

and lots of little boxes.

And so on. Which is not to say that there was nothing to take from the exhibition. Those who came to "The Museum as Muse" with knives drawn were bound to be disappointed, not because there was much to dislike or even like in the show, but rather because its pluralistic approach left little to grasp materially. And in this, it reminded me of a provocative exhibition James Meyer curated a few years back, titled "Whatever Happened to the Institutional Critique?" Of course, the question was rhetorical: in posing it, Meyer implied that some forum for critical exchange was still open, that the presence, or vestige, of institutional critique still remained at the edge of discourse. If a troubled project, the critique of institutions was nevertheless an unfinished one. And this is the lesson to be drawn, however negatively, from "The Museum as Muse." That in its universe of possibilities, a universe without history, the museum is open for business as usual. Enjoy the show.



For about five years now, Amy Adler has been exhibiting her curious photo/drawing hybrids, culminating in a small retrospective-like show in the "Focus Series" at LA's Museum of Contemporary Art this past winter. Adler's monumentally-scaled new work, *Nervous Character* (1998), exhibited with two other pieces at Margo Leavin Gallery, points to a new direction for Adler. It also provides an occasion to think through some recent issues in both drawing and photography, and the unexpected ways in which certain strategies from 1960s durational and process-based art return in image-based figurative work like Adler's.¹

Nervous Character consists of 24 framed photographs installed along the wall of the main gallery: two images alternate, each repeating 12 times. Each pair features a young woman looking down, then up. In Adler's characteristic manner, each image is a unique color photograph of a tightly-rendered pastel drawing, which has subsequently been destroyed. In previous projects, this strange oscillation between drawing and photography produced unease, a tension linked to the struggle involved in re-using and re-authoring pre-existing images. This was especially true in series like *What Happened to Amy?* (1996) and *Once in Love with Amy?* (1997) based on photographs of the artist at a younger age, taken by others under murky circumstances. The often highly charged content and narrative underpinnings of these earlier images tended to overpower the procedural and structural issues that forcefully animate the new work.

From its inception, Adler's project has used the melding of drawing and photography to investigate the tension between original and copy, between single image and

Liz Kotz

Amy Adler at Margo Leavin Gallery, LA
February 14–March 20, 1999

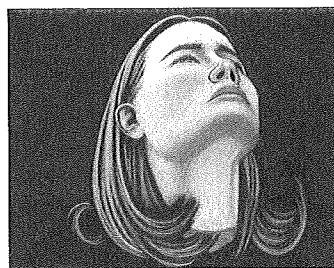
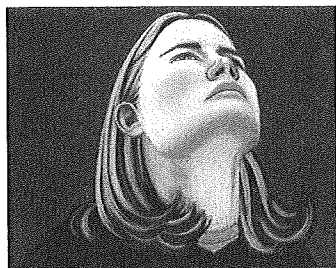
¹ This is a complex historical relationship brought into relief by the current LAMoCA exhibition, "Afterimage: Drawing Through Process" (April 11–August 22, 1999), which focuses on materials from the late 1960s and early 1970s. See also Cornelia Butler, *Amy Adler*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999).

multiple. Yet if the earlier work rested on conflicts embedded within each image, here the tension occurs across and between the images. The 24-frame sequence of *Nervous Character* resembles a tiny fragment of film, but structured inversely: motion is broken down to its most basic form, a simple a/b/a/b structure. Up, down: a simple nodding gesture. Because the final form is photographic, it takes a moment for the viewer to realize that each image is different, individually drawn with minute variations from one to the next. Sensuously rendered on dark textured paper, each drawing has a richness and emotional force that allows it to “hold” its moment, to function as “specific” image, setting up an unresolved tension between it and the overall series.

