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Dan Fischer: Xerox Realism

Robert Hobbs

Dan Fischer's meticulously nuanced and highly polished graphite drawings based on Xerox copies of photographs present notable artists' images from the mid-twentieth century to the past decade. Predicated on a sophisticated rereading of photographic imagery and its copies, Fischer's art conflates the polarity between works of art exhibiting aura and those lacking it that Frankfurt School critic Walter Benjamin first discerned in his famous 1930s essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which has been a cornerstone for postmodern photo-based work beginning in the late 1970s. In addition, Fischer's work gives new significance to French poststructuralist critic Roland Barthes' notion of the third meaning, a still largely underappreciated concept, that was crucially important during the late 1970s and early '80s when such preeminent postmodern artists as Sherrie Levine¹ and Cindy Sherman found ways to posit their ideas in terms of multiple overlapping frames so that each one had to be read in terms of another. In Fischer's art postmodernism remains a layered and complex undertaking. Even though his skillful drawings appeal to a wide-range of viewers who simply enjoy their breathtaking mimesis, these multi-layered works rely on the skills of postmodern viewers, who not only are able to appreciate this type of art's contradictions but also can hold them in suspension while looking at them.

Fischer first realized that drawing would be his primary art form during the fall semester of 1998 when he enrolled in the course at Alfred University entitled "Experimental Drawing: Flux to Form" taught by sound and video artist Andrew Deutsch. He credits this class with "opening his eyes to what drawing could be," particularly when Deutsch introduced him to the ideas of John Cage, who advocated setting up a series of pre-compositional strategies for making works of art so that they would seem to create themselves.² In addition to its emphasis on Cage, the class involved a series of exercises for developing students' sensory and perceptual abilities by teaching them (1) to see and draw their peripheral vision; (2) to try to remember and duplicate their first drawings; (3) to learn to concentrate on listening and holding in their minds distinct sounds for increasingly longer periods of time; and (4) to make raster-type drawings that emulate the scanning patterns of parallel lines customarily displayed on early black-and-white television by emphasizing the repetitive movements of first their wrists and later their elbows and shoulders while utilizing different degrees of pressure to achieve in their works lines that vary from dark to light.³

In order to undertake Deutsch's assignment to apply the raster-type concept to a Polaroid picture and then draw it, Fischer asked a friend to take a black-and-white image of him in profile. He began transforming this Polaroid into the equivalent of a video image by employing two parallel but slightly separated pieces of paper to isolate narrow sections of the photograph, thus simulating the effect of raster lines. When he focused solely on the view of each isolated strip of photographic information, he was particularly intrigued by "how close he got to an abstract/realistic way of drawing."⁴ In the process of making this work, he also relied on the enhanced memory techniques that Deutsch had taught him so that he could

transfer, with surprising precision, a discrete slice of visual material. In order to approximate the character of raster lines and thus give his art a technological look, which his mode of working actually contradicted, he left “gutters” of white space between carefully drawn passages that paralleled the movement of his paired sheets of white paper across the surface of the Polaroid. The use of the spacing between the raster-like passages in Fischer’s work constitutes a tipping of the hat to the important role video studies played in his undergraduate major of painting, printmaking, and video. These slices of imagery alternating with empty spaces can also be considered synaesthetic equivalents to Deutsch’s exercise that involved students concentrating on internally remembered sounds while becoming aware of the silence in the classroom. Furthermore, working in this manner parallels the musical act of either performing a score or improvising on one – a practice familiar to Fischer who can boast of several accomplished musicians in his family, including his uncle James Dvorak, a jazz musician.

During that same fall and several months after completing his self-portrait, Fischer became so intrigued with a Hans Namuth photograph of Pollock standing in front of a drip painting, which had been reproduced in MoMA’s brochure for its Pollock retrospective, that he decided to draw it. His keen interest in transposing this photographic reproduction into a graphite drawing with prominent raster-like slices of imagery impelled him to stay up all night completing this work. He has remembered that “it [the elaboration on Deutsch’s assignment] felt like an improvisation,”⁵ and the process of rethinking Pollock’s image in terms of early video’s mode of reception proved to be so satisfying that he made, during that same winter, 15 to 20 drawings of different artists, including one of photorealist painter Chuck Close. His decision to use artists as models for his work was a logical one since he was in the habit of decorating the walls of his living space with his favorite images of them, thus unconsciously setting them up as readily available subjects for his work. In all these drawings Fischer continued to experiment with different sets of proportions between image and blank space to simulate the effect of raster lines. He also initiated the practice of leaving large white borders around his images to stress their photographic origins.

