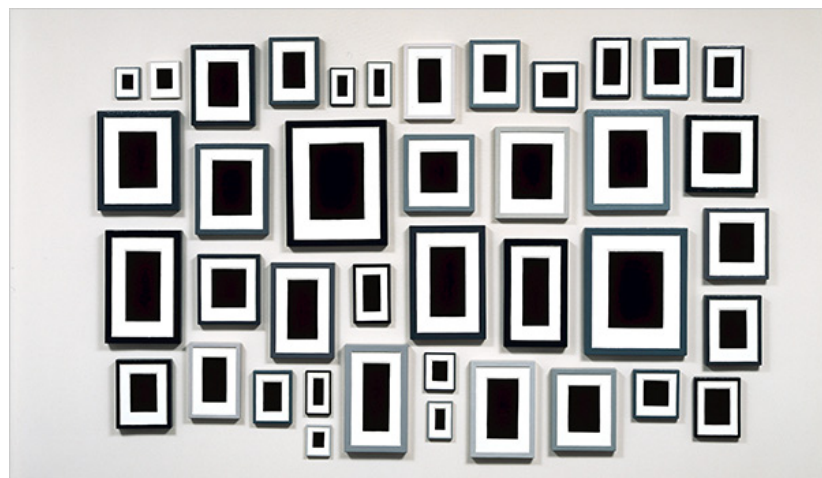


Framing the Message of a Generation



Metropolitan Museum of Art/Licensed by Scala, Art Resource

"Collection of Forty Plaster Surrogates," 1982-84, by Allan McCollum, on view in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's current exhibition "The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984." More Photos >

By HOLLAND COTTER Published: May 29, 2009

HOW does cultural history get written? Who chooses which portraits will hang in the hall of fame, which art will live on in museums, which books will end up on the classics shelf, which music will be standard fare in tomorrow's concert halls?

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We are encouraged to think that such judgments have lives of their own, are decided by a kind of natural selection. The most beautiful art will prevail, the most ambitious, the most morally uplifting, the most universal in emotional appeal. Everything else is by default of a lesser order. We shouldn't fret if it disappears.

This view is, of course, wishful thinking. Moral and universal are concepts up for grabs; my notion of beautiful may leave you cold. Many of our masterpieces owe their origins to the distinctly immoral ambitions of power politics, their survival to prosaic strokes of luck, their present pre-eminence to institutional marketing, scholarly attention and popular sentiment. Even so, survival can be chancy. Fine things are tossed out and crummy things kept all the time.

In the case of art from the deep past we can usually only guess at how the selection process worked. With contemporary art we can see it in operation. We can see history being written — recorded, edited, enhanced,

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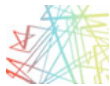
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Sherrie Levine/Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Installation view of a Sherrie Levine exhibition at 3 Mercer Street Gallery, New York, 1977. [More Photos](#) »

invented — right before our eyes. It can be a disturbing sight.

I was reminded of this after visiting two big history-writing and history-inventing exhibitions in New York this spring, “The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984” at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) (through Aug. 2) and “The Generational: Younger Than Jesus” at the New Museum (through July 5).

Both are eagerly anticipated surveys, one of influential art from the near past, the other of art very emphatically of the here and now, and with an eye to the future. And neither show is modest in its aims. Both speak of art they are presenting in epochal terms, as defining not styles or trends but generations. This is a bold take on history, but a tricky one, gratifyingly dramatic, inevitably distorting.

Thinking in terms of generations is by no means peculiar to the field of art, but it is more common there than in

literature or music. Writing and composing have always been inherently solitary activities; the results can be transmitted over time and space through copies and without the presence of the creator. By contrast, the making of art in its most traditional forms — painting and sculpture — was historically a social activity. Almost everything about it was concrete. Training was closely supervised; execution was a multistep, labor-intensive process most efficiently carried out by groups.

The master-apprentice bond, the passing of expertise and values from one era to the next, is part of an ancient story. The figure of the lonely artist in his garret is a relatively recent one. Even in the modern era the old social model has persisted in the concept of an avant-garde. True, the generational exchange there is contentious, with torches dropped as quickly as they were passed. But an old collective model remains intact.

There’s a little bit of all of this in the story told by the Met show, which begins in the early 1970s at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. There several students of the Conceptualist artist John Baldessari were lifting photographic images from popular sources — advertising, television, films, pornography — and repositioning them in conventional art formats. In the process the original images took on unsuspected, often loaded meanings, and the new work threw various aesthetic givens, like originality and expressivity, into confusion.

As it turned out, artists in other cities were on a similar track and eventually everyone converged in New York. There in 1977 five of the artists — Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith — appeared in a group exhibition at Artists Space in Lower Manhattan. The show was organized by the critic Douglas Crimp; it was called “Pictures,” and because it looked different from other shows around, it was noticed.

When Mr. Crimp published a revised version of his theory-intensive exhibition essay in October, the hot academic journal of the day, the “Pictures” phenomenon was born. The show assumed mythic status; for a certain insider audience it came to define the most significant new art of the day, and the beginning of the postmodernist wave. The art market confirmed this appraisal.

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