

AFTERWARD/AFTERWORD/AFTERWORK

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Of Little Masters and Old Men

One of the outstanding canvases hanging in The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a poignant landscape by the seventeenth-century artist Nicolas Poussin depicting the *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun* (1658; fig. 1). In ancient mythology, the king of Chios is said to have punished Orion after the giant got drunk at a banquet and aggressed the king's daughter. Wandering in shame and darkness, Orion arrived like a beggar on the shores of Lemnos where Hephaistos—the god of blacksmiths, artisans, and sculptors—took pity on him and instructed his assistant Kedalion to guide him to the healing powers of the sun. In the Poussin painting, we see the little metalworker perched on the giant hunter's back, the two setting off for the kingdom of Helios where Orion would find his redemptive, happy ending. Poussin's interpretation of the tale also invokes the famous line attributed to the twelfth-century monk Bernard de Chartres, "We are dwarves perched on the shoulders of giants," an adage that underscores the cheerful reception by the present of the illustrious achievements of the past in a historical moment before the onset of what Harold Bloom would morosely diagnose as the "anxiety of influence."¹ But for those who lived in the premodernist past, the condition was not so acute. As in the *Blind Orion*, ultimately it was the ability of today's men to find the golden light of the future that enabled the towering denizens of the past to dream again—to see the world anew.

Poussin's painting and Bernard de Chartres's motto serve as a point of departure for an anachronistic history of Sherrie Levine's work, for they exemplify several of the themes that lurk behind her art and practice: vision and knowledge; humor and wit; humility and empathy; repetition and difference. It is a disruptive model of history that snips straightforward time lines in favor of more entangled relationships between before and after. Bernard's expression, for example, is only known to us because John of Salisbury (nicknamed "Johannes Parvus," or "Little John") carefully safeguarded this phrase in the *Metalogicon*, a twelfth-century defense of the liberal arts written against a group of crabby anti-intellectualists known as the Cornificians.² It is perhaps in the shadows of this affective, retrospective history that the pathos of Levine's work finds its most sympathetic stage.

If we draw close enough to Levine's two little smirking dwarfs in *Repetition and Difference* (2002), it is this story of double belonging that they seem to be rehearsing. If you linger long enough, they might just whisper: "Come back later, and we'll tell you the story about our cousins, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch!*" (2002). Like the diminutive metalworker Kedalion who would save Orion, these little men possess a power of expansion that is magnified in their doubling. The empathetic formula for repetition adds the past and the present, before and after, original and copy so that each pair is the sum of its parts: The opacity of cast crystal and the philosophical gravitas of black glass is intensified by the glimmering reflection of its significant other; likewise, the sheen of the bronze surface glows twice as brightly next to the flat sobriety of its companion.



The relationship between both “Avant-Garde” and “Kitsch”, on the one hand, and “Repetition” and “Difference,” on the other, is defined by a certain *incurable codependency*—the one cannot exist without the other; the identity of one depends upon the other.

One Inside the Other

But the cheerful men of the past—the Kedalions and Little Johns of history—were not without mischief and subversive antics. If Levine claims that “it’s often more useful to think of artmaking as play rather than work,” and that “[f]antasies of aggression and control have an interesting place there,” it is because dwarfs sometimes play pranks on giants, too.³ Levine’s *Three Muses* (2006; fig. 2), for instance, stands as a witty riposte to all those classicizing yet utterly predictable, tasteful yet insipid marbles and plaster casts littering elite European gardens (as well as not-so-elite American pizzerias); however, it is in Levine’s use of rarefied bronze as her material where the final punch line is delivered, rather than in the more obvious deployment of the three little pigs. And here Levine is thinking perhaps like Raphael when the young artist draws Michelangelo’s formidable *David*, but seen from behind—literally making an ass out of the heroic model (fig. 3). The colossal block of flawed marble, as historians and guidebooks love to say, was nicknamed “*il Gigante*” until Michelangelo

1. Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665)

Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun, 1658
Oil on canvas, 46 7/8 x 72 in. (119.1 x 182.9 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York;
Fletcher Fund, 1924 (24.45.1)

2. Sherrie Levine

The Three Muses, 2006
Cast bronze, three parts, 6 x 9 1/2 x 5 1/2 in.
(15.2 x 24.1 x 14 cm); 5 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 4 1/2 in.
(14 x 19.1 x 11.4 cm); and 4 x 7 x 4 in.
(10.2 x 17.8 x 10.2 cm)
Edition of 12

3. Raphael (1483–1520)

“David” after Michelangelo, DATE TK
Pen and brown ink over traces of black chalk on paper,
15 9/16 x 8 5/8 in. (39.6 x 21.9 cm)
British Museum, London, 1824, inv. Pp,1.68



took pity upon it and transformed it into a representation of the biblical underdog who would defeat the giant Goliath, conflating and collapsing the dwarf/giant dichotomy through the cleverness of art. Raphael's gesture was undoubtedly one of admiration for and humility toward that which came before him, but that same gesture is also a cheeky afterthought demonstrating a healthy sense of humor toward the achievements of his predecessor.

