



# SHERRIE LEVINE

NEW WORK

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

**NEW WORK: SHERRIE LEVINE**  
**JANUARY 17 – MARCH 10, 1991**

Sherrie Levine has made two groups of work with the collective title *Melt Down*, words taken, of course, from the terminology of nuclear disaster. These pieces are based on a computer analysis of the colors used in six well-known paintings by European modernist masters. In the first part of the series she divided the paintings into eight zones, determined the average tone of the pigments in each, and reproduced the resultant values in six prints. Then she found out the average color in each of the paintings overall and made a painting of that color. Exhibited here are three paintings by Levine, each of which bears the average color found in particular paintings by Mondrian, Kirchner, and Monet.

Since the early 1980s when she photographed reproductions of photographs by Edward Weston and Walker Evans, Levine has become a well-known practitioner of the artistic strategy known as appropriation. However, the *Melt Down* paintings—each made with paint mixed for accuracy by a painting restorer and applied by him in a single coat on a mahogany panel—are appropriations only in a rather distant, special sense. We cannot, nor could the original artists, recognize the paintings used as the basis for Levine's work. What we see here represents not so much the appropriation of another artist's work as the use of it to make something entirely different. In creating such paintings, Levine pays homage to these artists, while at the same time asserting that their work is available for use by other artists in whatever manner they choose.

Levine's *After Man Ray* is based on a painting in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art by that artist titled *La Fortune*, or *Luck*, painted in 1938. It shows a billiard table identical to the six in Levine's installation even in the odd, outside placement of the table legs and the position and color of the billiard balls. In most of her previous work Levine has simply and quite straightforwardly appropriated another artist's work as her own, though sometimes making changes in scale or medium. In this case she has done something more complicated by deviating from her source in several important respects. For one thing, Man Ray's painting, which was recently seen in the exhibition *Anxious Visions: Surrealist Art* at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, shows the billiard table outdoors, tilted at an odd angle, against a sky filled with multicolored clouds. Levine has suppressed the background, righted the angle of the table, and instead of the painting's single table she has produced six. More importantly, however, where Man Ray worked in two dimensions, Levine's installation is in three. On the simplest level, she has realized what most of us as children probably sometimes dreamed of when we looked at paintings: she has literally taken us through the picture plane into a three-dimensional world in which the objects depicted in the painting actually exist. In one sense, she has dissolved the picture plane only to replace it with a looking glass, as the real table seems to repeat itself again and again, as if we were seeing it in parallel mirrors.

If we are troubled by Levine's concretization of something we have previously experienced only in mirrors, we are even more disturbed by what she has materialized out of the relatively thin air of Man Ray's painting. Because the tables are replicated in a fashion akin to the familiar repetition of minimalist sculpture, we are inclined to find in their repetition an



Man Ray, *La Fortune*. 1938, oil on canvas,  
24 x 29 in. (61 x 73.7 cm).  
Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art.  
Purchase, with funds from the Simon Foundation,  
Inc. 72.129  
(photo: Geoffrey Clements)

Cover: Sherrie Levine, *After Man Ray (La Fortune)*,  
1990 (photo: Ben Blackwell)

underlining or amplification of apparent meaning. If something is repeated over and over, and at such a large scale, obviously it must be important. Yet unlike minimal art, the bareness of which makes clear its disclaimer of meaning, Levine's tables are filled with visual detail and thus, apparently, significance.

To begin with, there are a number of subtexts. The billiard table is quintessentially a luxury object, used almost exclusively by upper-class men. It is thus possible to see it in Levine's version as a representation of masculinity, an impression that is strengthened by the no doubt intentional resemblance of the table legs to an abstracted version of the female form. One can see the tables as a penetration by a middle-class woman artist into the world properly inhabited only by upper-class men. There is also, of course, the sense that by repeating the tables Levine has found a concrete metaphor for art as endless mass production and thus has made its status as a commodity at once evident and literal. This perhaps accounts for the disturbance the tables create in the context of the museum; in a place where only originals are exhibited, to present six identical, expensive consumer objects clearly suggests something troubling about the other works of art that are nearby.

