

# CultureGrrl

Lee Rosenbaum's cultural commentary

## Q&A with Douglas Crimp: Responses to the Met's "Picture Generation" from the Group's First Proponent



Douglas Crimp at the Met's "Pictures Generation" press preview

For me, the Metropolitan Museum's much discussed, uncharacteristically risk-taking theme show, [Pictures Generation](#) (to Aug. 2) is more remarkable for that conservative institution's willingness to tackle a worthy, complex contemporary subject than for the actual rewards derived from viewing it.

While the underlying Big Idea---artists' appropriation of media images---has undeniably gained lasting traction, many of the movement's 30 practitioners in this 160-work survey have not. The big names, from our vantage point some 30 years later, are [Richard Prince](#), [Cindy Sherman](#) and [Barbara Kruger](#), and the generation's father figure, [John Baldessari](#). Others have fallen out of the limelight; still others were and remain relatively obscure.

In his catalogue for the show, [Douglas Eklund](#), the Met's associate curator for photography, mentions the works' "often daunting intellectual rigor," which may account for why this admirable project ultimately, for me, fell a bit flat. In most cases (with notable exceptions), I appreciated the innovative, rule-breaking concepts that inform the "Pictures" pictures, without finding them moving, engaging or involving, let alone visually seductive.

But there's a critic whose views are certainly of far greater interest than mine or even than the judgments of leading members of the art-scribe tribe---seasoned observers like [NY Times'](#) [Holland Cotter](#) (who [praised](#) the Met for having "finally made a big leap into the present, or near-present") and the less enthusiastic [Peter Schjeldahl](#) of the [New Yorker](#) (who [regarded](#) much of the show as "slipshod, though often arresting and occasionally fun").

The person I was most interested in hearing from is curator/critic [Douglas Crimp](#), who was a seminal figure at that moment of contemporary art history and is now an art history professor at the University of Rochester. It was he who first identified the affinities of this group of artists and their creative progeny as a new, important development, when he curated and wrote the text for the 1977 "Pictures" exhibition that provided the inspiration for the Met's show. The enduring influence of that small show and the Crimp's related essay far exceeded expectations when the display of five artists---[Robert Longo](#), [Jack Goldstein](#), [Sherrie Levine](#), [Troy Brauntuch](#) and [Philip Smith](#) (the last of whom has been snubbed by the Met's show and catalogue)---opened at Artists Space, a feisty alternative venue in New York.

Having been told at the press preview that Crimp himself was present among us

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[LEE ROSENBAUM](#)  
I'm a veteran cultural journalist who writes frequently for the [Wall Street Journal's](#) "Leisure & Arts" page. I've been a regular cultural contributor on [New York Public Radio](#) (WNYC). I've appeared as an art-market commentator on [BBC-TV](#) and have published numerous Op-Ed pieces in the [New York Times](#) and [Los Angeles Times](#). I am author of [The Complete Guide to Collecting Art](#) (Knopf) and have lectured on cultural property issues at the [New Acropolis Museum](#) and the [University of Pennsylvania](#), on deaccessioning at [Columbia Law School](#), the [University of Iowa](#) and the annual conference of the [Museum Association of New York](#), and on museum governance and cultural property issues at [Seton Hall University](#). [more](#)

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(although all public remarks came from Eklund), I cornered him (as luck would have it) in front of works by his favorite artist in the show, **Louise Lawler**, whose reputation may get the biggest boost from this Metropolitan Museum exposure.

In the spirit of "Pictures," I'm appropriating Crimp's comments for my own work. (I'm the "Q"; he's the "A.")

Q: What's your take on the Met's take on a subject in which you had been so involved?

A: There's been an uptake of the "Pictures" exhibition that's continued for about 32 years now. It's been a very long process of being tied to this moment and that little exhibition that I did at Artists Space. I guess at this point I can say I'm pretty detached from it. Of course I'm also extremely attached, but I'm detached insofar as I've watched the process of something I did and a couple of texts that I wrote become a part of history. I've realized over time that you can't control the way history is made.

Q: If you could control it, how would you do things differently than this [the Met's show]?