The overall tone is somber, yet the facial expressions shift imperceptibly from image to image, since no two are exactly alike: nuances of sadness, desperation, perhaps regret. While beautifully crafted and emotionally resonant, the images are also blank, perplexing: no information is revealed, no story is told. In *Nervous Character*, the single images are individually compelling, but it is the sustained repetition that gives the project its monumentality and its emotional load. Even a simple structure of minimally varied alternation can produce a narrative—witness the early Peter Kubelka films made with alternating sequences of black-and-white leader. Here, however, the repetition bleaches out the narrative and allows this emptiness to come into focus.

In a previous (and unexhibited) work *Where Is Love?*, which served as a partial model for *Nervous Character*, Adler had made 24 drawings of a young woman’s face in profile, again organized in alternating pairs. In it, the series completely dominates the single image; each monochrome drawing so nearly identical that a viewer can barely distinguish one from another. Both projects adhere to a certain method: to return to the same image over months and months, to attempt to re-create it by hand time after time, to perform the same gesture over and over. Perhaps the full pathos is only available to those who have a sense of what such facture entails: the willfulness of a kind of unrelenting work ethic, which verges on psychic brutality. It also points to the contractual, task-like nature of the drawing process: the initial pair establishes a structure, a set of rules, to be executed by grueling, rigorous routine which the artist subjects herself to. Yet within this rigid and apparently controlling structure, things happen, as the manual execution cannot but introduce unanticipated variation. The drawings themselves function as evidence of this

Amy Adler, *Nervous Character* (detail), 1998.



peculiar transaction and its durational, ordeal-like nature.

Structurally, its logic is almost the converse of Gillian Wearing's *Sixty Minutes Silence* (1997) which features an assembled body of police officers attempting to stand still for the hour-long video. While Wearing perversely uses video to make a "still" image, Adler employs still images to produce movement; in both projects, it is the gradual accumulation of tiny variations, the minute glitches and deviations, that make them emotionally involving. We examine them for signs of failure and fatigue, and get drawn in—not unlike the sympathetic "body response" provoked by Bruce Nauman's videotapes of simple repetitive actions.² The time of making and the time of watching take on a force that gives otherwise perhaps banal images an unexpected weight and pathos—analogue to the capacity of repetition to shift and inflect the perception of the "same" image in Warhol's early silkscreens. What seems perverse is Adler's adoption of drawing as a vehicle for this inherently durational experience of bodily intensity, inexact repetition, physical effort, and endurance.

Of course, by its very nature, all drawing is inscribed with temporality. Art historically, we can trace the explicitly performative and durational use of drawing³ back to the seminal early 60s works of avant-garde composer La Monte Young, whose *Composition 1960 #9* consisted of a straight line on an index card. Young's subsequent *Composition 1960 #10/to Bob Morris* stated "draw a straight line and follow it"⁴; Young's 1961 reformulation consisted of repeating the composition 29 times. The piece was realized twice that year (once at Harvard and once in New York) as a public performance in which Young and a collaborator used plumb lines and chalk to trace and retrace a line on the floor 29 times. Such a precedent, however distant from the current work under discussion, demonstrates that an understanding of drawing as a task and temporal process—drawing as an act of physical transcription and endurance, structured by repetition, implicitly durational and performative, involving potential intensities of both aggression, subjection, and control—has been around for quite some time.⁵

Oddly, this emphasis on the bodily, durational aspects of drawing is heightened by current efforts to resituate drawing in terms of photography, to graft drawing onto photographic models, discourses, and materials—partly in order to challenge the secondary, marginalized status of drawing within larger art practice. Unlike older models of life-drawing or gestural expressionism, many current practices of drawing (and painting) are explicitly mediated by photography: photography as a vehicle for figurative content; photography as a tool for the conceptual investigation of the image; photography as record of a process or event. Adler's work operates precisely at this juncture ("photographs" made through drawing, a late twentieth-century reversal of the nineteenth-century model of photography as "drawing with light" or "the pencil of nature").

