C O N V E R S A T I O N :

SEEKING SOME PERSONAL INSIGHT into the era of the "Pictures generation," Art in America *asked artist Laurie Simmons and writer/curator Marvin Heiferman to talk on record about the times. Over a period of a few weeks in February 2009, they conversed about some key issues, both old and new.*

"I had my fingers in a lot of photographic pies and careers during the period," Heiferman tells us, "because as a gallerist and later as an independent curator, I worked and was friends with a number of people in the Pictures group." He was employed both at Castelli Graphics and LIGHT Gallery, important venues for photography in the 1970s. Today, Heiferman is the curatorial force behind "click! photography changes everything," at the Smithsonian Institution's Photography Initiative website (www.click.si.edu). He has organized exhibitions in New York at the Museum of Modern Art, New Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art and International Center of Photography.

After graduating from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, Laurie Simmons moved to New York in 1973 and had her first exhibition at Artists Space in 1979. She began showing at Metro Pictures in 1980, eventually having numerous solo exhibitions, and is currently represented by Sperone Westwater Gallery. Her photographs are included in "The Pictures Generation: 1974-1984" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and she is presently at work on her second movie musical, Counting by Eights*, in collaboration with her daughter, Lena Dunham. Simmons will have a show in May at the Tomio Koyama Gallery in Tokyo.*

BEGINNINGS

LAURIE SIMMONS The "Pictures" exhibition at Artists Space was organized by Douglas Crimp in 1977, and I remember it pretty well. I saw some work I liked and some work that confused me. What's funny is that most of my favorite artists from that period—Barbara Kruger, Sarah Charlesworth, James Welling, Cindy Sherman, James Casebere, Louise Lawler, Richard Prince and Allan McCollum—were not in the show, yet here we find ourselves 33 years later: "The Pictures generation."

MARVIN HEIFERMAN It's interesting to be sitting here talking about how a chunk of our lives is being turned into a brand-named history. We've known each other a long time, since the late '70s, when I was running the photography program at Castelli Graphics.

LS Well then, you know our conversation will be photocentric. I'm pretty sure I introduced myself to you at Castelli, because I liked what you were doing. I followed all of your shows: "Some Color Photographs" in 1977, "Pictures: Photographs" in '79. "Likely Stories" [1980] was a show about narrative photography that included Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman, Brian Weil, Jim Welling and Sandy Skoglund. I had a very strong awareness of it because I wanted to *be* in it. And I wasn't.

MH Sorry about that. The gallery, for me, became a place to see and juxtapose different kinds of images, and help shape a dialogue around them.

LS Well, yes, you made Castelli—along with Artists Space, P.S.1, White Columns and Franklin Furnace—into a place where you could find other kinds of things going on, this heretofore untitled collision of art and photography that didn't quite have a name yet.

MH All of a sudden, there seemed to be a small but growing number of people around who were looking at and responding to images, from both outside and inside the art world, with a mix of curiosity and enthusiasm, fascinated by the active roles photographs play in every aspect of culture and our everyday lives.

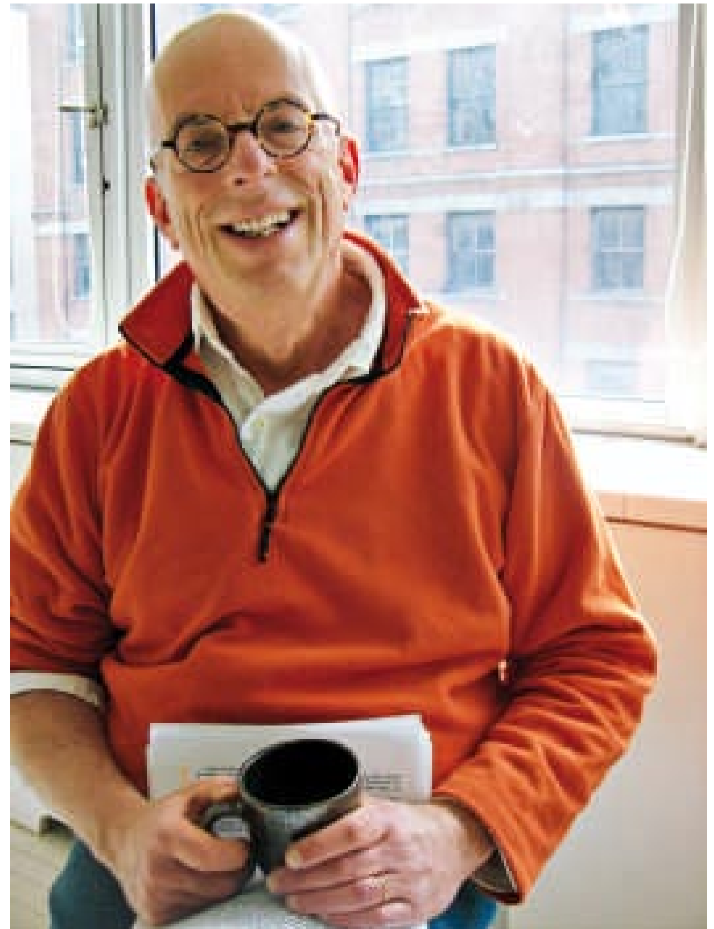
LS I know I was looking for like-minded souls. It was a lot like smoking pot in high school and figuring out which other people did, too. Artists around my age started seeing that there were people thinking and working in similar ways. You have to understand that whatever so-called scene was happening then was much, much smaller and more manageable than anything happening today. A few big parties, a few big openings, a few galleries—and you could almost figure it out. I observe it to be much tougher today. Many micro and

LAURIE SIMMONS & MARVIN HEIFERMAN

geographically diverse scenes. But at least there's the Internet: art blogs, MySpace, Facebook, etc.