Yet the most powerful and important aspect of the tables derives from their specific existence. Billiard tables and pool tables alike, we realize after a moment, have always seemed to carry a hidden meaning, like the pattern on the face of a playing card or a baseball diamond. Almost any configuration of balls on the brilliantly lighted, green surface immediately resolves itself into geometric figures of a quite unsurpassed elegance. Indeed, our unconscious assumption, particularly when we were children and ignorant of the way the game was played, is that the patterns themselves have meaning, so much so that when a shot is made, which completely changes the position of the balls, our initial reaction is shock, followed by an effort to decipher whatever pattern emerges.

What Levine has done is to heighten immeasurably our expectation of meaning and then to deny it. First she gives us magical access through the picture plane into the world of Man Ray's painting. Then, by repeating the tables, she demonstrates that such access is useless, for behind the picture plane is necessarily and only the world of the looking glass. And finally, we see that the mysterious patterns of the arcane, beautiful game have no meaning, as we discovered before in childhood, but only endless repetition.

Along with the issue of meaning necessarily goes the question of authorship. In one sense Levine can be said to have accomplished only a brilliant, visually beautiful amplification of what was already present in Man Ray's painting. Yet there is more to this than simply a stunning *coup de théâtre*, because she has, in the process, taken us on a journey, a search for meaning in art that is significant in itself. If there is at the end of the hall of mirrors a sense of emptiness and even death, then that is perhaps only an accurate rendering of the outcome, in our day at least, of the search for meaning in art. That Levine has taken us to the edge of the abyss only to confirm by looking into it that it is in fact empty, no matter how beautiful and visually seductive it may be, is surely an important achievement.

John Caldwell

*Curator of Painting and Sculpture*

## SHERRIE LEVINE

Born in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, 1947

Lives and works in Los Angeles

## EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin, Madison. B.A., 1969;

M.F.A., 1973

## SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

1974

De Salsset Art Gallery, University of Santa Clara, California

1977

3 Mercer Street, New York

1978

3 Mercer Street, New York

Hallwalls, Buffalo

1979

The Kitchen, New York

1981

Metro Pictures, New York

1982

A & M Artworks, New York

1983

Baskerville + Watson Gallery, New York

Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, Los Angeles

1984

Gallery Nature Morte, New York

A & M Artworks, New York

1985

Baskerville + Watson Gallery, New York

Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois

Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, Los Angeles

1986

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

1987

Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford

Mary Boone Gallery, New York

1988

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

High Museum of Art, Atlanta

Galerie Nächst St. Stephan, Vienna

Mario Diacono Gallery, Boston

1989

Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

Mary Boone Gallery, New York

1990

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1977

*Pictures*, Artists Space, New York

1979

*Pictures, Photographs*, Castelli Graphics, New York

1980

*Pictures and Promises*, The Kitchen, New York

1981

*Couches, Diamonds and Pie*, P.S. 1, Queens, New York

*Extended Photography*, Die Wiener Secession Vienna

1982

*Documenta 7*, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany

1983

*Seventy-Fourth American Exhibition*, The Art Institute of Chicago

1984

*Sex Show*, Cable Gallery, New York

*Difference: On Sexuality and Representation*, The New Museum, New York

*Ailleurs et Autrement*, ARC Musée Contemporain, Paris

*Hirshhorn Tenth Anniversary Show*, Hirshhorn

Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

*Image Scavengers*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia

*Art and Politics*, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio

1985

*Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Rudolf Zwirner Gallery, Cologne

*Correspondences*, La Forêt Museum, Tokyo

*Talking Back to the Media*, Foundation de Appell, Amsterdam

*Repetition*, Hunter College Art Gallery, New York

1986

*The Sydney Biennial*, Sydney

*Abstract Appropriations*, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University



*As Found*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston  
*Drawings After Photography*, Independent Curators Incorporated, New York

*Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

*Eurapo-Amerika*, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

*Art and Its Double*, Fundació Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona

1987

*Avant-Garde in the Eighties*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

1988

*The Image of Abstraction*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

*Carnegie International*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

1989

Prospect 89, Frankfurt Kunstverein and Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt

*Bilderstreit*, Reinhalle, Cologne

*Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

*A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

*What is Contemporary Art?*, Rooseum, Malmö, Sweden

*Image World: Art and Media Culture*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

*Wittgenstein: The Play of the Unsayable*, Die Wiener Secession, Vienna

1990

*Culture and Commentary*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art." *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982): 43–56.