That same winter Fischer also started to work with grids in addition to relying on alternate vertical sections of imagery and space. His first work to employ a grid (which corresponds, of course, to the one that he drew on a Xerox copy of a photo-reproductive image) was a portrait of Italian neo-expressionist Francesco Clemente. Although Fischer continued to make drawings based on either raster lines or grids during this early period, he later decided to focus totally on grids because they provided particularly useful discrete bits of information, which he could transpose from one medium to another.

His description of the process of employing raster lines to make the early drawing entitled *Stella at Work* is significant for the insight it provides into his way of thinking during this formative period. He writes:

In some ways, with the piece “Stella at Work,” I feel I’m reproducing the idea of reproduction, in relation to the workings of mass media in general . . . My drawings are copies of photocopies, copied from photographs taken from a range of historical and contemporary art references . . . I isolate a thin

strip of my source image and, based on the information that is revealed to me, I try to reproduce this portion as accurately as possible (much like . . . a computer printer prints line by line) . . .

I feel that the drawings are highly analytical, both formally and conceptually. Line by line, I try to make these past moments of art history come back to life, to be more exotic, or more surreal than they actually were (perhaps all stories are told this way). I try to reproduce the excitement of a special moment or location in art history, and to celebrate the role of artists as myth, or as icon.⁶

After enumerating this process, Fischer includes a few provisos regarding the visual rhyming occurring between the raster form and the subject of Stella working on one of his black paintings. He notes:

However, the “Stella At Work” piece seems to turn out as some sort of light-hearted joke. I mean, it is essentially a drawing, done line by line, of the painter Frank Stella painting his most famous works with his own line-by-line approach. That was not intentional. This work belongs to a series of drawings that use the same line-by-line technique, representing an assortment of artists performing, or posing in some way or another. It just so happens that the subject and the style of the piece coincide in a more literal way.⁷

In this statement Fischer reveals a desire to avoid visual puns, which he regards as too easy; his reticence indicates a desire to pursue far more serious goals, involving the oxymoronic one of making an original copy, which he has called on other occasions either a “personal” or a “realistic copy” and also termed a “handmade readymade.”⁸

Although Fischer made an early drawing of Chuck Close and later created a larger and particularly elaborate one of him working on a partially completed painting that is now in MoMA’s collection, Close’s brand of photorealism/minimalism was not a model for Fischer’s art. Coming of age in 1968 when minimalism and conceptual art represented the most cutting-edge approaches, Close regarded photographs mainly as information, which he would coolly and rationally transpose square by square to canvas with an airbrush, a tool usually associated with commercial art, so that the work would not reveal the artist’s hand. In his art Close aimed to undermine such formerly unquestioned photographic conventions as the sharp and diffused focus caused by cameras’ inability to register depth of field accurately.



Stella at Work, 1999

Graphite on paper

7 1/4" x 9 3/8"

Gift of Robert Feldman (PA 1954), in honor of

Frank Stella (PA 1954)

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy,
Andover, Massachusetts.

Not dispassionate and removed from his work like the early Close, Fischer is deeply engaged with both his chosen subjects and way of working. He is particularly intrigued with “how an image is revealed”⁹ to him almost as if it happened by magic during the process of drawing it - an indirect acknowledgment of the important role Cage’s concept of pre-compositional strategies assumes in his own work. In his notes, he has confided, “Every image, every drawing is an experience, it’s a trip into the detailed depths of my favorite images, also it’s a study, learning how to draw through photography.”¹⁰ Fischer has self-styled his mode of working “Xerox Realism” in order to emphasize that he is “not competing with or trying to reproduce a photograph.”¹¹ But instead of making only a rote copy of an image that is itself a mechanical copy, Fischer observes, “The touch of graphite on paper, and the passionate rendering of my favorite subjects are the driving forces of the project.”¹² Fischer, like Close, has relied on the process of first drawing grids on the image to be copied as well as corresponding ones on the surface to be drawn. He does this so that he can concentrate his energy on transposing small passages of visual information one at a time into a new medium. He views the process as belonging to a far longer historical trajectory than Close’s photorealism when he points out, “The grid is a historical transferring device used as early as the Renaissance and by later artists such as Albert Dürer” and concludes, “In a way, I’m continuing a tradition.”¹³