MH And what do you think was brewing at the time?

LS It's been discussed so many times—the idea of this being the first generation of artists to come of age having been nourished on media and TV. *And* we arrived in New York during a very fertile period of narrative, process, conceptual artmaking, artist writings and a measure of photorealism. It seemed uncool to paint. I didn't consider my favorite painters—David Salle, Tom Lawson, Jack Goldstein and my husband, Carroll Dunham—to be real painters. But what were they? It wasn't until later in the '80s that I understood painting was a big deal. In short, a very diverse group of people—coming from many more places than CalArts and Buffalo—seemed to be able to put photography to good use.



A CHANGING IMAGE WORLD

MH Every generation probably goes through something like this. But we grew up and were operating in a mediated environment where photographic imagery had become inescapable. Images from mass culture so insistently shaped our experience and the environment that it seemed inevitable and made sense to use photographic images to initiate what was a smart and, for some, controversial dialogue about photographic imagery.

LS Warhol had already gotten to a lot of those ideas and some people were starting to see his centrality. Warhol's soup can was getting to be kind of kitschy. Those were not the kinds of ideas my friends and I were thinking about (although interest seemed strong in Warhol's films). But maybe it was kind of a "kill your father" thing. We were all using Warhol, abusing him and taking off from there. But he wasn't in the conversation in a really big way. I'd be more likely to look at Johns, Rauschenberg, Rosenquist or Baldessari to fulfill those needs. What I was least interested in were the photographs being shown at the Museum of Modern Art. Although I liked to explore those places, I had a really strong sense that picking up a camera didn't mean I had to be part of that photographic mindset in any way, shape or form.

MH It wasn't so much Warhol's paintings that were inspirational at the time—he was cranking out those commissioned cookie-cutter celebrity portraits. But it's what he was doing with graphics, multiples, *Interview* magazine, his films, public appearances and television cameos that proved to be an inspiration for younger artists.

PICTURES: PHOTOGRAPHS
June 23 through July 27, 1979

Steve Collins
Bernard Faucon
Nancy Goldin
Brian Hagiwara
Len Jenshel
Arnold Kramer
Sherrie Levine
Richard Prince
Sandy Skoglund
Sharon Smith

Opening Saturday, June 23rd, from 4 to 6 p.m.
AT CASTELLI GRAPHICS

Left, announcement card for the exhibition "Pictures: Photographs," 1979, curated by Marvin Heiferman; at Castelli Graphics, New York.

Opposite and above, Laurie Simmons and Marvin Heiferman took photographs of each other during their February 2009 conversations.

Simmons: *Big Camera, Small Camera*, 1977, gelatin silver print, 8 by 10 inches.

COMMERCE AND ART

MH The most compelling photographic imagery, the pictures that were shaping needs, expectations and interest, seemed to be coming from elsewhere. Dick Stolley, the founding managing editor of *People* in 1974, got it right when he was asked how editors chose who'd be on the cover of the magazine. He laid out the values that were driving America's image-driven culture: "Young is better than old, pretty is better than ugly, rich is better than poor, movies are better than music, music is better than television, television is better than sports and anything is better than politics." It was around that time that artists in the Pictures group began making work. And it's probably no coincidence that a number of them, including Barbara Kruger, David Salle and Richard Prince, were working at magazines, or in commercial media.

LS I got a job in 1980 editing covers for *Mademoiselle* because my friend was the art director at the time. I loved it because I just knew which head shots were right, and I started to have confidence in my photo intuition in a way that I'd never tested before. Then I introduced my friend to Richard Prince and when they started going out, he got the job editing covers. Richard then went on to work at Time-Life. Carroll Dunham was an artist in the layout department there. Barbara Kruger worked as a designer, picture editor and art director. Sarah Charlesworth was a freelance photographer. I had so many different ridiculous jobs; I worked at a backgammon shop for a day, painted houses, put up wallpaper and photographed dollhouse toys for a catalogue to make a living. Many artists wanted jobs that wouldn't relate to or influence their art. I suppose in some ways we were all being influenced by our day jobs.

INSTITUTIONS REACT

MH Having worked at LIGHT Gallery, a bastion of contemporary art photography, the first couple of years after it opened, I was fascinated with work that started to suggest new ways to operate photographically. Not everyone was as enthusiastic as I was. "Pictures" work, when it surfaced later in the 1970s, created wisecracks, then confusion, then resentment in the art photography world, which had only recently established its own respectability earlier in the decade, as galleries opened and National Endowment for the Arts grants funded photographers and helped museums jump-start photography collections. Most of that activity and support seemed to endorse a modernist approach to the photographic medium. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a bunch of young artists, and the idea of postmodernism itself, started gaining traction. Work that thumbed its nose at art photography's hard-won status and standards—that questioned how photography shapes us, instead of celebrating how we shape it—was the center of attention.

