

For some artists of the “Pictures Generation” of the mid-seventies and early eighties, such as Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, and Sherrie Levine, among others, appropriation was the formula of “post-modern” art and their photo-based practices borrowed, quoted, copied, rephotographed, cropped; “practicing without a license”,¹ underneath each picture there was always another picture. They used photography to examine the strategies and codes of representation; they were not only exposing and dissembling mass-media fictions, but enacting more complicated scenarios of desire, identification, and loss. Appropriation explores how “representation stands for the interests of power. Consciously or unconsciously, all institutionalized forms of representation certify corresponding institutions of power”.² Sherrie Levine—whose works (photography, painting, sculpture), often appropriated from artworks within the modernist canon, challenge notions of originality, authenticity, and gender—positioned her art after Duchamp and Barthes, paraphrasing in 1981 his closing sentence “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author”:

*The world is filled to suffocating. Man has placed his token on every stone. Every word, every image, is leased and mortgaged. We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash. A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. Similar to those eternal copyists Bouvard and Pécuchet, we indicate the profound ridiculousness that is precisely the truth of painting. We can only imitate a gesture that is always interior, never original. Succeeding the painter, the plagiarist no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense encyclopaedia from which he draws. The viewer is the tablet on which all the quotations that make up a painting are inscribed without any of them being lost. A painting's meaning lies not in its origin, but in its destination. The birth of the viewer must be at the cost of the painter.*³

In 1981, Levine photographed reproductions of Depression-era photographs by Walker Evans. The series, entitled *After Walker Evans*, became a landmark of postmodernism, both praised and attacked as a feminist hijacking of patriarchal authority, a critique of the commodification of art, and an elegy on the death of modernism. Far from a high-concept cheap shot, Levine's works from this series tell the story of our perpetually dashed hopes to create meaning, the inability to recapture the past, and our own lost illusions.

1. “Rephotographing is a technique for stealing (pirating) already existing images, stimulating rather than copying them, ‘managing’ rather than quoting them—reproducing their effects and look as naturally as they had been produced when they first appeared. A resemblance more than a reproduction, a rephotograph is essentially an appropriation of what's already real about an existing image and an attempt to add on or additionalize this reality onto something more real, a virtuoso real—a reality that has the chances of looking real, but a reality that doesn't have any chances of being real”, www.richardprince.com/writings/practicing-without-a-license-1977/.

2. Brian Wallis, “What's Wrong with This Picture? An Introduction”, in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art, in association with David R. Godine, 1984)

3. Sherrie Levine, “Five Comments” (1980–1985), in *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 92–93.