In a manner totally uncharacteristic of Close’s approach and much more related to the British-American super realist Malcolm Morley who in the mid-‘60s began making painterly equivalents of photographic reproductions that he has divided into grids,¹⁴ Fischer conjectures that along with his pencil, “the grid allows me to get intimate with all my subjects.”¹⁵ He represents this process as a remarkable journey into abstraction:

*The grid allows me the pleasure of getting lost in the details of my favorite imagery; it takes me on a journey into the cracks and crevices, and therefore abstractions of incredible images from the past one hundred years of art history.*¹⁶

In consideration of this statement, we might conclude that Fischer regards the grids dividing up both his selected Xerox image and his subsequent drawing as a series of intimate spaces that are particularly significant because they are the places where realistic elements begin to trail off into abstraction. Concentrating on each of these imposed squares, Fischer takes control of them one by one in his drawings: he has implied that they provide him with the key to a deeper and more private way of meditating on his chosen subject matter in his work. Moreover, he has indicated on several occasions that they serve as touchstones to a special type of intimacy whereby he becomes united with his subject.¹⁷ This closeness in turn serves as the emotional scaffolding for his drawings because the areas that begin to appear abstract allow him both greater ease of entry into the work as well as the opportunity to identify with these ambiguous spaces. Unlike Close who chose not to ameliorate his squares of transposed visual information into overarching wholes, Fischer wishes to go beyond the act of transcription in order to cohere all of his discrete blocks into a unified picture. In his completed works he permits some of the grids to be entirely covered and others to partially peer through the black passages of his drawings while still others remain highly visible in the drawings’ lighter areas.

Instead of working to achieve the look of photographic reproductions in his drawings, Fischer endeavors not only to approximate the luxuriant powdery blacks characteristic of Xerox copies but also to enhance them with the richer blacks that graphite is capable of producing. The distinction his drawing makes between the two media of photography and Xerox copy is remarkable. In addition, it provides his work with a multistoried layering that makes looking at his art a vertical exercise involving (1) the recognition that this work is a highly personal copy of a photograph, (2) the insight that a reproduction of the photographed image has been Xeroxed, and (3) the understanding that this mechanical reproduction is the source that the artist has copied. Of course, the three are conflated in Fischer's art so that one usually does not approach his drawing in a sequential fashion but all at once: only later does one begin to consider the ways these works are constructed. Working on standard white Stonehenge paper with a mechanical pencil loaded with thin HB lead, Fischer achieves in his drawings a surprising range of values that approximate those found in his Xerox model. He makes liberal use of kneaded erasers as he gradually builds up layers of graphite to achieve the velvety surfaces that have become a hallmark of his work and the range of tones that contribute to the overall richness of his images.

The enormous effort that Fischer expends on the surfaces of his drawings is in part indebted to the intensity with which he looks at art in museums and galleries. An inveterate visitor of New York art galleries, Fischer began visiting as many as 40 to 50 gallery and museum shows in a day while still a student at Alfred, and he would regularly undertake this expedition twice a month so he could stay abreast of all the changing shows. When looking at works of art, he followed the advice of his older brother Robert, who had studied illustration at the School of the Visual Arts and later became a graphic designer. According to Fischer, "Robert said, 'if you go to galleries, look up close and think about how a work is made and then later think about it conceptually.'"¹⁸ This is advice that he has continued to follow, and the benefits of this approach for his own work are readily apparent when one considers the importance he places on the actual making of an individual work, which sometimes takes as long as two weeks of concentrated activity, working 10 to 12 hours a day, to complete it.

Fischer remains highly ambivalent about the word "celebrity" when it is used in reference to his art. Recently he wrote:

I can understand why viewers might focus on the celebrity aspect of the drawings, and I guess that could be an interesting reading of the work, but to me it feels more like a consequence of the project, of choosing this kind of imagery to work with. . . . Though I do feel that the celebrity issue, obsession, fandom, etc., is an interesting one and I welcome that reading of my work [as] . . . just another layer.¹⁹