LS The "postmodern" label baffled me when I first heard it. I assumed it related to the quotational neoclassical flourishes that had been appearing for some time in architecture. But

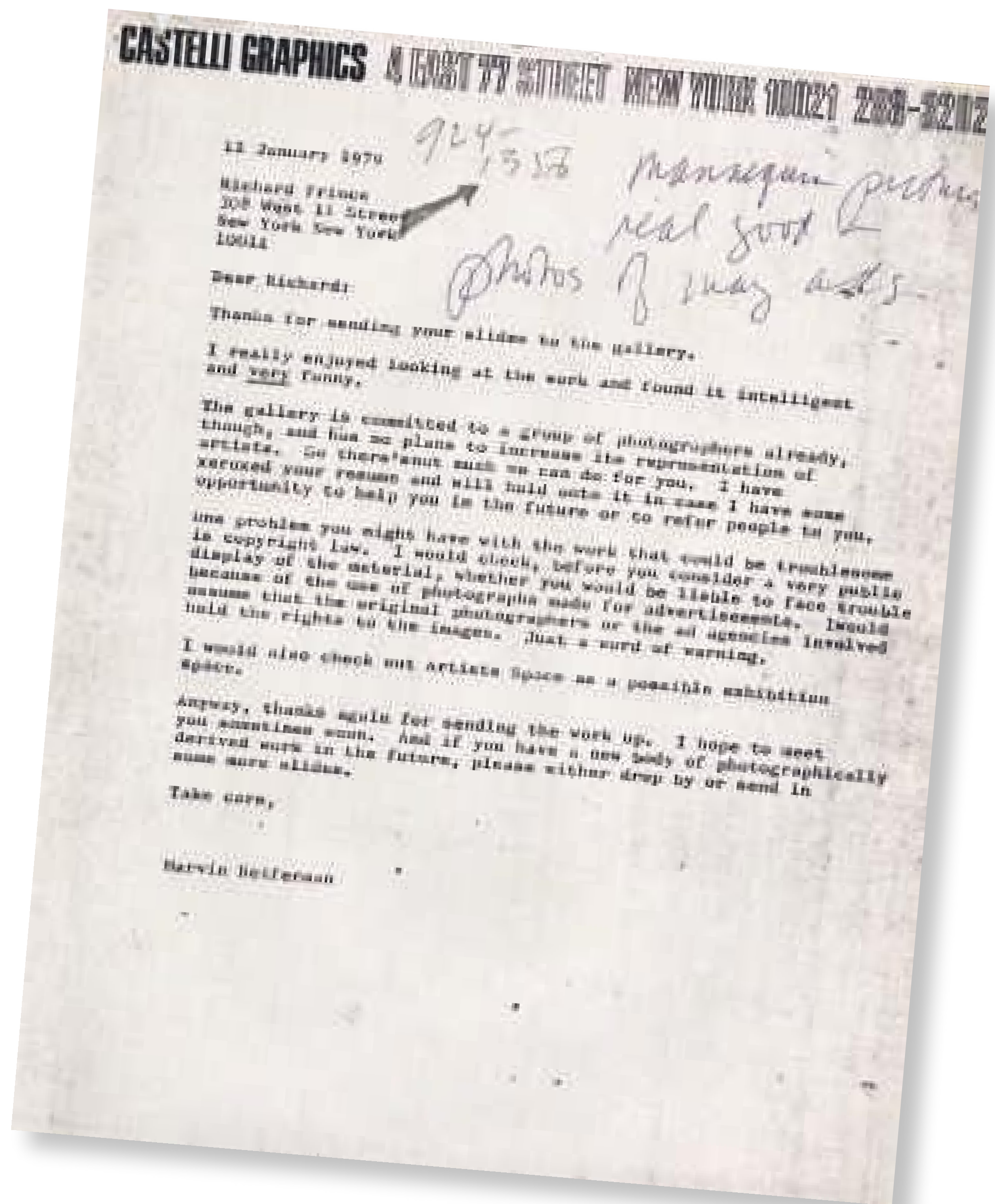
“I REMEMBER TAKING NEW WORK TO MOMA TO SHOW TO JOHN SZARKOWSKI AND HIS POSSE OF ACOLYTES, AND SENSING THEIR PALPABLE INDIFFERENCE AND CONDESCENSION.” — *MARVIN HEIFERMAN*

I figured out it was the beginning of naming an “ism” in art. It was clear to me that some artists around my age were responding to conceptual art and others to Pop, and some were picking up on an attitude or vibrational field and making things that just looked right. While I revered the conceptual artists, I fell simultaneously crazy in love with Richard Hamilton’s 1973 survey at the Guggenheim and Gordon Matta-Clark’s deconstructed houses. I kind of saw this so-called postmodernism through my own eyes as the evil spawn of Conceptual art and Pop.

