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Memory Banks

by Alexander Dumbadze

Ashley Bickerton:
Tormented Self-Portrait
(Susie at Arles) No. 2,
 1988, mixed mediums,
 90 by 68½ by 20
 inches. Des Moines Art
 Center. Courtesy
 Lehmann Maupin, New
 York and Hong Kong.



A romantic myth pervades memories of 1970s New York. Movies like *Taxi Driver*, *The French Connection*, and *Dog Day Afternoon* have immortalized the city as gritty, hardscrabble, streetwise; glamour was somewhere else. Artists lived in lofts. Nonprofit spaces predominated. There was a vibrant energy associated with a geographic locale simply referred to as Downtown—a space that was ecumenical and radical, accommodating to both punk and poststructuralist theory. When compared to the professionalized art world of today, this image of New York is idyllic. It stirs wistfulness, dreams of better days. But nostalgia is just a representation infused with emotions. It thrives on conceptions of the past, not actualities. And while it is real, in the way that any feeling is, nostalgia nonetheless distorts the perception of time, filtering it through want and longing.

In the 1970s, New York's population decreased by more than 800,000. The city was economically strapped, burdened by its financial obligations to police officers, firefighters, teachers, and other civil servants. Infrastructure was falling apart: a sixty-foot section of the West Side Highway collapsed on December 15, 1973. Graffiti covered subway cars; automobiles were left abandoned on city streets; decrepit warehouses along the Hudson decayed and were often left to burn if



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they caught fire. Officials struggled to devise reliable means of generating revenue, whether through taxes or new bond offerings. That New York almost declared bankruptcy in 1975 came as little surprise. So many of the skilled manual labor and manufacturing jobs that had long supported the city's economy had disappeared, and in this bleak moment local leaders enacted policies to reinvent New York as a financial capital, seeing Wall Street and real estate as the way toward civic prosperity.

During this transition period between a city shaped by its working and middle classes to one defined by extraordinary wealth and insurmountable income gaps, it was possible for a wide range of artists to live in New York cheaply and, for some, eventually to thrive economically. When David Salle moved to Manhattan in 1975 his rent was \$125 a month. Writing exhibition reviews helped cover his expenses. Sherrie Levine waited tables at Magoo's, a Tribeca bar popular with artists. Jack Goldstein and his good friend James Welling worked as janitors at the Guggenheim Museum. It was possible to get by on little, which meant there was time for making art as well as hanging out. Few felt the pressure to make money through their practices because there was hardly a market. Everyone was in the same boat, and, for a while, the primary source of capital was symbolic.

The promises and perils of this now lost New York loomed over the recent exhibition "Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s" at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.¹ Works in the show from the first years of the 1980s mark a shift from an art scene isolated from the machinations of the market to one fully imbricated within it. There is a feeling evident in Martha Rosler's video *Martha Rosler Reads "Vogue"* (1982)—in which the artist critiques ads in an issue of the magazine and highlights the fashion industry's reliance on sweatshops—that one could still stake out a legitimate moral high ground in relation to an economic system that produced glittering images and real despair. It still seemed possible to talk about art *and* commodity, not just art *as* commodity.

The situation grew more complicated as the decade progressed. The exhibition's curator, Gianni Jetzer, notes in his catalogue essay that a voracious culture of collecting emerged in tandem with a bullish stock market in the 1980s. Artists became conscious of their place within this economy, acknowledging how their work had become a commodity while also finding ways to manipulate, subvert, and further explore that status.²

Jetzer avoided didactic judgments in his assessment of this convergence and created instead an expansive historical narrative, bringing to the center artists who have been cast aside by standard histories of the 1980s. Many critical accounts of the New York art world during that decade have emphasized the Pictures Generation. Besides Goldstein and Levine, Troy Brauntuch, Robert Longo, Richard Prince, and Cindy Sherman are most closely identified with the group. (Other artists active at the time also share sensibilities with this core group, as made clear by "The Pictures Generation: 1974–1984," a capacious 2009 exhibition

at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.) The discourse around “Pictures,” the famous exhibition curated by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in 1977, and all the subsequent writing about Pictures artists and their embrace of the techniques of mechanical reproduction to appropriate images, and their attendant critique of authorship, were part of the framework of “Brand New.”

Yet the exhibition also helpfully moved beyond critical judgments that have ossified into a kind of dogma, freezing artists in a particular moment in time and allowing canonical pieces to overshadow anything else they have done. It is hard today to think of Sherman, for instance, without reference to her “Untitled Film Stills” (1977–80), or of Levine without her early photographs of photographs. Jetzer included work by these artists, but their presence was muted, and the pieces were installed in a way that underscored aesthetic and intellectual connections. Sherman’s appearance in the guise of a pigtailed young girl in the photograph *Untitled #121* (1983) echoes the cartoonish erotic images in Julia Wachtel’s paintings. Levine’s *Chair Seat: 5* (1986), an antique wooden chair seat adorned with simple vertical stripes, highlights the artist’s impersonal engagement with the tropes of modernist abstraction that Peter Halley also employed in his paintings.

