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ART REVIEW | 'THE PICTURES GENERATION'

At the Met, Baby Boomers Leap Onstage

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)
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Apart from a few years in the 1960s when the New York culture czar Henry Geldzahler tossed some stardust around, the Metropolitan Museum was a fusty backwater for contemporary art, and an object of scorn in the art world. New work seemed to arrive only in bland job-lot batches. Exhibitions kept being awarded to angsty British painters who had peaked before World War II.

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Robert Longo/Metro Pictures Gallery

The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984
Robert Longo's "American Soldier" (1977) is part of this show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. [More Photos](#) »

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were the whole story. No larger context for their work is suggested, though they shared a set of social and political experiences.

They were born in the mid-1940s to early '50s, in a prosperous but paranoia-prone cold

A few years ago things began to sharpen up. Modest but on-the-ball displays of recent photography quietly appeared, and, for the first time, video. [Damien Hirst's](#) silly shark arrived. [Kara Walker](#) was invited in as a guest curator. And now with "The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984," the museum has finally made a big leap into the present, or near-present. A decades-long snooze may be over.

The show is a winner. It tackles a subject — an innovative and influential body of art produced between two major American economic booms — that has been begging for museum attention. It does so at a time when the work in question has particular pertinence to what's being made today. And it gives the subject something like classic old master treatment (decent space, big catalog) at probably a fraction of old master cost.

As for the art itself — painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, video, installation, prints and books by 30 artists, most of them still active and caught young here — it looks terrific. Some of it has become famous. But a lot of it hasn't been seen since it was made in the post-Vietnam 1970s.

The word "generation" in the title is a bit tricky. The artists included here represent only one aspect of art being made at the time, though they are presented as if they

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war era. They were the first kids to be raised with television, fast food and disposable everything. As teenagers they were soaked in Pop Art, rock and rebel politics. As art students, even in traditionalist programs, they felt the effects of Conceptualism. Ideas replaced objects and images. Painting was pushed to the side. The movement questioned what art was for and redefined what could be art.

John Baldessari, who taught at the California Institute of the Arts near Los Angeles, was one of Conceptualism's more unorthodox gurus. Once art had been emptied of visual matter, he wanted to fill it back up with images, specifically with images lifted from the mass media.

Where art was once assumed to reflect and even shape culture, the mass media — television, film, advertising — was overwhelming and shaping art. For Mr. Baldessari that was a phenomenon worthy of critical investigation, and some of his students — like Jack Goldstein, Barbara Bloom, Matt Mullican, David Salle and James Welling, all big presences in the Met show — agreed.

Similar ideas were being explored by artists elsewhere: by Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, Robert Longo and [Cindy Sherman](#) in Buffalo; by Paul McMahon in Boston; and by Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Richard Prince and Laurie Simmons in New York City.

They were all making art that combined elements of Pop and Conceptualism with social concerns about consumerism, political power and gender. Their work kept ideas to the fore but rematerialized them as images. Many of those images were photographic, extracted from everyday life, a life that was increasingly a creation of media culture, as [Andy Warhol](#) well knew.

Reductive accounts of the period pinpoint these trends as coalescing in a 1977 group exhibition called "Pictures" at Artist's Space in SoHo, an event that has also come to define a "generation." In reality, this was a smallish affair, mostly of brand-new work, with only five artists — Mr. Goldstein, Ms. Levine and Mr. Longo, along with Troy Brauntuch and Philip Smith — with work by Ms. Sherman installed elsewhere in the gallery. The show's real influence probably derived from a related essay written by its curator, Douglas Crimp.

A few original "Pictures" pieces are in the Met exhibition, which has been organized by Douglas Eklund, an associate curator in the Met's photography department. They give evidence of certain highly individual styles and signature images almost at full development.

A small sculptural relief by Mr. Longo of a nattily dressed man bending backward as if struck, was modeled on the figure of a gangster shot to death in a Rainer Fassbinder film. In true mediated fashion Mr. Longo took the image from a newspaper reproduction of a film still, and it anticipates his monumental 1981 drawings of similar figures, three of which are hanging in the Met's Great Hall.

Mr. Brauntuch, now well known for working with archival fascist imagery, had a dim, dark photographic image of [Hitler](#) stamped onto a one-color ground like a spot of acid eating into a modernist abstraction.

1 | 2 [NEXT PAGE »](#)

"The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984" remains through Aug. 2 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, (212) 535-7710, metmuseum.org.

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