MH When I started looking at this new work, I loved its nonchalance, intelligence and cheekiness, the fact that it was interested in both seeing and seeing *through* images. The photo world, though, wasn’t as amused, and didn’t have a clue what the small group of us was getting so jazzed up about. Toward the end of my stint at Castelli in the early 1980s—and then when I went off on my own to work with photographers and artists and produce exhibitions—I attended some of the early annual meetings of Oracle. This was a conference of photography curators from around the world who gathered together supposedly to talk about the future of the field, and was funded by Sam Yanes at the Polaroid Corporation. Polaroid supported a lot of progressive photographic projects in the 1970s and ’80s. It was, to say the least, disappointing to me that most of the attendees were more excited to fuss over 19th- and 20th-century work and issues of preservation and storage. But there were a handful of us—including Andy Grundberg, who was writing for the *New York Times*, and Jeff Hoone from Syracuse—who did our best to raise interest in the new work we were so excited by. No one seemed to care.

It amuses me to remember—now that the Metropolitan Museum is mounting a show about the Pictures generation—that Weston Naef, then curator of photography at the Met, said there could be no way to collect that kind of work—assuming there was any interest in it—because no one manufactured acid-free storage boxes big enough to store it. A few years later, I remember taking new work to MoMA to show to John Szarkowski and his posse of acolytes, and sensing their palpable indifference and condescension. I remember taking the elevator down from the curatorial offices, walking along E. 53rd Street, back in the real world, and saying to myself, “They’re never gonna get it.” They did, I guess, around 1995, when MoMA paid a reported $1 million for a complete set of Cindy Sherman’s “Film Stills.”

LS I had lunch at MoMA in the early 1980s with Linda Shearer when she’d just started working as a curator in the paintings and sculpture department. She wanted to know how they could get some of this “new,” kind of still category-



CASTELLI GRAPHICS 4 EAST 77 STREET NEW YORK 10021 [illegible]

[illegible] January 1979

Richard Prince
[illegible] West 11 Street
New York New York
10014

Dear Richard:

Thanks for sending your slides to the gallery.

I really enjoyed looking at the work and found it intelligent and very funny.

The gallery is committed to a group of photographers already, though, and has no plans to increase its representation of artists. So there's not much we can do for you. I have xeroxed your resume and will hold onto it in case I have some opportunity to help you in the future or to refer people to you.

One problem you might have with the work that could be troublesome is copyright law. I would check, before you consider a very public display of the material, whether you would be liable to face trouble because of the use of photographs made for advertisements. I would assume that the original photographers or the ad agencies involved hold the rights to the images. Just a word of warning.

I would also check out Artists Space as a possible exhibition space.

Anyway, thanks again for sending the work up. I hope to meet you sometime soon. And if you have a new body of photographically derived work in the future, please either drop by or send in some more slides.

Take care,

Marvin Heiferman

Letter from Heiferman to Richard Prince, 1979.

“I WAS AWARE THAT PEOPLE THOUGHT A CERTAIN KIND OF PHOTO WORK WAS EITHER STEALING, BORROWING, COPYING OR DUMB.” *—LAURIE SIMMONS*

less work into the collection. But back then, MoMA was all about departments. I said, “Linda, it’s not going to happen, at least probably not in my lifetime,” which was silly for someone as young as I was then to say. I must have felt that my kind was very shut out by institutions. I do remember going to MoMA and the Met and looking in the photography galleries and feeling like everything was from another time, even the more recent stuff. And listen, at that point, photography was only a little over 150 years old. It was still a wild frontier. The moment I picked up a camera I felt that I had a responsibility to know what had happened in the past, so I immersed myself in the history, saw and read everything I could, and you know what? It didn’t take that long.

MH I’ve always thought the conservatism of the art photography community was based on the fact that they were happiest when photography was reassuring, when it shaped and contained the world in a tasteful, comforting way. Then along comes a group of artists who seem to revel in photography but also seem to be behaving badly; they’re less interested in making “original” and well-made photographs than in raising questions about photography’s power and influence.

LS Well, it was like, Let’s get to the image as quickly as possible, let’s get to the message even faster, and let’s find the scale to knock you over the head with the image and the message.

MH I thought it was great that artists using photography were giving up on all that preciousness of art photography to find some new, weird beauty.

NEW GENERATION, NEW PERSPECTIVES

LS I assume my experience when I arrived in New York in 1973 was not that different from anybody else’s. I came from a traditional art school and wanted to be an artist in New York City. I’d learned the basic skills, but when I got to New York and encountered Conceptual art, performance, film and “the dematerialization of the art object” [part of the title of Lucy Lippard’s 1972 book], I saw what seemed like all the secrets that were kept from me at art school. I encountered a perfect storm of events, some new cheap materials and techniques, and the mindset of a generation before me, which helped me see that photography didn’t have to be precious and could be disposable.

MH Something else that was important was the way John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha opened up the thinking about images, particularly because they were working in Los Angeles, one of my favorite places, where imagery literally and figuratively shapes the business, architecture, culture and self-image of the city and the people who live there.

