SHOW'S OVER FOLKS, MOVE ALONG: THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF ART AND THE SECRET LIFE OF THE UNDERGROUND

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FROM 1960 TO 1968, THE SILVER-COVERED OTHER WORLD OF WARHOL'S LOFT ON EAST 47TH STREET FUNCTIONED AS THE PLACE WHERE INTERLOCKING SUBCULTURES OF THE 1950S–ARTISTIC, SEXUAL, SOMETIMES EVEN CRIMINAL– WERE ABLE AT LAST TO SURFACE INTO THE BRIGHT GLAMOUR OF THE 1960S AFFLUENT CHIC.

–STEPHEN KOCH, STARGAZER: ANDY WARHOL'S WORLD AND HIS FILMS

In the 30 years since the apogee of Warhol's Factory, of the subcultures that surfaced there, only the criminal, with certain exceptions, has yet to be taken up as part of art's celebration of difference. Still, it can be said that the expanded boundaries of art stem from Warhol making the art world safe for Andy. So Dave Hickey claims was Warhol's salutary effect for art in particular and, by extension, culture in general. By turning the inside out—offering a voyeuristic peephole into the real or posed life of the underground — and the outside in — adapting Hollywood genres to camp content — Warhol was more than able to compete with mainstream media representation, while becoming a subject of it as well. Now, art again is the yokel cousin to entertainment's sophistication. Once, the Factory made visible an entourage of outcast 'superstars' consisting of hustlers and queens. Now, art stars pale next to the license Warhol unleashed in the cross-dressing and transvestism of sport and fashion superstars—Dennis Rodman and RuPaul, to name two.

How true, Stephen Koch, when you said of the Factory that, "It was the special destiny of the place to make the underground visible. When that process was over, the show was over." The only surprise is that it has taken so long for the art world to realize that its show really and truly is over, and how its success has contributed to make it so. Moreover, what power today does an image of the "underground" have to attract a youngster from, say, Topeka, Kansas, and to draw him or her to an art scene, even to become an artist, next to that of a spectacle backed by the mass media mastery of advertising and television? Yet, the wide address of Dennis Rodman's cross-dressing ploy renders his image so acceptable as only to elicit a ho-hum response—"been there, done that."

"To make the art world safe for Andy" meant as well making the images of culture toxic, or rather making toxic images into cultural ones. Perhaps there always has been a supplemental role to the underground: to enfranchise a distant audience, even if only one at a time, through identification with images. Although starting with the individual, this role results in an effect on society at large. Art's link to the margins, articulated through the underground, initiates a dialogue that ends with society's "mainstreaming" the image of the outcast. (For recent examples, think of the influence of Larry Clark's and Nan Goldin's images on fashion photography.) What starts as a celebration by artists, is appropriated by the media, and often ends as a panic in the press. (Look at the response to Calvin Klein's 1995 'teen porn' advertising campaign derived from Clark's images.) The enchantment of artists with the margins is one token of the allure of the underground. After all, the underground corresponds to a dynamic theme in American history of the rejection of family and reformation of community, enacted under an ideal. That this ideal is expressed today in subcultures, or just cults, does not weaken the power of its attraction—on the contrary.

The 'underground' today is a representation. Whether it is a romantic illusion is not the issue; let's say it stands for the idea that attracted us to contemporary art in the first place. For many in the art world, though, initial fascination has concluded in their subsequent adoption of various critiques of art.

Regrettably, 'critique' is the starting point for students in today's art schools — which is only to acknowledge that it has become an entrenched academic discourse. As with all academic discourses that justify institutions, the 'institutional critique of art' demands that its status be maintained as part of the public good.