Not a zealous fan overly impressed or obsessed with celebrities' glamour and fame, Fischer takes a sophisticated and intuitive approach to his subjects. Although the act of collecting over 100 Xerox images of Andy Warhol might qualify him as an avid follower, he has found that only a few pictures of this artist appeal to him enough to decide to make a drawing of them. Whenever he selects an image to draw, he

does so on impulse: he never feels compelled to do so. He cannot explain why he chooses a particular image over other possible choices and simply deduces the obvious observation that “something clicks”²⁰ with a particular image. The transvestite image of Warhol that Fischer employed for two of his works no doubt resonated with him because the cosmetic mask and wig, coupled with the well-known body of this artist, repeats the trope of layering that appear in Fischer’s references to photographic reproductions and Xerox copies and are a crucial aspect of his drawings. Similar types of masks, which have become the basis for other individual works by Fischer, include those assumed by Matthew Barney, Robert Gober, Paul McCarthy, and Cindy Sherman. While Fischer’s inspiration may seem to come from the photograph, his work adds something to it that was not there in the first place, particularly his reference to reproductive techniques that can be interpreted as technical masks reinforcing the ones worn by his figures. Thus, we might speculate that Fischer’s attraction to a particular image depends on the unrealized possibilities that it holds out to him, and his process of selection involves seeing what is there and intuiting those qualities that his drawing might contribute. In consideration of this two-fold process, Fischer both inverts and redirects the title of Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” when he conjectures that he is “learning about art through the act of mechanical reproduction.”²¹

Fischer’s elliptical revision of Benjamin’s title is worth pursuing further because it provides special insight into the extent of his ambition for his drawings as well as an understanding of the theoretical subtlety of his art. As is well known by aficionados of Benjamin’s essay and as has been evidenced by the postmodern photo-based art that has been informed by it, this critic sets up an opposition in his essay between (1) a virtual aura resulting from the authenticity that he deems unique objects in the past to exhibit by virtue of the distance that separates them from viewers and (2) the prosaic closeness and lack of aura that mechanically produced images – meaning photographic and cinematic ones – project. Regarded in the past four decades as canonical, Benjamin’s polarity certainly made sense when he developed his thesis in the 1930s shortly after the first wave of mass media culture that began a decade earlier. But Benjamin’s strict division is less persuasive today when it is regarded from a perspective that includes an appreciation of Warhol’s highly mediated art. Elevated to the highest reaches of fine art, Warhol’s largely mechanically based reproductive paintings have acquired a sense of quality, distance, and authenticity that meets several of Benjamin’s criteria for auratic art. In addition to the transgression and merging of Benjamin’s polarity between aura and its absence that Warhol’s art effects, the postmodern photographic investigations that Louise Lawler initiated in the early 1980s record the many contexts in which works of art can be located, including home, office, museum storage area, architect-designed museum installations, fine art gallery, and auction house. Her photo-based art demonstrates the tremendous impact that different circumstances and situations can have on a traditional work’s putative aura. When considered in this manner, so-called auratic works of art can no longer be construed as autonomous and separate as Benjamin would have us believe. Instead of being able to continue to subscribe to Benjamin’s strict dichotomy, we have come to understand that the auratic can become prosaic and that the reverse can also be true. Benjamin’s own thinking about photography provides a clue to the breakdown of his polarity, for

he regarded mid-nineteenth-century photographs made with slow shutter speeds as capable of capturing a subject's aura while he concluded that the later fast shutter speeds resulted in its loss.

Andrew Deutsch regularly lectured on Benjamin's two different approaches to photography in his "Flux to Form" class,²² which Fischer took, thus providing him with the necessary conceptual tools for rethinking Benjamin's thesis regarding art's aura and its disappearance. If early photographs exuded aura because of the slow shutter speeds needed for light to register its effects on film, then, according to this logic, a similarly satisfying type of aura can slowly be built up by bringing the efforts of the hand in conjunction with the act of replicating photographs, a tactic that Fischer's work sets out to demonstrate. As Fischer opines in notes that appear to be informed by Benjamin's essay:

*I feel that I'm actually keeping up the flow of reproduction, the idea of mass production. But maybe I can make this idea a little less cold, a little more human maybe. (There is my hand, in the drawing, will you shake it?)*²³

The question at the end of this note begs the not-so-obvious conclusion that by inserting the artist's hand in the overall mechanical process of reproduction accomplished first by a camera and then by a Xerox machine, Fischer transforms it from a merely mechanical copy into an auratic one. This emphasis on the hand slows down not only the making of the work but also the process of experiencing it. And this stress on the artist's hand explains in part why Fischer qualified his work in his notes as "drawings that represent the idea of 'the copy,'"²⁴ thus acknowledging (1) the huge gap that separates a work of art from its referent and (2) the fissure coming between artistic means (the hand) and his work's primary subject (the mechanical copy).²⁵