The idea of postmodernism arose almost concurrently with the art in “Brand New.” All the concept’s contradictions, clichés, and ambiguities permeated the exhibition, coming forward in the diverse work of artists like Haim Steinbach, Barbara Bloom, and Gretchen Bender, and that of collectives including Colab and General Idea—all of whom acknowledged their complicity within an oppressive representational order while aiming to expose its manipulative ways. Fredric Jameson’s brief 1982 essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” which began as a talk delivered at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, presciently outlines this situation. He insists that postmodernism is a fundamental historical shift, emphasizing two major trends: pastiche and schizophrenia. The former is akin to appropriation, and devalues originality. Styles, forms, even ideas can be lifted, used, and reordered. Parody rather than satire predominates. Nostalgia is the lens through which the past is viewed. This mode of operation is made possible because of the intensified experience of time Jameson labels schizophrenic—a metaphor, instead of a diagnosis, for a culture unable to modulate the interpretation of signifiers such that it feels as if one lives in a constantly renewing present.

At the root of this reorganization of cultural production and everyday life is the reach of late capitalism, an economic system in which information and data is prized over production; flexibility, precariousness, and a do-it-yourself ethos reign over stability and institutional commitments; and commodities—and by extension consumerism—govern all aspects of life. In Jameson’s analysis art is subsumed into this new world order. There is no outside, no escape, only the hope of a critical resistance from within. Jameson’s text, which describes a new way of being, is far from exuberant. It comes across as fatalistic, even, it could be said, somewhat sad.

It may be precisely because it is instilled with this sense of melancholy that much of the work in “Brand New” appeared remarkably contemporary. While the Pictures Generation is closely associated with film, video, and photography, Jetzer presented a more expansive selection of work that included the sly conceptualism of Louise Lawler and Dara Birnbaum and Bender’s remarkable videos, but also the sculptures of Joel Otterson and B. Wurtz; the installations of Ken Lum and Alan Belcher; the poignant critique of gender inequality offered in the Guerrilla Girls’ posters; and the paintings of Meyer Vaisman. What these works express is less a coherent critical position than a shared sense of dispossession. In this way, “Brand New” feels like less a historical survey than a field report of the current moment.

The Hirshhorn sits within the heart of darkness: to the northwest lies the White House; directly east, just down the National Mall, is the United States Capitol. It was hard not to view “Brand New,” like almost everything else today, through the haze of angst caused by Donald Trump. All the anxiety generated by a president motivated by racism and narcissism, coupled with a feckless Republican-led Congress, influences one’s judgment, and it has led me, somewhat involuntarily and stirred by thoughts of “Brand New,” to look back at the 1980s longingly.

I struggle to name this sentiment. Nostalgia might be the best word. There’s a rush of emotions that flow forth upon an encounter with a subtle visual cue, such as the bold type used in a 1985 print advertisement featuring Andy Warhol on view in a vitrine at the Hirshhorn. I had the same pair of Reebok tennis shoes Warhol wears. When I was a teenager in the 1980s, MTV was a furtive pleasure; I stayed up late to watch “120 Minutes.” It was on that alternative video show that I first heard the word “postmodern,” and it is a wonderful coincidence that two of my favorite music videos—Megadeth’s “Peace Sells” and New Order’s “Bizarre Love Triangle”—were directed by Longo and edited by Bender.

Music videos have a particular way of framing experience that can be deeply affecting. Longo and Bender used found footage, layered and color-saturated images, jump cuts, fade-outs, and split screens. They were not just enacting aesthetic strategies, but creating a mood—sophisticated, poetic, and cool. Within the short span of a pop song, there was a sense that something full of potential existed beyond humdrum youthful ennui, and I realized, among the works in “Brand New,” that I longed for that dream of potential; not its actualization, necessarily, just the feeling that something redemptive might happen, a sense of hope that right now seems very far away.

To walk the streets of Bushwick or certain parts of Manhattan makes the 1980s seem close at hand. Current fashion trends leap from the pages of *New York* or *Vogue* issues from that era. The seamless integration of former styles such that they become emblematic of the present signals the sense of exhaustion that defines our era. The constant state of crisis reinforced by the twenty-four-hour news cycle,

the general feeling of being overstretched, worked to one's limits, living life precariously occludes aspects of the past and makes one's glasses a deeper tint of rose when looking back. But it also allows, if one is receptive, a greater sensitivity toward a materialist history, prompting one to realize that the 1980s were marked by a sense of gloom, just like today is.

