frequently associated with this early phase of institutional critique include Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke.

^{37.} Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Recognition: Representation, Power, Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 52–69.

^{38.} Levine said this in her essay "Five Comments," for which she appropriated text from other artists. Sherrie Levine, "Five Comments," in *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*, ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 92–93. The press release for Prina's 2012 exhibition *Painting* at Petzel Gallery says, "Prina's work often embraces the principle of the relay race"; http://www.petzel.com/exhibitions/2012-02-18_stephen-prina/.



Fig. g. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, 1988–89. Black-and-white photograph, acrylic, text, and collage on Masonite. 81 x 88 in. (205.7 x 223.5 cm). Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W Gallery, New York

"controversial" or "shocking," or ignored by serious critics (usually as politically naive or overly literal). But she also acknowledges that this difficulty can be embodied within objects, discussing the work of Carrie Mae Weems, for example, and devoting a chapter to David Wojnarowicz's multifaceted work, in particular a poignant yet vitriolic painted collage created after the death of his dear friend Peter Hujar from AIDS (fig. 9). This work has been categorized as "difficult" in part because of its refusal to split form from content, to resign itself either to being about aesthetics and the ontology of mediums or to fully accept its activist bent and identify itself as solely message-based or reductively aligned with propaganda. (The artists in question often find themselves the targets of critics from both sides of this divide—the formalist modernists and the political activists.)

In difficult and emotional work, to continue to use Doyle's terms, viewers are asked to participate more fully. Likewise, in much of the work in *Take It or Leave It*, the response of the viewer is considered to be very much a *part* of the work. There is a commitment to the viewer as the receiver and the arbiter of meaning that sets this work apart from previous genres and movements. And there is much "difficult" work in *Take It or Leave It*: Piper's unrelenting depictions of the thing our society seems least able to address, its racism; Wojnarowicz's brutally honest and angry railings against government neglect, Catholic hypocrisy, and capitalism's degradation of the environment; Gretchen Bender's frenetically optical and sometimes alarmingly visceral portrayals of global violence and its bedmates, international economic growth and

corporate hegemony; Paul McCarthy's unflinchingly abject depictions of political cronyism, familial dysfunction, and the onslaught of information designed to elicit desire for the American dream; the simultaneous nurturing and sadism located in Nayland Blake's *Gorge* (1998; p. 145), in which he is force-fed for an hour; Robert Gober's poignantly tender yet heart-wrenching drawings of entwined couples on the pages of the September 12, 2001, issue of the *New York Times* (pp. 164–65); a partially obscured memo to Condoleezza Rice dated January 2001 about the increased activities of Al Qaeda in Jenny Holzer's redaction painting (pp. 166–67); and Cady Noland's witty yet irascible sculpture that calls attention to the many paradoxes of this place that we call the United States (pp. 88–89).

In evaluating difficult work, we must seek to understand it in terms of both its materiality and its social and political contexts (not one or the other), but we must also carefully examine specifically how it addresses the issue of reception and thus questions art's role in our society. Ligon's *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* is particularly pertinent in terms of the question of reception. The work is a complexly dense immersion into the artist's attempt to understand not only his personal relationship to Mapplethorpe's highly controversial photographs of nude black male bodies but the reactions of many others as well. Ligon appropriates Mapplethorpe's images and places them alongside seventy-eight quotations from various figures, ranging from "informed" experts in the field of art to

laypersons who likely know nothing of the debates surrounding the work. Renée Green's Partially Buried (1996; pp. 138–39) similarly mines Robert Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed (1970) but not as a formal investigation of the work itself or even as an exploration of a work she felt personally inspired by. Rather, Green's video examines how the meaning of the work—sited on the Kent State University campus—shifted after the Ohio National Guard shot and killed four students there in May 1970 during a protest against President Nixon's decision to conduct military operations in Cambodia and South Vietnam. Students turned Smithson's public artwork exploring the process of entropy, which had been built just months prior to the shooting, into a memorial of sorts, writing "MAY 4 KENT 70" on its surface. The object of further human interference (vandalism, arson, university neglect) as well as natural forces, the work decayed over the years, and university groundskeepers gradually removed parts of it. Today all that is left is the concrete foundation and two walls, which are largely covered in brush and hidden from view. These pieces are a reminder that works of art are inevitably changed by context, current events, and reception and, moreover, that they can engender fierce debate. With a pronounced sense of commitment and a sometimes palpable vulnerability, the artists in Take It or Leave It persist in keeping debate alive, critiquing our institutions so that we might understand ourselves more fully.