At stake here are two key postwar logics—the reproducibility of the image, and the durational performance of the event or action—that we do not tend to think

² Nauman uses this term "body response" to describe what he sees as the visceral, physical identification elicited from viewers of his durational films and videos. See Willoughby Sharp, "Bruce Nauman," *Avalanche* (1971), reprinted in Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, eds., *The New Sculpture 1965–1975: Between Geometry and Gesture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), 241.

³ I use "performative" in the sense of "inscribing an action or process," rather than in the looser sense of "performance-related" or implying public enactment before an audience found in performance studies.

⁴ The composition was published in Young and Jackson Mac Low's 1963 compendium *An Anthology*, but is perhaps best known through Nam June Paik's 1962 Fluxus realization *Zen for Head*.

⁵ In a mid-60s interview, Young noted, "It can be performed in many ways. At that time, I employed a style in which we used plumb lines. I sighted with them, and then drew along the floor with chalk. I drew over the same line each time, and each time it invariably came out differently. The technique I was using at the time was not good enough." Like many pieces of the time, the duration was not fixed prior to performance, but simply entailed the time it took to complete the job—"a whole performance must have taken a few hours" with the audience coming and going. See Richard Kostelanetz, "La Monte Young," in *The Theater of Mixed Means* (New York: RK Editions, 1968), 183–218.

together. In particular, artists who work closely from photographic source materials, like Adler or Marlene McCarty, tend to recognize the task-like nature of drawing; they subordinate its gestural, inventive capacities to simple, quasi-mechanical functions of rendering or transcribing. The early gouaches and watercolors of Sherrie Levine and the 1993 *Playboy* drawings of Lutz Bacher, based on photographic reproductions of existing artworks, do the same. Like Karen Kilimnik, Elizabeth Peyton, and others, Adler partially reference amateur practices of drawing from photographic reproductions as vehicles for fantasy and private desire (what goes by the code-name “teenage girl drawing”)—a process of bodily and psychic inscription and incorporation that merges maker and object in ways disallowed in technologically mediated forms of reproduction like xeroxing, silkscreen, rephotography, and so forth. Yet the nature of such transcription, with its emphasis on the manual recreation of an existing image, paradoxically refashions drawing as “task” and “process”: the physical execution of a previously-determined concept or idea, an idea whose temporal execution produces unanticipated results.

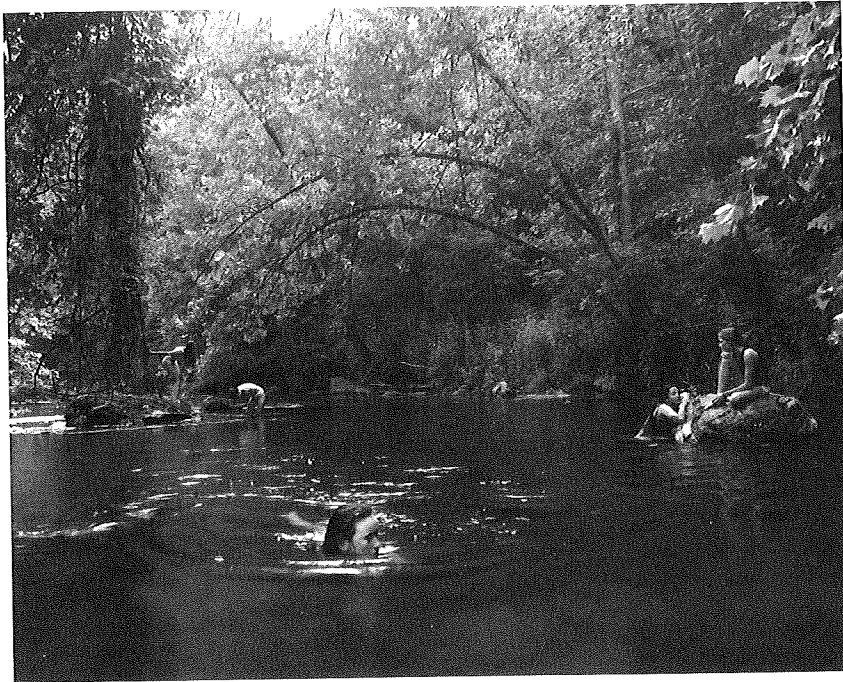
We are not accustomed to looking for the legacies of such 60s strategies in figurative pictorial images, where they may be initially unrecognizable.⁶ Yet perhaps we can understand this type of drawing as functioning analogously to certain crucial sculptural work of the late 1980s and early 1990s (by Charles Ray, Robert Gober, or Felix Gonzales-Torres), in which process and durational impulses return, re-condensed into the recognizable object—via a version of the readymade. These artists’ convoluted crossing of Minimalist and Pop legacies often hinge on a crucial device, the “handmade readymade.” By laboriously re-making mundane household objects—doors, sinks, kitty litter, dog beds, etc.—Gober, for instance, was able to infuse these existing forms with an affect, intensity, and potential criticality no longer available in more conventional readymade practices (of, say, Neo Geo). The laborious remaking also heightened the bodily-analogue dimension of these objects, drawing out subtexts of anxiety, aggressivity, and desire without verging toward overt expressionism.