Fischer's absurdly apt question about representation that invites viewers to reach out and "shake" the artist's hand is also an observation about the way that art, which employs the artist's hand, can join one human being's creative efforts with another's appreciation of it. This query can in part explain Fischer's appropriation of the title of Mike Kelley's piece, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, for his second New York gallery showing in 2003. Referencing the title of Kelley's 1987 assemblage of used stuffed animals and old afghans was no doubt intended to be a wry comment on Fischer's labor intensive work. As he has explained:

*I really thought about using this title for my show at Derek Eller because it represented three ideas to me, in relation to how I feel about art and my own art practice/process: (1) obviously the many "Love Hours" I spend laboring over my own work, (2) the many "Love Hours" that all of the artists I love put into their own work, and (3) the many "Love Hours" I've had looking and experiencing art in galleries and museums, and how inspired, in love, and alive it all makes me feel. And furthermore, the service that artists provide for society in general and how it's almost impossible to repay the favor so to speak. How do I thank Vincent Van Gogh for those magnificent drawings? I can't!*²⁶

For the current exhibition, which he has entitled “Strangelove,” Fischer redirects the title of Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 black comedy about out-of-control nuclear technology resulting in a pre-emptive attack to describe his own strange love for the relatively straightforward skill of making drawings of Xerox copies of photographic reproductions and thereby catapulting them into art’s arena. The word struck him as both a “funny” and fitting way of characterizing the peculiar attraction that he has for his subjects and that artists in general have for their work. Marveling at the obsessions artists are able to sustain, Fischer employs the word “strangelove” as his exhibition’s title in order to perpetuate aspects of the “Love Hours” theme of his 2003 exhibition while moving in the different direction of finding the entire artistic enterprise extraordinarily curious.²⁷

A proposition that Fischer’s work indirectly advances is this: if an individual work of art can comprise both mechanical and auratic features, then it is much more complex and far more divided than Benjamin realized. Rather than regarding Fischer’s works as unitary and autonomous, we are well advised to think of them as sequential, layered developments predicated on photographs that in themselves are usually not considered works of art even though they depict images of well-known artists. At the outset of making a drawing when he is choosing a work to copy, Fischer confronts issues of ownership. Does the generative image belong to the photographer who might be known or anonymous? Does it become part of the intellectual property of the artist since it oftentimes represents his or her persona? Or can the image be considered Fischer’s property since he both “appropriates” and “appreciates” it as he lovingly recreates it.²⁸

Both creator and copier as well as instigator of an artistic process and at times an outsider who is amazed to watch a recognizable image emerge from the drawing as if its appearance was inevitable and automatic, Fischer has placed himself in the situation of never being able to assume, in the Romantic sense of the term, sole ownership of his art. Unlike the Romantic, who as progenitor par excellence, relies on the model of divinity’s capability to generate a world beginning with nothing but imagination and the proverbial divine spark, Fischer readily acknowledges both his limited humanity and the distinct social, cultural, and historical perspective that provides him with his view of the world. He is aware that he is participating in a process that antedates his selection of an image and also anticipates his completion of a work, when it will once again be reproduced, as in this catalogue, so that it, like Sherrie Levine’s photographs of photographs, will be partially scaled back to the category of photographic reproduction from which they first appeared, thereby making aspects of his art – particularly his touch and the work’s aura – only partially reproducible.

Predicated on a specific type of doubling involving authenticity and artifice, Fischer’s work participates in the type of simulation/dissimulation tactics that Roland Barthes describes in his essay “The Third Meaning” in terms of “blur[ring] the limit separating expression from disguise” and subsequently characterizes it as an “‘artifice’ . . . [that] is at once [a] falsification of itself . . . since it shows its fissure and its suture.”²⁹ Relying on Barthes, New York critic Douglas Crimp’s famous *October* essay “Pictures,” which legitimizes postmodern photo-based art at the same time as it announces it to be a new type of art, analogizes the third meaning in terms of the noun and verb forms that the word “picture” is capable of