I mock you, but only because I secretly love you—this ribald, “aggressive/passive” stance is also seen in a print by an unknown artist (fig. 4) that itself is predicated on a long sequence of “afters”: It is a work after a woodcut by Nicolò Boldrini, which was after a lost drawing said to have been made by Titian that, in turn, was after the ancient statue *Laocöon and His Sons* that had been unearthed in a Roman vineyard in 1506 to everyone's marvel and surprise. In Boldrini's version, the composition of the sculpture is reversed in production, as was common in printmaking. The anonymous engraving returns the figures to their original positions, but we are no longer dealing with a simple tale of repetition as classical imitation or as reproductive prints. Titian and the others undercut the seriousness of this momentous occasion not only by flipping the prototype back and forth and by moving the cliché across a hierarchy of different media, but by metamorphosing the calm grandeur and noble simplicity of the ancient heroes into screaming monkeys. In spite of



the vast temporal distance that separates Raphael, Titian, Boldrini, and our anonymous engraver from Levine, they would have found much to like in her art.

Early modern Italians especially prized wit or *acutezza* (acuity) in art and language. Representing one thing while saying another produced a surplus pleasure that allowed you to “look with the eyes while contemplating with the mind.”⁴ This kind of double vision operated metaphorically, for the metaphor, as a seventeenth-century writer explained, packs “objects tightly together in a single word and almost miraculously allows you to see one inside the other.”⁵

It is through this bifurcated optic that Levine’s cutouts bearing the silhouettes of American presidents speak most eloquently. Form vies with content as the confrontation of the two produces a marvelous third image that lies in between—what Levine might refer to (after Marcel Duchamp) as the “infra-thin.”⁶ Like the infamous drawing of the duck-rabbit (variously attributed to Joseph Jastrow, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and others), wonder is generated not simply in seeing the one or the other but in the moment when simultaneity trumps chronological priority; it is the poetic difference between “two for one” versus “buy one get one free” or the magical formula that enables “ $1+1=1$ ” rather than “ $1+1=2$.”

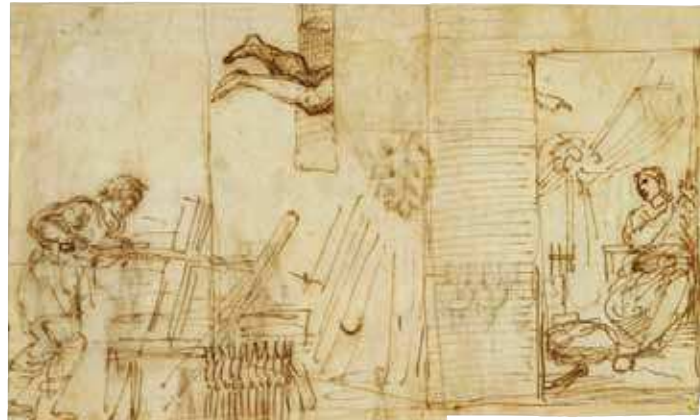
Looking at Annibale Carracci’s drawing of the *Annunciation* after Jacopo Tintoretto (fig. 5), the pleasure in being able to identify the reference to the painting in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco by the Venetian Old Master is doubled in the pleasure of seeing the comedic differences between the two. Instead of the drama of the biblical narrative as it is portrayed in Tintoretto’s painting, Carracci looks awry at the scene. Everything in this image is about halves: The focus upon Joseph laboring away on the left is balanced by Mary dropping her ball of string on the right; the wooden plank is being sawed in two; the angelic body is being split into feet on one side of the window and a pointing finger on the other. But without seeing Tintoretto in the drawing, Carracci’s visual witticism could not function properly; seeing only Tintoretto without Carracci also made for a poor joke. Likewise, mistaking a Levine for a Walker Evans is to misunderstand the work; in contrast, to see the repetition is to produce new meanings out of old images. While the difference between Levine’s photographs and those of the photographers she photographs is often “infra-thin,” the pleasure of repetition and of coming after is bound by a similar incurable codependency.