LS It was a really down time in New York. “Dirty, dangerous and destitute” is how I recently read it described. Whole neighborhoods were burnt out. There was a lot of cheap, derelict real estate. The economy had tanked. Artists didn’t expect to make money. Some artists did make money, but I was certainly very wary and suspicious of them. I’d been programmed to think that way in the late ’60s. If you could even dream of showing, you didn’t want to have your first show in a commercial gallery. That would have separated you from your peers, and somehow the independent alternative and artist-organized spaces were the places where you wanted to hang your work. I don’t mean to romanticize the state of the art world then. It’s just the way things were, and we made the best of it.

MH I tried my best at Castelli to push the photographic dialogue along in themed summer shows, which, because no one was in town, weren’t supposed to attract attention, but did. And there were places like White Columns, Franklin Furnace and P.S.1 that were always open to new ideas. Carol Squires curated a great series of shows at P.S.1.

LS I had my first show in the hallway at Artists Space in January 1979, and then I was offered a show in a P.S.1 classroom the following April. I pretty much thought I had died and gone to heaven to get those two spaces within months of each other. And those places were where I’d go to find people and look at interesting stuff. I went to galleries and museums, too. But I went to alternative spaces, performances and art publications to do my real research.

DUMB ART, SMART THEORY

LS An artist came up to me at my P.S.1 show and said, “Do you mean for your work to be so dumb?” I said “Excuse me?” and they said “Like, it’s dumb. You stand a toy cowboy in the middle of a field and take a picture. Do you mean for it to be dumb?” I was surprised, to say the least, but I was also aware that people thought a certain kind of photo work was either stealing, borrowing, copying or dumb. I really understand now, in hindsight, that you might look at those pictures and have no way to access them.

MH Dumb was good, right? So many of the rules of respectful and supposedly sophisticated image-making were restrictive.

LS Yes, but to tell the truth, I was self-conscious about not having studied studio photography. I wondered what composing a picture meant. I’d studied drawing and painting but was insecure about the structure of photos. I figured having read a million picture magazines might equip me for shooting pictures. Mostly I felt like there was no one driving this car, but that was sort of scary and exciting.

MH I suppose that’s what thrilled some and threw other people off, the fact that the work didn’t live up to their expectations.

LS Well maybe that’s where the theory came in. Maybe it was easier for some people to prop themselves up with Derrida, Benjamin or Barthes, and to say, Hey, if you don’t believe me, I’ve got backup—a wingman. You knew that the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program and certain artists like Sarah Charlesworth, Barbara Kruger and Louise Lawler were involved in a lot of investigative reading. But

Simmons: *Brothers/Horizon*, 1979, Cibachrome, 5¼ by 7 inches.

then, you know, it's not like our generation was the first to embrace theory. The conceptual artists I'd been so drawn to had been really interested in philosophy (Wittgenstein, Husserl, Piaget), and artists have always been curious.

MH Critical writing raised fundamental and provocative issues about representation for an audience ready, willing and able to read through and deal with it.

LS A number of artists I admired had zero interest in theory though their work was being firmly attached to it. I always felt that the art led me to places where I had no intention of going. Art, eventually, made me read some theory; I didn't read Barthes and then make a picture. My search did ultimately lead me to psychoanalysis. I met a few people, including Silvia Kolbowski, who encouraged me to read Lacan and Freud and think about psychoanalytic theory. Then one day I just said, "This is really hypocritical"—the reading and the *not* doing. Then I was on the couch three days a week for years. You kind of followed your nose.

MH I was working at LIGHT Gallery when Susan Sontag's *On Photography* came out in 1973. I remember being surprised and disappointed that Sontag didn't seem interested in art photography at all. Soon people were talking about John Berger, then Roland Barthes, Rosalind Krauss and interesting work by people like Alan Sekula and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, all of whom kept raising the issues that ultimately shifted the dialogue around photography by drawing attention to the medium and its power and impact.

LS There was a lot of pressure to know. I remember one of the first panels I was on at the ICA in Philadelphia—probably related to the "Image Scavengers" show [1982] and I think moderated by Doug Crimp. I was rendered absolutely speechless because I thought the conversation was going to shift to the language of theory. I was just starting to be able to talk about my work in general, and I didn't understand where my job ended and the critic's job began. I was making things in response to what I was seeing. It was a visual conversation. Yes, I was led to certain texts and artists by what I was discovering, but I kind of secretly divided the world around me into those who knew their theory and those who didn't. Ultimately, my sense about the photo-artists' side of the discussion—in contrast to the painters I knew—was, I'll talk if I have to but I'd rather look.

MH In the Pictures group, people made work about consumer culture and how women were represented in photographic images. Class was touched upon. Issues of race were, for the most part, largely ignored by the mainstream art world. Do you think critical theory—for those who read it, and even for those who didn't—brought attention and validation to the work?

Simmons: *Tourism: Parthenon/ First View*, 1984, Cibachrome, 40 by 60 inches.

LS I tend to think that the art gives birth to the conversation.

MH That was before everybody went to graduate school.

LS It's amazing that some of us managed to make our work and did it so privately. I lived in a building with artists—Jane Kaplowitz, Jimmy DeSana, Diego Cortez among others—and that meant people were coming through all the time. But unlike in grad school, we didn't *have* to show each other our work. I knew about feminist politics and art; I'd been following that very closely but didn't want to make work about that. In my first years in New York I saw work around about terrorism and the Baader-Meinhof group. I wondered, Am I meant to be making work about terrorists? Where do I start? Finding a place to jump into the conversation was, I would say, the most difficult part.