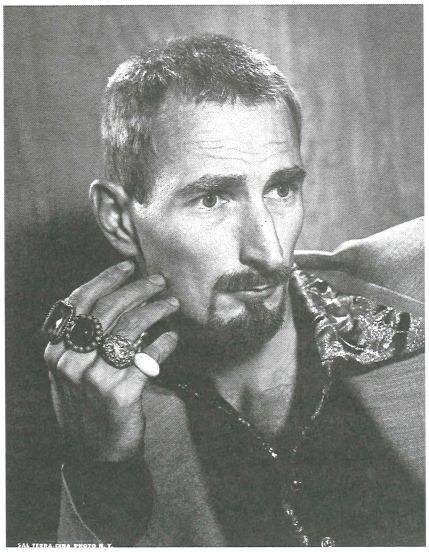
Benjamin Buchloh makes this all too clear in a recently published lament for loss of critical privilege. In *Artforum*, he demanded of art institutions "a critical space of exemption, if not opposition [*sic*], within the bourgeois public sphere" for the "relatively limited set of artistic positions and practices" of his generation that he has championed over the years, or reap the "irreversible consequences," one of which will be *his* absence from the field. I think many would find this ultimatum, and the 'cultural production' that would be its outcome, inconsistent with their desires for art. But then, we all suffer from the contradictions of our institutional positions and our radical roots. Buchloh's insistence that art's engagement only be public and collective is at odds with a more attractive view, to me, of art (or the underground, for that matter) as primarily "a mode of private discourse, an accumulation of small, fragile, social occasions, the product and the binding agent of fugitive communities of like-minded participants," as Dave Hickey more generously describes it.

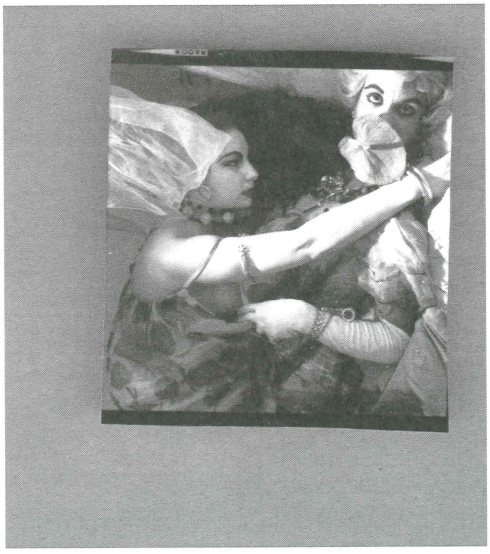
The show being over, is it possible that the underground has maintained a secret life in representation? Since that form of artistic community could be neither lamented nor recreated after its dissolution, the *idea* of the underground had to be relived in imagination, which meant having to await the arrival of a new generation that had no direct experience of it. Not surprisingly, the generation whose adolescence coincided with 'the 60s' — artists of the 1980s—replayed that decade's dichotomies of art in its own. Already in the 1960s, at their very origins, the opposition between 'institution' and 'underground' was supplanted by the gallery success of the former embodied in the macho theatrics of minimalism and its 'white cube' apodicticity. Meanwhile, the camp theatrics that ruled the underground would not outlive the theatricality of the decade itself. The underground's theatre of self-presentation would require a return in another form, a reprise that would have to be considered, in its own terms, equally beyond the pale. In the 1980s, sustaining a surreptitious reference to the underground would involve some type of *re*-presentation of self within a quotational strategy, a notion that was well rehearsed, although with different emphases, in appropriation art and current debates over 'the death of the author.' Here would be one way to characterize American art of the 1980s: On the one hand, the institutional citational art of neo-minimalism, neo-conceptualism, and neo-geo; on the other hand, a performative citational art of photo-artists such as Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince. Thus would the interpretation of Sherman's and Prince's works offered by postmodernist accounts be skewed towards an underground mnemonics.