The parallels between the two eras are striking. Ronald Reagan became president riding a wave of support from resentful white voters. He could be so disengaged from policy that he was notorious for taking naps during briefings. Much of Reagan's attention was trained on an unrealistic, unreliable, and excessively expensive missile defense system commonly referred to as Star Wars. As Cold War tensions escalated, movies such as *The Road Warrior* or the made-for-television drama *The Day After* made plain the stark realities of a nuclear winter. Reagan, despite it all, was always optimistic, and his exuberance, while affecting for some, annoying for others, did not sway many Americans in their belief that the country was in decline.

Perhaps this malaise was an outcome of economic stratification, a problem to which the New York art world was hardly immune. Its gallery scene was marked by a divide between the haves and have-nots. SoHo and the East Village, separated by mere blocks, represented two distinct entities: the former more established and increasingly blue-chip, the latter scruffy and haphazard. This dichotomy collapsed when limousines began pulling up to openings at stalwart East Village galleries like Cash/Newhouse. The reach of money transformed the downtown art scene. For some, there was a notable uptick in their quality of life. A number of artists now lived off their art. Business was more stable for galleries, and the art world in general had recourse to more support. In return, expectations grew tremendously. Artists needed to make more works available. Galleries had to deliver better services. Collectors demanded more attention and greater privileges. Things were no longer simple and ad hoc, but increasingly professional.

This became evident when *New York* magazine featured Mary Boone on the cover of its April 19, 1982, issue. The accompanying article, "The New Queen of the Art Scene," celebrated Boone's business acumen as well as her noted style. Much was said about how she made Julian Schnabel's career, and how her strategic location in the 420 West Broadway building and her occasional partnering with Leo Castelli created a boom market for her artists. Eric Fischl joined her stable in 1984. He had been enjoying the pleasures increased wealth brought him, but even he realized that the excess did not come without consequences. In his memoir, *Bad Boy* (2013), he recounts a party he attended at David Salle's remodeled loft on White Street. They were there to celebrate Salle's opening at Boone. Excellent champagne was served; Sean Penn and Madonna were in attendance. With a degree of misgiving Fischl recalled: "Young artists, suddenly flush with cash, were shedding the gritty bohemianism of the seventies and embracing a modish upscale urbanity."³

In this environment, painters like Salle, Fischl, and Schnabel experienced tremendous success. Their work was not part of “Brand New,” but it did cast a shadow over the exhibition. This had less to do with the paintings’ content, which included provocative depictions of women in the case of Fischl and Salle and hyper-masculine gestural compositions in the case of Schnabel, than with its seeming opposition to the intended critical dimension of the work Jetzer highlighted.

Standard art historical narratives concerning the 1980s, the ones I learned as a student and have taught and reacted against in recent years, arose in response to the influx of money in the New York art world. These accounts are defined by the embrace of poststructuralist theory and its latent anti-humanism as well as a rediscovery of Frankfurt School Marxism. Much of this writing, which could be found in the pages of *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *October*, *Real Life*, *Semiotext(e)*, and *ZG*, took the social context as a given, and the presumed belief among many writers was that the very use of theory was itself an antiestablishment gesture. Just the presence of Baudrillard, Derrida, or Foucault in a text was a broadside against normative kinds of art writing. To use theory, to discuss images and other forms of representation in terms of signifiers and signified, was seductive—a form of politicized resistance within an economic system that seemed totalizing and inescapable.

The appeal was as much in the rhetoric as it was in the topic. At the core of these discussions was the relationship between absence and presence, the original and the copy, the idea of the self and its depiction. The material realities of the moment, the existential dread and unease that consumed individuals, were unwittingly papered over by a coded discourse.

In its most distilled form, the dominant story of the 1980s is this: critics associated with the theoretically and academically inclined publication *October* supported the art associated with Pictures because of its critique of authorship and its use of mechanically reproducible technologies like photography and film—media that inherently subvert the primacy of a singular work of art and the *raison d’être* of the art market. On the other hand, painters like Salle, Schnabel, Fischl, and others received widespread critical attention in more mainstream publications like the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and *Vogue* for works that employed non-photomechanical kinds of appropriation. The high prices their work garnered fueled the hype, but there were also those who emphasized these artists’ postmodern credentials, with Thomas Lawson, for example, making the case in his 1981 essay “Last Exit: Painting” that the best way to deconstruct painting’s negative associations is through painting itself.⁴

These arguments dissipated toward the end of the 1980s in large part because writers affiliated with *October* moved into academia and turned their attention to the longer history of modernism. The stock market crash of 1987 and the changing tastes of collectors quashed painting’s boom. Still, accounts such as these have remained entrenched because they are fairly accurate. But their narrow purview

means a diverse range of practices have been overlooked, waiting for the right moment to be understood, to be part of another history of the 1980s.