NONCHALANT BUT RIGOROUS

MH The very act of appropriating and manipulating images injected what became a characteristic visual look and a twist to the work being done. Artists intent on critically re-examining media images could only work with whatever modest photographic tools and materials they could afford. And that turned out to be an advantage. Prints that weren't fussed over made it easier to call attention to images that were willfully overproduced. Color photography—largely dismissed by the art photography world until MoMA proclaimed William Eggleston's work worthy of coronation—was embraced by Pictures artists because of, not in spite of, its commercial connotations.

LS I still remember the Eggleston show in 1976. It was considered the watershed moment for color photography. My own father, the king of amateur photography, had switched to color film years before. Who were those people who thought that color photography had *just arrived* in 1976?

MH The same people who demanded that if photography was going to be art, it better be "artful," black-and-white, and escapist, removed from the dizzying world of gaudy pictures that constantly swirled around them. Early black-and-white Pictures work, like Cindy Sherman's film stills, was pretty funky. And I vividly remember the punchy color in your "Tourism" pictures, and the fuzzy backgrounds in them; I loved your willingness to embrace soft-focus fantasies of flawed, faraway places.

LS The "Tourism" backgrounds ranged from slides I'd checked out of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's slide library to sun-faded, generic tourist slides I'd bought at the Parthenon and other sites. So they started out fairly degraded. And I was blowing things up from 35mm black-and-white negatives and chromes. Photographer friends would say, "You can't blow this up, the grain's going to be

"IT WAS LIKE, LET'S GET TO THE IMAGE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE, LET'S GET TO THE MESSAGE EVEN FASTER, AND LET'S FIND THE SCALE TO KNOCK YOU OVER THE HEAD WITH THE IMAGE AND THE MESSAGE." *—LAURIE SIMMONS*

the size of a golf ball!" and I thought, "That sounds really great!" But in the beginning, when everyone was showing at Artists Space and P.S.1, there really was modesty in terms of scale, in terms of print size.

MH Drawing attention to the manipulated and transient quality of photographic imagery reinforced the fact that magazine and newspaper images, and movies and television shows, are fabricated to come and go. It's kind of amazing, in retrospect, to realize how the photographic interests of the time were pointing toward what we've just begun to experience in full force—a digital world in which we will fully and easily appropriate, manipulate, produce and distribute photographic imagery.

LS I thought the fugitive quality of the photograph was enticing and kind of sexy. The disappearing picture. I loved the conversation about not knowing how long it would last.

MH And remember how that made some collectors and most museums nervous?

LS Well, that's a whole other subject. I've seen some of the old prints, and some of them aren't surviving.

MH But, pretty quickly, artists did, on other fronts, start coming to terms with marketplace realities. That's when people began to edition work, which created price-point distinctions—in addition to conceptual ones—between art photographers and artists working with photographs.

LS There were certainly implications that the whole activity vis-à-vis the market was a fraudulent one—that the pictures were frauds and the makers of the pictures were frauds—particularly when raising the question of who actually made them. That was coming loud and clear. It is kind of funny to think that people could be so doubtful. And then when you do the look-back—just like with Dada, Surrealism and Arte Povera—there are a lot of pictures from the period that look not only beautiful but even precious.

PICTURES ARE ACTIVE OBJECTS

MH What you and other artists at the time seemed intent on doing was getting people to pay closer attention to images that were meant to be taken for granted. Contrary to what most people think, pictures do not sit there passively waiting to be awakened by our attention. Pictures make things happen. Photography is interactive on conscious and unconscious levels. Images are made for specific reasons, and we respond to them based on our own specific needs, desires, and sets of cultural and personal blinders. If art photography in the '70s made heroes out of master photographers whose sincere goal was to make form and meaning, you could argue that Pictures artists did us all a big favor by working to uncover the political, cultural and marketplace strategies that make photographs convincing.

LS And that was the challenge, if you had to boil it down. Everyone in the world who had ever read a newspaper or magazine, or seen a snapshot, thought they had a handle on photography. The accessibility of images, which was so raw and wild for this particular generation of artists, was also what made people around them doubt that it was art—if you can believe that ever happened.

MH Instead of presenting photographs as trustworthy documents, works by Pictures artists, regardless of the media they ultimately chose to use, say clearly and up-front that whenever we look at a photograph, we're looking at a simulation, a picture, fiction. That's what shook some people up as much as it excited others, understanding what Roland Barthes called the "reality effect," and what Richard Prince talked about a lot at the time as the convincing "look" of a picture.

PICTURE ENVY

LS I think that any collage created before the mid-20th century, any time a picture was cut or reused in any way, also influenced my generation. I know that one of the issues at the time was, How far can you go with a unified photographic surface? Everything photographic looks the

Simmons: *New Bathroom/ Woman Kneeling/First View*, 1979, Cibachrome, 3½ by 5 inches.