connoting and also proposes it as a stylistic designation for this new work.²⁹ Discussing the work of such “pictures” group artists as Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, and Sherrie Levine, Crimp observes, “underneath each picture there is always another picture.”³⁰ Barthes, the main theoretical source for Crimp and his artists, theorizes this overlapping as the third meaning, which goes beyond information and symbol. In an obvious nod to geometry, Barthes analogizes it in terms of an obtuse angle, which is at once more generous and also more precarious than straight-arrow right angles and also unlike narrow-focused acute angles. In accordance with its geometric equivalent, this type of obtuse meaning goes far beyond mere information and established symbols to connote the simulation/dissimulation tactic associated with certain types of masks, particularly those appearing at masquerade balls that are intended to create mystery at the same time they reveal this mystery to be only an elaborately staged act. Using language that could be applied to both Sherman’s photo-based art, which is predicated on the game of the artist assuming a persona, and to Fischer’s multi-storied drawings, which are both depictions and falsifications, Barthes compares his obtuse meaning to

*an actor disguised twice over (once as actor in the anecdote, once as an actor in the dramaturgy) without one disguise destroying the other; a multi-layering of meanings which always lets the previous meaning continue, as in a geological formation, saying the opposite without giving up the contrary . . .*³¹

Elsewhere in his essay, Barthes emphasizes this creative strategy’s ability to function as a “counter-narrative” in which it presents its own “play of presence/absence,” thereby “appearing-disappearing”³² as one looks at the circumstance of an actor assuming a role. Following Barthes’ lead, one can discern in Fischer’s work the fact that drawing is a counter-narrative that undermines photography’s dominance as well as the reverse scenario of photography functioning to undermine drawing’s preponderance. He multiplies and complicates this already complex dialectic when he makes a drawing of a black-and-white Xerox copy of a reproduced photograph of the 1992 professional color photograph that California artist Charles Ray commissioned of a fiberglass dummy of himself, which he constructed for this express purpose. In terms of this type of layering that exposes a number of gaps between reality and fiction and plays as well with presence and absence, Fischer’s work can be construed in Barthes’ terms as “a structuration which slips away from the inside.”³³



Charles Ray, 2001
Graphite on paper
Image: 8.25" x 3.375"
Paper: 23.50" x 16.50"
Collection of Arthur G. Rosen

In his essay Barthes ventures interpretations that act like viruses attacking the work of art from inside its vertical structure and allow him to differentiate the pretense of actors from the cinematic roles they assume. In recognition of this operative that viewers often realize even as they allow themselves to be seduced by a narrative's fictive claims to reality, Barthes theorizes the condition that he labels "filmic." He outlines this idea in the following manner:

*The third meaning structures the film differently without ... subverting the story and for this reason, perhaps, it is at the level of the third meaning, and at that level alone, that the "filmic" finally emerges. The filmic is that in the film which cannot be described, the representation that cannot be represented The filmic, very paradoxically, cannot be grasped in the film "in situation," "in movement," "in its natural state," but only in that major artifact, the still The "movement" regarded as the essence of film is not animation, flux, mobility, "life," copy, but simply the framework of a permutational unfolding and a theory of the still becomes necessary The still offers us the inside of the fragment. . . . Moreover, the still is not a sample . . . but a quotation*³⁴

Like quotations that require being demarcated by quotation marks, the filmic also needs to be differentiated from film so that its role as a twinned statement – both a self-consciously cited and repeated passage – becomes apparent. Following Barthes' example, we can theorize for Cindy Sherman's masqueraded images, Sherrie Levine's photographs of photographs, and Dan Fischer's drawings of reproduced and frequently masked images the parallel theoretical category of the "photographic," which includes the photograph as part of its representation while becoming primarily significant for restating its function internally so that it comments on itself at the same time that it partially dissimulates itself.

The advantage of employing this theory of the photographic as a special category is to be found in its ability to enable us to discuss the type of disguise and/or multiple layers of copying that comprise a number of postmodern works, which self-consciously cite or appropriate other photographic images even as they redirect them to new ends. Not autonomous, these works are split in the process of being formed so that their fragmentary nature is as much internal as external. In the photographic two dominant tensions prevail. One is between the work and its appropriated referent – that is between its old and new meanings – which we can consider a horizontal type of displacement. The other is a vertical one: it is found in the type of doubling that characterizes the disguises that artist Sherman assumes, the re-photographing that Levine undertakes, and the elaborate masquerades that Fischer's subjects often thematize and his drawings carry out when they assume the look and manner of Xerox copies of photographically reproduced images. Although all three are involved in similar postmodern pursuits, the differences between the two generations of artists are also important because Sherman and Levine belong to an earlier generation that relied on fast shutter speeds to manifest their photo-based works while Fischer is a member of a later one intent on slowing down the making of art so that it becomes an extended meditation. The quickly realized object versus the painstakingly achieved one that curator Jean Crutchfield refers to as the works of "fast and slow generations"³⁵ is also apparent in the difference between Levine's watercolors, which are free