While the art world has long understood that one legacy of early 80s “postmodern” photography was the rethinking of the (photographic) image itself as a “readymade,” we have yet to think through the extent to which parallel and subsequent image-based practices also adopted the model of the “handmade readymade.” Particularly, it offered a strategy to reinvest the photographic image with affect and subjective intensity. After all, what are Jack Pierson’s blurred and faded photographs if not attempts to reproduce the look (and subjective charge) of “found” images? Such a structure, the image as a handmade readymade, is what animates many current practices—not only in photography, but also increasingly in more “traditional” media, as the photographically-based drawings and paintings of countless artists seem to attest.

Yet by failing to access the durational, bodily aspects of making which potentially invite a more visceral, corporeal relation to the viewer, much of this work risks sim-

⁶ Of course, the relative academicism of more obvious efforts to re-animate this legacy—for instance, efforts in sculpture and installation coming from certain UCLA or Yale graduates of the past few years, or the more recent projects of Janine Antoni—might suggest the difficulty of re-using certain durational, ephemeral, and conceptual strategies in familiar forms.

ply making "pictures": pictures which increasingly fail to hold interest, no matter the celebrity, coolness or attractiveness of their subjects, or the beauty or quirkiness of their execution. Conversely, what makes Adler's *Nervous Character* effective, I think, is the integration of photography not only as subject matter and final form, but as an underlying structure of (inexact) repetition which can empty out meaning as well as reinforce it.



Janet Kraynak

"Julia Margaret Cameron's Women" at MoMA (Jan. 27–May 4, 1999) and "Another Girl Another Planet" at Lawrence Rubin Greenberg van Doren Fine Art, NY (March 23–April 17, 1999)

Justine Kurland, Bathers, c-print, 1998.

Before there was Cindy Sherman, there was Julia Margaret Cameron. An implausible comparison, perhaps, but one which is compelled by two exhibitions, concurrently on view in New York. Cameron, who took up photography in 1863 after receiving a camera as a gift from her children, is the subject of "Julia Margaret Cameron's Women," an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that focuses less upon Cameron's pioneering role in the development of the new medium, as her preoccupation with idealized images of young women and adolescent girls.¹ A few blocks uptown is the exhibition "Another Girl Another Planet," featuring the work of thirteen "young" (i.e., mostly emerging) artists, twelve of whom are women, who create highly staged photographs of verdant landscapes and uncanny spaces, frequently populated with young women in various stages of undress.² "Another Girl" offers a snapshot of a particular strain of late nineties

¹ The exhibition was organized by Sylvia Wolf of the Art Institute of Chicago.

² "Another Girl Another Planet" is organized by Jeanne Greenberg and guest curator, Gregory Crewsdon.