“REMEMBER HOW ANGRY PEOPLE GOT BECAUSE, INSTEAD OF MAKING ‘ORIGINAL’ WORK, IT LOOKED AS IF ALL OF YOU WERE SHOPLIFTING?” —*MARVIN HEIFERMAN*

same and is therefore limited. But I sort of felt that way about painting. Where could you go with those limited materials and that language, and find something new to say?

MH A number of Pictures artists played around with the concept of collage—you did, Barbara Kruger, Sarah Charlesworth and Richard Prince. There were also artists who were layering or projecting images on top of images, like Frank Majore. This idea of collaging or bringing disparate images together was important in Rauschenberg’s work.

LS And Johns’s. But, I think you just hit the nail on the head—it wasn’t about *not* looking at art. And it wasn’t about only looking at media. It was about, again, a kind of collision or perfect storm of TV, media, art, film, performance, fashion.

MH Thinking about advertising and fashion photography, Pictures artists had a keen awareness of, and maybe a little bit of envy over, the financial resources it took to imagine and craft those kinds of fabulous and over-the-top images. That’s what Diane Keaton and I were interested in when, in the early ’80s, we started collecting early color transparencies of Hollywood film stills and publicity pictures for the “Still Life” book and exhibition project we did [1983]. We were mesmerized by the levels of artifice, skill and salesmanship it takes to fuel the fantasies that fill up our dreams and imagination.

LS I have a picture in one of my notebooks of a 1982 ad with a Renault that looks as if it has literally driven into a Degas painting. I wanted to make pictures like that, with disparate aspects—things that could never happen in real life. To do that, I had to go find a specialist at an ad agency to do the cut-and-paste work for me. That seems pretty primitive now that we have Photoshop, but it felt radical then to see something fake seamlessly slipped into a realistic photographic environment. There’s an ad in the current *Vanity Fair* where Grace Kelly, Albert Einstein and Kristin Scott Thomas are dining together at the Dorchester. Back then those kinds of corny juxtapositions would only happen in paintings and illustrations. Now it’s absolutely commonplace.

YOURS, MINE, OURS

MH I remember talking to you, years ago, about how the look of your images (and the work of a lot of other artists, too) was being ripped off in the commercial world. It’s ironic that artists who made work based on what they saw in magazines soon found their own work being appropriated back by magazine art directors who had seen the work in galleries or reproduced in art journals.

LS I just needed the work, that’s why I was outraged. I needed the job. But, then, art directors were just doing their jobs and shopping for ideas to steal.

MH It’s as if the walls separating art and life kept coming down. Or maybe the point is it isn’t a wall at all, but something equally permeable from both sides.

LS Yes, and there were little flare-ups of plagiarism charges here and there, and that still happens. Sometimes it sticks and sometimes it doesn’t. But the borrowing thing was really thematic, and artists were borrowing from each other and everyone, and inevitably stepping on each other’s toes.

MH You mean like trying to figure out who did re-photography first?

LS Exactly, that sort of thing, and like rear-screen projection—who used that first? And could we all do it?

MH Seems to me, again, that issues around appropriation

Left, Renault car advertisement, 1982.

Opposite, publicity shot of musical actress Ann Blyth moving into her home, 1953; from “Still Life” (1983), Heiferman and Diane Keaton’s book and traveling exhibition of collected photographs.

were prescient of what was to come. Think about the spread of image- and file-sharing today and its impact on the music and movie businesses. Remember how angry people got because, instead of making "original" work, it looked as if all of you were shoplifting?

PHOTO POVERA

MH I remember how surprised and awed I was by the simplicity of the material Sherrie Levine used to make her early silhouettes, and the power they packed. There were real financial constraints on what any of us could do at the time. Most people forget that photographic production, at its slickest and fanciest, is very pricey.

LS That's why the trashy labs became a very important resource; they were fast and cheap. The interesting thing was that I grew to love the way the results looked and quickly got used to that. I remember somebody gave me a huge Dunkin' Donuts poster tossed out when they changed the store window. The thing was massive, 8 feet by 8 feet. I pinned it up in my kitchen. The background was pale blue with an enormous glazed cinnamon bun. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and that probably influenced me to move up in scale as much as anything.

MH Remember Cibachromes, with their mirror-finish surface and intense, metallic color? They were gorgeous in their own kind of way. It was great to see artists making the most of whatever new photographic materials or production options became available. Early on, Pictures work had a poignant quality to it, but that was probably as much a consequence of the limited size of photographic papers that were readily available at the time as it was a reflection of the visual sources you were responding to. Once the market started to heat up, the biggest shift was in the scale of the work being produced.

SIZE MATTERS

LS One of my ideas was that the images I made should be the same size as the pages where I'd first found them—in storybooks and magazines. I just kept thinking of being read to as a child or looking at magazines in my father's dental office, paging through *Life* and *Look.* It must have been like 1978 or '79 when I met Jim Rosenquist and showed him my tiny, 4-by-5-inch Cibachrome pictures of dollhouse kitchen and bathroom interiors. He looked at them and said, "These things should be giant! They should be like billboards!"

MH Did that make you feel good or bad?

LS Well I just wasn't there yet. And of course, the first time I ever blew something up, it was like a total revelation.

