

# COLLAGE AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION

## Sherrie Levine's new work

Valentin Tatransky

When I first saw Sherrie Levine's art, her intentions remained obscure and impenetrable. Her images and objects were easily recognisable, but it was practically impossible to judge the work aesthetically, to say whether it was good or bad, or whether she had achieved what she wanted.

Levine's new work is clearer. She has turned towards collage, which has its own formal tradition. She has created several new series of works featuring the silhouette heads of Kennedy and Lincoln, photographs of fashion models, and drawings of children taken from a how-to-draw book.

Pop art recycled cultural icons into art. Photo-realism turned photographs of the American urban landscape into painting. However, if one had been deeply moved by cultural icons and events, and one had a desire to express one's attitude towards these images by trying to convey to others their aesthetic power and affective impact, while at the same time wanting to preserve the images intact, one would be faced with some severe choices. This desire to express an attitude to an image, combined with the desire to leave the image alone, is the artistic problem faced by Levine.

The second time I saw her work was in an important exhibition called *Pictures*, which was organised by Douglas Crimp and held during October, 1977, in Artists Space. The exhibition featured new art that was representational, but it was representational without having anything to do with "realism". It was art as image-making, the kind of art whose formal structure I had wanted to see in the early 1970's. Most of the images were inspired, as far as form went, by cinema photography. Levine had a series of hand painted silhouettes of presidents, women and dogs, collectively entitled *Sons and Lovers*.

She has now made a new series of silhouettes of the same presidents (Washington, Lincoln and Kennedy) in which photographs of fashion models are used to create the forms. The emotional relationships that were kept hidden in *Sons and Lovers* are now finally expressed. But the effect of these new collages is subdued.

The central problem of collage is its formal simplicity. The juxtaposition of images can be emotionally very accurate, as it is in certain works by Rauschenberg. But the very power of such juxtapositions declares their creative impotence, because the images simply lie parallel to each other. Thus devoid of the body's intervention, they fail to create a new ideal. No one has described this problem so well as Eisentstein, who, in an essay in *Film Form*, discusses the difference between his own use of montage and Griffith's use of it and criticizes Griffith for simply making "a drama of comparisons, rather than a unified, powerful, generalized image."

Powerful as they are, Levine's more traditional collages (which include elements cut out of context and pasted together) share this weakness in a way her newest and more sophisticated collage-based work does not. This new work is a series of reproductions of drawings taken from a how-to-draw children book. The images are reproduced mechanically in the center of a page which has the artist's name and the date of the piece typeset near its bottom edge. Unlike the pop artist or the photo-realist who amplifies the found images through reproduction, Levine presents them at their face value, in their original scale, for their quality.

The subject matter of Levine's art is the American family, and the manner in which that subject subsumes other issues. To say that is not to pick just any subject, because that is the subject. A more sophisticated way of saying that art is about the family, that art is about childhood, that art is about adolescence, that art is about sexuality, is to say that art is about memory.

Collage is the means by which Levine retrieves images from the artistic indifference of their culture. Unlike the pop artist she is not embarrassed by the emotional load of her images. The use of collage enables an artist to avoid the process of depiction. Clement Greenberg discussed the development of collage in cubism in terms of an attempt to differentiate between literal flatness and depicted flatness. And as much as he wrote about the plastic qualities of cubist art, he also wrote that cubism is the vehicle of aesthetic emotion. Now Levine believes that in order to present the drawings of children as art, she herself must not draw. She's American and she knows how to be modern, and there's just nothing like being modern. But our memory inhabits a body, and there is nothing that can convey the impression of memory within the work of art as powerfully as the touch of one's own hand. One could say that there is an apparently contradictory combination of desires in Levine's work; the desire to express significant emotion, and the reluctance, combined with a modernist awareness, to create with the hand.

Most of Levine's work and most of the work in *Pictures*, is "anti-formalist". But we know that that is a clumsy expression, because good art always has well developed formal qualities. "Formal art" in the debased popular sense simply connotes the rectangle. And so "anti-formalist" art would put the image first, using the rectangle, be it canvas, film, paper, or a wall, as a net in which to suspend that image. That is to say the image would develop the formal qualities of the work.

Levine's found drawings of children succeed as works of art because of the way she sees them. Attitude is everything — that is the difference between her and a pop artist. The whole idea of a how-to-draw book is the antithesis of art. She knows that. And she uses her knowledge to make one of the most important distinctions that can be made in art — the distinction between representation and illustration. Representation is the carrier of emotion, the carrier of the body's genius, whereas illustration simply explains. Levine's work does not explain. Instead it subverts an image originally intended illustratively, and makes it a representation, fills it with the emotional resonance of memory.

Very few Americans appreciate the aesthetic value of their culture. Levine does.