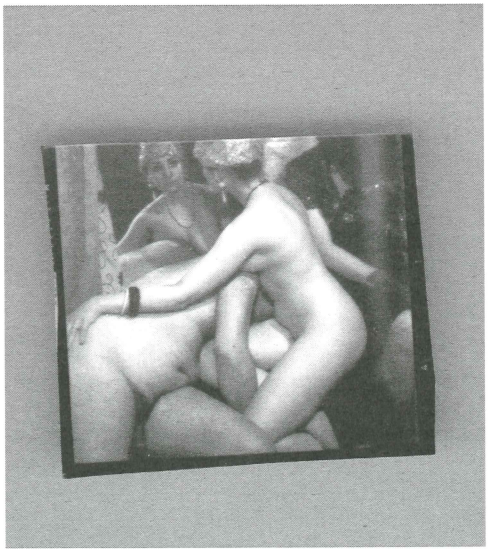
Can an *image* alone sustain some reference to the underground without being its actual documentation? Are reprising *roles* enough to keep a dialogue with the idea of the underground at least intermittent? In that the photographic image is also a displacement of time or space, doesn't a relation to the idea or image of the underground partake of the same dual distancing: In the past, the spatial distance of its not yet participants; in the present, the temporal distance of remembering of the too young to know it? Richard Prince's re-photographed images, which are, he says, projections of his own desires, likewise inflect this duality: Depicting the *space* of the other (his biker chicks or some other subcultural substitute for the margins), and suggesting another *time* (in that usually the images can be taken to stand for another era — the 1950s, the 1960s, or the 1970s — eras, however, that Prince has passed through from adolescence on).

Such recourse to memory, but not nostalgia, aligns this work, with good reason, to other excavations of adolescence that inform so much of the succeeding 'juvenile' art of the late 1980s, as well as the decade's more abstract art. Centering on the suburbs, the memory of that childhood place became the ironic content to the formal citation of its period's corresponding modernist art, the latter taken, of course, to encompass Pillow Talk as much as Vir Heroicus Sublimis. Already in the 1960s, and ever the archaeologist of futurity, Robert Smithson had understood that the suburbs and the underground were secretly connected: "Suburbia literally means a 'city below,'" he wrote in A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art. Thereupon he could collapse the two in the suburban "outdoor immateriality" of Edward Ruscha's Sunset Strip photographs and "the pale but lurid indoors of Andy Warhol movies." From the entropic conclusion of the 1960s, when the children of the suburbs took media centre stage, Smithson predicted that the spatial distance between the underground and the "spectral suburbs" would be obliterated by the "enormous mental distances" of history and time. That time of reconciliation and recovery is now.

The suburbs, then, do not express some lack that the underground makes up for, but only the requisite distance to have a desire for it. Yet, with the loss of that original underground, and the recognition that it won't come again, art compensates. Once an underground image is expelled from art's orbit of interest by becoming too visible, art restlessly seeks other margins, even while image after image of it are brought into the mainstream. Art is compelled to search for margins in ever widening or narrowing circles. In the case of the latter, art focuses in on one place, so that over time, for instance, the transvestites and transsexuals of Nan Goldin's photography replace the queens of the 1960s underground who flourished in Warhol's films. Or, in the case of the former, art makes us travel outwards from the unnamed criminality of the New York Factory to the white trash criminal underclass of







the American heartland and margins that figures so prominently in the works of Cady Noland, Richard Prince and Larry Clark. What are portrayed in these outcast images if not substitute families? From Goldin's queens, Noland's Manson family, Prince's bikers and Clark's drug chums and petty criminals of his Tulsa days, to the skateboarders of Clark's late style, we come full circle to the 'suburbs.' It is no surprise to find the source of future identifications here, in one image of 'criminality' or another. Nowhere is the fear greater than in the heart of the American suburbs that the enemy is within the family and the kids are not 'alright.' The outcast is the girl, or boy, next door, ready to seek kinship beyond his or her natural family. And so the underground remains an ideal in all these images, ever retaining its intimate link to the desires of the suburbs.

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far left
Jack Smith
photo Sal Terra-Cina
c. 1970

All other photos
Smith-Studio tableau
c. 1960