and relatively quickly made improvisations of reproduced images, and Fischer's carefully articulated copies, which reclaim photographic representations as drawings, thus returning them to an auratic state. Apropos this changed velocity, Fischer reminded himself,

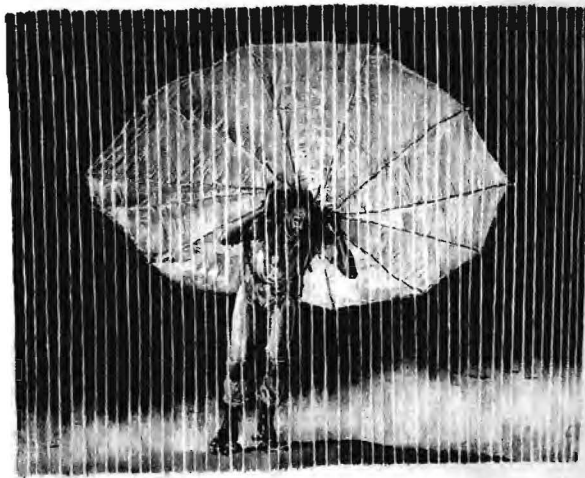
Part of the job of being an artist in "today's world": slow it down. Approach from a different angle, heightened sense of observation, advanced skill, acute focus and reflection. Embrace tradition (know history and grow from that knowledge). Be open to growing technologic advances in the field. You can be critical, but don't discriminate. Be in love.³⁶

In addition to differing from earlier postmodernists in terms of the time involved in actually making the work and the increasingly important role that the hand plays in its creation, Fischer moves away from earlier postmodern cynicism to create an art based on the appreciation of his subject and the real love of his process. Extending this idea, he writes,

I'm not trying to be critical or ironic when I make drawings of artists. I'm trying to be appreciative, understanding; I want to participate. On a daily basis I take a journey, and get lost in the details of my favorite imagery.³⁷

The foregoing discussion enables us to conclude that Dan Fischer's postmodern drawings, which he terms "Xerox realism," are both real and imitation: authentic efforts as well as dissimulating achievements. Going beyond Walter Benjamin and working more in accord with Louise Lawler's approach, they manifest both auratic and prosaic characteristics. And following the direction of Barthes' third or obtuse meaning, they are theoretically photographic, i.e. layered representations, even though they are not photographs. Original copies, they are depictions predicated on significant yet subtle differences.

Robert Rauschenberg, 1999
Graphite on paper
Image: 8.5" x 10.5"
Paper: 15.12" x 22"
Collection of Derek Eller



Footnotes

¹ Fischer found Sherrie Levine's work in particular fascinating. He copied several pages of notes regarding this artist's work that he took from Linda Weintraub, Arthur Danto, and Thomas McEvelley, *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society, 1970s – 1990s* (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, Inc., 1996). Cf. Notes in Fischer's papers, Long Island, New York. The papers, which consist of 38 pages of hand-written notes, begin during the artist's last year at Alfred and continue to the present, but are for the most part undated. Only a few can be dated on internal evidence. According to Fischer, conversation with author, 14 December 2005, he started making his early work before he began reading about Levine's work, even though he was somewhat familiar with her overall approach prior to making this art.

² Fischer, conversation with author. Andrew Deutsch, telephone conversation with author, 20 January 2006. Deutsch has related that the subtitle of his course was inspired by Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys, who advocated shaking up preconceptions and thus changing one's attitudes toward drawing.

³ Deutsch, telephone conversation with author. Deutsch is known primarily for his experimental music. In the past eight years he has released over 20 CDRs of solo electronic music on his Magic If recording label, and he has also collaborated with such electronic music artists as Tetsu Inoue and Stephen Vitiello. His First Line (*Sounds for Drawing*), a collaboration with Ann Hamilton, was included in Lawrence Rinder's Whitney exhibition *BitStreams* (2001).