A: I have no interest in controlling. I did something: I did a little exhibition; I wrote a text; I rewrote the text and published it a couple of years later in "October." It had effects. A lot of it is very gratifying to me. A lot of the attention has been paid to that little exhibition, but also to what I wrote about a group of artists and a phenomenon.

It's been interesting to see how much that has had an effect and I guess it has proved to me that all of us who participate are making art's meanings---the viewers of art, the critics of art, obviously the artists and the museums that make exhibitions---all of these constitute meaning in works of art. Meanings don't inhere in the objects themselves. They actually have to do with reception.

Q: Are the meanings that you see here different from the meanings that you intended back then and the meanings that you would attribute to these things now? How does your perspective differ from the point of view reflected in this exhibition?

A: It's not so much about my being married to what I thought then. I don't even know what I thought then, because I thought so many many things subsequently. It's more about what I think now.

In what Doug [Eklund] was just saying [in his remarks to the press], he gave a certain amount of attention to the importance of women and I think that has to be really emphasized. In his first wall text, he mentions feminism but then he goes on to define the influence of feminism as something like, "It doesn't matter what the gender of the artist is." [The wall text stated that feminism "made it possible for woman artists to define themselves as artists who happened to be women."]

I think that's **NOT** the lesson of feminism. The lesson of feminism is in the kind of art that's being made and the kinds or propositions that were being made through the art---the critique of originality, for example, which is something I already argued for early on with respect to Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman. I think that's a feminist perspective and that is a crucial aspect of this formation of artists. I didn't recognize that at the time.

I don't think that the work of **Louise Lawler**---probably the artist I feel closest to, in relation to my subsequent work---can be understood without taking account of second-wave feminism.

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Louise Lawler, "Pollock and Tureen," 1984, Metropolitan Museum, image courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures

Q: Do you have a more political take on all of this than we're seeing here?

A: I don't know, but what struck me about the Sarah Charlesworth piece is that it actually was not just a photograph but [related to] a particular political event [the kidnapping by the Italian Red Brigade of Prime Minister Aldo Moro]. I'd have to read the catalogue to know how he [Eklund] is dealing with the politics of it. [Eklund sticks with how "conceptually astute" the piece is. It shows photographs that appeared on various newspapers' front pages on the day when Moro's hostage picture was published. His image is the small one on *The Times*; second from top on *The Guardian*.]



Sarah Charlesworth, "April 21, 1978" (detail), from the series *Modern History, 1978*, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art

Q: What do you make of Philip Smith's absence from the Met's show?

A: He was not so much of the group, of the social world, of the people who formulated this. He's gay and this [the Met's show] is a very straight configuration of artists. I don't know what's happened to him, career-wise. It's a slightly touchy subject: I think Philip is upset, reasonably.

What's more interesting is that four of the five continue to be artists that we think about. [Crimp also noted that he himself had omitted Smith and added Sherman in his second essay on "Pictures," published in "October" magazine. Eklund later told me that he had made a "curatorial decision" to exclude Smith: "I didn't respond to his work strongly enough to include it."]

Q: Are you bemused that your exhibition became such a watershed moment?

A: I never thought this work would end up in the Metropolitan Museum. For me, it was totally associated with alternative space. It was truly alternative.

Q: How does this show relate to the [Shepard Fairey controversy](#)?

A: These were among the artists who tested the copyright laws and the whole notion of appropriating images became a kind of discourse, so younger artists could pick up on it very easily.

Q: Do you think the Fairey controversy is making a mountain out of a

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molehill, because we've already established the appropriateness of this type of use by artists?

A: No, because copyright is still a huge legal issue. I myself have huge issues with the notion of "fair use"---whether or not a critic should be able to publish an image without having to pay huge rights fees or, for that matter, to clear the text with the estate of the artist to make sure that they control what can be said. I think that copyright comes into conflict with critical discourse.

When I asked the Met's curator about the relevance of the show to the Fairey-Associated Press contretemps, Eklund noted that for five years he's been largely focused on this exhibition project: "I only recognize the name [Fairey] and that it is something involving Obama. I've barely followed it."

Sometimes we can become a bit too fixated on our own work!



Met curator Douglas Eklund at the "Pictures Generation" press preview

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