MH Conventional photographic scale was always a little problematic. One day, when I was working at LIGHT Gallery

in the early ’70s, I was sitting at the front desk, when the elevator door pushed open. I don’t remember what show was up at the time, but whoever was in the elevator leaned out, saw a wall lined with tiny, identically framed and matted black-and-white photographs, and said, “Oh, photographs.” Then the door closed, and the person ascended to some other floor, where the rectangular objects on the wall were bigger. I’ll never forget that, in terms of what it takes to get people to pay attention to pictures.

LS There was definitely a feeling, by the early ’80s, that when it came to exhibiting modest work, it might get lost in the shuffle. Or, even worse, get quarantined in photo galleries. Who wanted to be there? I wanted people to look at my photographs the way I looked at paintings. My impulse was to think, “What can I do so you can’t ignore me?” which is probably the primal desire of every artist. Scale was an obvious place to go—everything was pointing in that direction.

TALKING BACK TO MEDIA CULTURE

MH A lot of the work at the time seemed to want to talk back to the media.

LS At a certain point, artists understood what “they” were trying to do to us. It was actually fun and a little scary to unpack the strategies of manipulation. Seeing an ad that proclaimed, “More doctors smoke Camels”: in the 1950s, it wouldn’t concern most people that someone had put on a doctor’s outfit and picked up a cigarette. Being able to separate yourself from the group mind and say, “I know what you’re doing to me and how you’re doing it. You’ve been doing it to me my whole life, and now I’m going to do it to other people,” was a little empowering. That’s probably what I loved about Barbara Kruger’s work. I felt like she was there first with that.

MH It is revelatory when it finally hits you how profoundly images manipulate experience. John Waters tells a great story about a childhood epiphany he had when his parents took him to a television studio to see the “The Howdy Doody Show” in person. Witnessing firsthand the off-screen shenanigans that made fictional entertainment seem real, John understood, for the first time, that what thrilled him on TV was just a construct. A similar realization, which is empowering or infuriating, depending upon your perspective, occurs once we start to understand how and why pictures excite and influence us.

LS I’m still jealous that he got to go.

LIFE vs. HISTORY

MH So, here we are almost 35 years after this so-called Pictures generation was spawned. What does it feel like, looking back?

LS Sometimes it feels like we haven’t really gotten past it. The way the Pictures discourse was framed still has a huge lock on the ideas of a lot of very interesting younger artists, several generations of them. I couldn’t really have imagined that. It’s like that’s where we locate “seriousness.” I think

that’s also been given added weight and staying power by the ascent of digital technology, which advances an idea of photography and reproduction that plays quite well into the so-called theoretical concerns of the type of work we’re discussing. There has undeniably been a lot of mythologizing, but that’s always true of influential art movements, and hopefully a show like this will sort some of that out.

MH When exhibitions about a group of artists or about a specific time period get put together, you seldom get a vivid sense of the larger cultural and visual environment in which the work was produced. In the case of the Pictures generation, I wonder how and whether it’s useful to represent the kinds of visual materials the work in question responded to. Inevitably, what gets lost in the mounting of these kinds of big, thematic art exhibitions is the energy of the times, the real stuff that we loved and hated, and a sense of the breadth and magnetic pull of the visual universe we navigated through.

LS Steven Spielberg has the right idea with the Shoah project. Go and tape as much information as you can from everybody involved in a specific moment in history and stud-

View of the exhibition "The Family of Man: 1955-1984," curated by Heiferman; at P.S.1, Long Island City, 1984. Photo Mark Feldstein.

ies: how they saw things, what they read, what they liked. File it until somebody is ready to collate it. That's really the only way to ensure accuracy. A curator's interpretation is obviously dictated by their own investigation and where that merges with their history and studies. My experience is my experience. I had exactly one conversation with Jack Goldstein the entire time we were in Metro Pictures together, as opposed to hundreds with Cindy and Louise. I love the idea that all artists write their own skewed history based on themselves and where they stand.

That said: I always loved your shows, because you culled massive archives of images, pre-Internet, that seemed to speak to the source material of a generation. You often helped me find what I was looking for.

MH When I did a remake of "The Family of Man" at P.S.1 in 1984, it included some contemporary photographs that addressed "big" themes but, just as importantly, hundreds and hundreds of images and objects that sampled the less than noble core values of the heavily saturated visual environment we were living in, and couldn't help but define ourselves through.

LOOKING AT PICTURES

MH What we saw and were responding to over a third of a century ago represents just one stage in our culture's ongoing and evolving relationship with photographic images. We've gone from being the dutiful makers and passive admirers of images to appropriating and interrogating imagery. We've gone from looking at pictures printed on pages and hung on walls to distributing and interacting with them digitally. With our easy access to video cameras, Photoshop, cell-phone cameras and flatscreens, and images, personal websites and blogs on the Internet, the Pictures generation now seems like a pivotal moment in art, when our interactive relationship to imagery just started to become central to art-making.

LS It sounds so naive now, how much we were talking about cameras telling lies, because now everything lies.

MH Digital culture makes that easy and satisfying.

LS Yes, but in the end, it's still really great to look at pictures, as much and as many as you can. ○