⁴ Fischer, conversation with author.

⁵ Fischer, email to author, 27 January 2006.

⁶ Artist's Statement, 1999. Copy in Fischer's papers, Long Island, New York.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Notes in Fischer's papers. Fischer, email to author, thinks that the "handmade readymade" designation may have been something that he picked up from a friend or else read. Noteworthy examples of the handmade readymade are Robert Gober's handmade sinks, which have been compared to Duchamp's urinal.

⁹ Fischer, conversation with author.

¹⁰ Notes in Fischer's papers.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Malcolm Morley: The Art of Painting" in Robert Hobbs, *Malcolm Morley*. (New York: Sperone, Westwater, 2005). It is too often overlooked that Chuck Close's photorealist work was initiated two years after Malcolm Morley's, when Close began to regard painting as a means for undermining photography's then unquestioned truth. A fellow teacher with Morley at the New York School of Visual Arts, Close became similarly involved in superimposing grids on small photographic images in order to break down their visual information into discrete bits. Then, with commendable accuracy, Close like Morley attempted to reproduce each square of this imaged reality. However, unlike Morley who relied on the mundane subjects of travel posters and postcards in his early works as a means for stabilizing and neutralizing these topics so that he could then emphasize the process of re-presenting them in terms of visible brushstrokes, Close emphasized his subject, who are artists and friends, as well as his grid at the same time that he diminished the effect of his hand by choosing to work with an airbrush. This apparatus was particularly useful for Close since it ensured that there would be no paint strokes in the final work to interfere with his images that simulated black-and-white snapshots, albeit on the grand scale. In this way, Close was able to utilize both painting and large scale, which enabled him to heighten the type of pictorial inconsistencies found in snapshots. Close's initial desire to

underscore photography's compromised objectivity separates him from Morley and also from Fischer who wished to problematize the differences and similarities between a copy and its referent.

¹⁵ Notes in Fischer's papers.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Fischer, conversation with author.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Fischer, email to author, 29 January 2006.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Notes in Fischer's papers.

²² Deutsch, telephone conversation with author.

²³ Notes in Fischer's papers.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ This type of gap between work and referent was a *modus operandi* for Robert Smithson's late 1960s Site/Nonsite dialectic in which his Nonsites – often mistakenly regarded as the artist's sculpture and located in such traditional art contexts as museums, galleries, or private collections – refer back to the Sites at the same time that they establish obstacles preventing the two from being merged together.

²⁶ Fischer, email to author, 29 January 2006.

²⁷ Fischer, telephone conversation with author, 29 January 2006.

²⁸ Notes in Fischer's papers. In his notes Fischer counters the word "appropriation" with "appreciation" several times. Although he privileges the second approach over the first, his coupling of the two strongly suggests considering them in tandem.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning" (1970), trans. Stephen Heath in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, rpt. 1983), p. 323.

³⁰ Douglas Crimp, "Pictures" *October* 8 (Spring, 1979): 75. Raised to canonical status in the annals of postmodern art, this essay is more heavily indebted to Barthes' "The Third Meaning" than has formerly been realized for the theoretical basis that it employs in assessing the new work of the "pictures" group that is limited in this article to Jack Goldstein, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Troy Brauntuch, and Sherrie Levine. Later Richard Prince became a central figure of the "pictures" aesthetic. In fn. 10, p. 83, Crimp credits Barthes' formative role in the following manner: "The appearance of the film still as an object of particular fascination in recent artistic practice is so frequent as to call for a theoretical explanation. Both Sherman's and Robert Longo's works actually resemble this odd artifact, as does that of John Mendelsohn, James Birrell, among others. Moreover, many of its characteristics as discussed by Barthes are relevant to the concerns of all the work discussed here." The crucial importance of Barthes' interpretative scheme for both this new work and Crimp's essay needs to be stressed even more than it has in the past because it is an idea that has helped to generate an entire school of photo-based postmodern art. In addition to the artists already listed, both Barbara Kruger and Louise Lawler should be included in this group of artists.

³¹ Barthes, p. 323.

³² Ibid., p. 328.

³³ Ibid., p. 329.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 329, 330, 33, and 332.

³⁵ Jean Crutchfield, conversation with author, 21 January 2006.

³⁶ Notes in Fischer's papers.

³⁷ Ibid.