Brooks, Rosetta. "From the Night of Consumerism to the Dawn of Simulation." *Artforum* 23, no. 5 (February 1985): 76–81.

Cameron, Dan. "Absence and Allure: Sherrie Levine's Recent Work." *Arts Magazine* 58, no. 4 (December 1983): 84–87.

—. "Art and Its Double: A New York Perspective." *Flash Art*, no. 134 (May 1987): 57–71.

Crimp, Douglas. "Pictures." *October* 8 (Spring 1978): 75–88.

—. "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism." *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 91–101.

Foster, Hal. "The Expressive Fallacy." *Art in America* 71, no. 1 (January 1983): 80–83.

—. "Signs Taken for Wonders." *Art in America* 74, no. 1 (June 1986): 80–91.

Indiana, Gary. "Sherrie Levine and Bette Davis: Affinities and Contrasts." *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1988, 105.

—. "Endgame." *The Village Voice*, October 6, 1987 (supplement): 18.

Jones, Ronald. "Slow Time: Sherrie Levine's New Work." *Artscribe* (January/February 1988): 45.

—. "Hover Culture: The View from Alexandria." *Artscribe* (Summer 1988): 46–51.

—. "Even Picasso: Sherrie Levine." *Artscribe* (November/December 1988): 50–52.

Krauss, Rosalind. "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition." *October* 18 (Fall 1981): 47–66.

Kuspit, Donald. "Sherrie Levine." *Artforum* 26, no. 4 (December 1987): 110–11.

—. "Sherrie Levine." *Contemporaneo* (December 1989): 90–91.

Lawson, Thomas. "Too Good to be True." *Real Life* (September 1981): 3–7.

—. "We Must Embrace Our Joys and Sorrows." *ZG Magazine* (October 1981).

—. "Last Exit: Painting." *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (October 1981): 40–47.

Levin, Kim. "Sherrie Levine." *The Village Voice*, September 29, 1987, 46.

—. "Sherrie Levine." *The Village Voice*, October 3, 1989, 99.

Moufarrege, Nicolas A. "Sherrie Levine: Nature Morte." *Flash Art*, no. 120 (January 1985): 42–43.

Owens, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism (Part 2)." *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 58–80.

—. "Sherrie Levine at A & M Artworks." *Art in America* 70, no. 6 (June 1982): 148.

Rimanelli, David. "Sherrie Levine." *Artforum* 28, no. 3 (November 1989): 147.

Smith, Roberta. "It's Not Fake Anything—It's Real Levine." *The Village Voice*, December 13, 1983, 107.

—. "Sherrie Levine." *The New York Times*, December 26, 1986, sec. C, p. 33.

—. "Art: From Sherrie Levine, a Mini-Retrospective." *The New York Times*, September 18, 1987, sec. C, p. 22.

—. "Sherrie Levine Enters the World of Sculpture." *The New York Times*, September 8, 1989, sec. C, p. 23.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Winning the Game When the Rules Have Been Changed: Art Photography and Post-Modernism." *Screen* 25, no. 6 (November/December 1984): 88–102.

Taylor, Paul. "Sherrie Levine Plays with Paul Taylor." *Flash Art*, no. 135 (Summer 1987): 55–59.

Westfall, Stephen. "Sherrie Levine at Baskerville + Watson." *Art in America* 74, no. 3 (March 1986): 145–46.

## CHECKLIST

*After Man Ray (La Fortune)*  
1990

mahogany, felt, and resin  
dimensions variable

Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York

*"Melt Down" (After Kirchner: 1)*  
1990

oil on wood  
28 x 21 in. (71.1 x 53.3 cm)

Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York

*"Melt Down" (After Mondrian: 2)*  
1990

oil on wood  
28 x 21 in. (71.1 x 53.3 cm)

Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York

*"Melt Down" (After Monet: 1)*  
1990

oil on wood  
28 x 21 in. (71.1 x 53.3 cm)

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# NEW WORK

A SERIES OF RECENT WORK BY YOUNGER AND ESTABLISHED ARTISTS