“Brand New” was a positive step in this reassessment, although it notably lacked many artists of color. While the show engaged with the AIDS crisis, it was somewhat difficult to see how much the art on view paved the way for, or relates to, the turn toward identity politics in the early 1990s. The exhibition, nonetheless, offered a powerful reminder about the dangers of the commodification of art and artists and the fascination with all things market. Rarely does this mean that commodities are bad and whatever opposes them are good. Instead, one sensed the accumulation of angst and disquiet that comes from thinking about money, or the lack of it, or the ways it factors into every part of life. It is felt in Dara Birnbaum’s video *Rémy/Grand Central: Trains and Boats and Planes* (1980), a nearly four-minute piece featuring appropriated advertisements, toward the end of which a young woman dressed in jeans and a red blouse stands vacantly on a suburban train platform, bottle of cognac held at her waist, as bemused commuters look at her with disdain. It is apparent in Haim Steinbach’s *supremely black* (1985), with its three containers of laundry detergent juxtaposed with two black tea kettles, all resting forlornly atop an exquisitely crafted shelf.

Steinbach’s work is more melancholic than Jeff Koons’s *New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Red, Brown, New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers, Yellow, Brown Doubledecker* (1981–87), which unsettlingly celebrates the machines, a sentiment at odds with the loneliness of the basketball held in a purgatorylike suspension in *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Spalding Dr. J 241 Series)*, 1985. Koons, not surprisingly, had a strong presence in “Brand New.” Hung throughout the show were several of his “Art Magazine Ad” images, which actually did appear in art magazines. One from *Art in America* (1988–89) shows Koons bestride a Shetland pony flanked by two objectified, bikini-clad women, one staring at Koons, who smiles creepily, and the other looking wanly in the direction of the viewer.

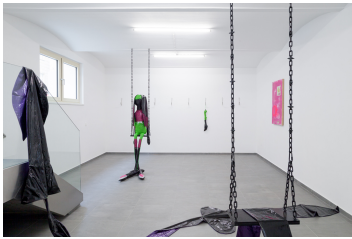
One of the unattended consequences of appropriative art is the way it highlights absence and a hard-to-specify alienation. This reflects the nature of the labor involved—selecting rather than making—as some hint of former presence is hidden behind the cool distance and discomforting autonomy of the appropriated thing. This is viscerally apparent in Richard Prince’s *Untitled (Hand with cigarette and watch)*, 1980, in which each wrinkle and pore of the man’s hand looks weathered and aged, as the fore- and middle fingers nervously hold a just-lit cigarette. It shows up in Ashley Bickerton’s *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles) No. 2* (1988), a massive steel-framed backpacklike object whose surface is covered with corporate logos: advertisements Bickerton selected to form a consumerist portrait. Alienation arises not from producing something, but from orienting one’s self toward the unrealizable redemption promised by consumer

goods. The presentation of absence can be more than a theoretical acknowledgment that a signifier has gone missing. It can be deeply personal, bodily in the most tangible ways. Tishan Hsu's *Biocube* (1988), which gives the impression of flayed skin stretched over the surface of a self-contained storage unit, makes an emotional void palpable; for *Untitled Furniture Sculpture* (1980–), Ken Lum arranged four sofas and accompanying end tables and lamps into a space closed off to viewers.

Toward the end of the exhibition, the issue of absence takes on a tragic and deathly tenor. Works like Act Up (Gran Fury)'s *silence=death* and Donald Moffett's *He Kills Me* (both 1987) employ the bold graphics of brands to raise awareness of the devastating AIDS crisis and the Reagan administration's purposeful indifference to the disease. Close to the show's exit is Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*), 1991: two wall clocks placed next to one another, and set initially at the exact same time. It was conceived as a double portrait of Gonzalez-Torres and his partner, Ross Laycock, both of whom eventually died of AIDS.

When I looked at the piece, the clocks were slightly out of sync, one running a few seconds behind. Such is life, such are relationships: we can be so close yet occasionally off. I know of few works that better capture the power of love. It brought me nearly to tears in part because I knew the piece was also a memorial, that in its inception the clocks ticked toward death and in their current state represent lives once lived. Two simple store-bought objects transformed by the power of art. It sounds mystical, I know, but how else to describe the way a work made in the midst of despair can also offer so much hope.

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