4. Artist unknown, after Nicolo Boldrini

(c. 1496–1566) **after Titian** (c. 1485/90–1576)
Caricature of the Laocoön in the form of apes; a reversed
engraved copy of the woodcut by Boldrini, after 1550
Engraving on paper, 6 1/16 x 13 3/8 in. (15.4 x 34 cm)
British Museum, London, 1874, inv. 0711.1288

5. Annibale Carracci (1560–1609)

The Annunciation, date unknown
Pen and brown ink on paper, 4 1/2 x 7 3/8 in. (11.4 x 18.8 cm)
Royal Library, Windsor Royal Collection © 2011 Her Majesty
Queen Elizabeth II



The Master's Voice

When Giovanni Tomaso Giglioli writes in the seventeenth century, “Aristotle said we feel great delight when we see two equal forces (or two forces between whom we are unable to detect too much difference) come together in competition,” it is as if he were waiting for Levine’s work to come.⁷ If Emanuele Tesauro precedes Levine by three centuries, his definition of “true imitation,” too, was waiting for her:

True imitation does not mean usurping metaphors and witty expressions exactly as you hear or read them; that way you would not be praised as an imitator but blamed as a thief. Imitating Praxiteles’ Apollo does not mean transporting it from the Cortile del Belvedere into one’s own loggia, but carving another piece of marble to the same proportions, so that Praxiteles on seeing it would marvel and say, “This Apollo is not mine, yet it is mine.”⁸

Levine’s work “relies on a certain reversal of before and after,” but it is also about a multiplication of possibilities.⁹ In this regard, her story is not unlike that of Kedalion who, in some accounts, is described as Hephaistos’s pupil, but in other genealogies is identified as the metalworker who taught Hephaistos his trade. Like the self-portrait of the sixteenth-century painter Sofonisba Anguissola (fig. 6), Levine’s art represents itself as an image of an image (Anguissola as a portrait on the easel) that is being constructed by the image of her master (Bernardino Campi)—a profound reflection on who or what is making and is made. The deliberate anachronism of this comparison connects with Levine’s love for “transgressional boundaries, leaky distinctions, dualisms, fractured identities, monstrosity and perversity,” what she summarized as “a fly in the soup, a pie in the face”—a history of art and artists based on practical jokes rather than theoretical anxiety.¹⁰

If Levine is an artist who thinks as an art historian, as Howard Singerman has suggested, she is a puckish one who might insist on using slides and likes to put them into the carousel upside down, backwards, and—often—one on top of the other. The artist as historian is an art historian who multiplies temporalities and scrambles tidy genealogies. The sculptural works such as *Crystal Newborn* (1993; page XX) and *Black Newborn* (1994), perhaps more so than Levine’s photographs, stand as testament to how one can



6. Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1532–1625)

Portrait of Bernardino Campi Painting the Portrait of Sofonisba Anguissola, 1559

Oil on canvas, 43 5/8 x 43 1/8 in. (110.8 x 109.5 cm)
Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena

be both the daughter of a modernist past that came before and the mother (of us all) who gives new life to those weary fathers.

To come after is a position of knowledge and power. If Levine comes after a venerable chorus of Old and Avant-Garde Masters, it is her song—like Anguissola’s meta-portrait of her virtually forgotten teacher Campi—that gives them visibility once more. Rather than wallow in the self-pity of a Bloomian flu brought on by the germs of belatedness and oedipal angst, and groan as old men do for the happy days of the past, Levine’s work embraces the past like a foreign country full of wonders for the taking. If cultural and geographical difference has been the favored subject of alterity studies for the politicians and practitioners of identity, Levine’s art demonstrates that History—i.e., time rather than space—is the new Other. Old is the new new . . . or, if we think about it, perhaps being new (i.e., being Avant-Garde) was always-already the old old? You’ll have to ask Levine’s little crystal, glass, and bronze masters for clarification on that.

NOTES:

1. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
2. John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 167.
3. Levine, quoted in Jeanne Siegel, “The Anxiety of Influence—Head On: A Conversation between Sherrie Levine and Jeanne Siegel,” in *Sherrie Levine*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Kunsthalle Zürich, 1991), 17.
4. Emanuele Tesauro, quoted in Eugenio Donato, “Tesauro’s Poetics: Through the Looking Glass,” *MLN* 78, no. 1 (January 1963), 23.
5. Emanuele Tesauro, quoted in *Italy in the Baroque: Selected Readings*, ed. and trans. Brendan Dooley (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 480.
6. Levine, quoted in Howard Singerman, “Sherrie Levine’s Art History,” *October* 101 (Summer 2002), 101. For Duchamp’s use of the term, see *Marcel Duchamp, Notes*, ed. and trans. Paul Matisse (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).
7. Giovanni Tomaso Giglioli, letter to Secondo Lancellotti, in *L’Hoggi di overo il mondo non peggiore ne più calamitoso del passato* (Venice: Guerigli, 1627), n. p.
8. Tesauro, quoted in *Italy in the Baroque*, 468.
9. Singerman, “Sherrie Levine’s Art History,” 98.
10. Levine, quoted in *Sherrie Levine: Sculpture*, ed. David Frankel (Cologne: Galerie Jablonka, 1996), n. p.