

"Kathryn Andrews," *The Buzz and the Beat: Inside the L.A. Art World*, edited by Richard Hertz, Ojai: First Minneola Press, 2009, pp. 211-217

### **Kathryn Andrews**

My last semester of college, I interned in New York City with Rosalind Solomon, a fine art photographer in her mid-sixties who had learned the craft from Lisette Model. After several months, she offered me a job printing her black and white images. I was also working in the commercial-photo world, editing news pictures at stock houses and when I applied to graduate schools in photography, these people were my immediate connections. I sought advice from a couple of professors I had met at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University who were engaged in a conversation about the history of the medium, dating back to its inception. I ended up going to the Rochester Institute of Technology for an MFA. In both the traditional and commercial photo circles that I was in, RIT was recommended.

As an undergraduate at Duke University, I studied image-making and civil rights conflicts, in particular how documentary photography and filmmaking had been used to expose the kinds of racism, sexism, and religious fundamentalism I'd seen growing up in Alabama. I had access to sociology scholars, experts in world religion, historians of ethnic genocide. Though I was curious about fine art, I decided not to focus on it and instead to pursue as broad of an education as possible. Years later when people asked me if I had worked with the philosopher Frederic Jameson or the art historian Kristine Stiles, who were both at Duke, I wanted to kick myself. I can't remember if I even heard about Jameson when I was an undergraduate. By chance I met Stiles in the university slide library, where I worked, and I took her class on early-twentieth-century modernism. When she invited me to curate an exhibition of contemporary art with other students for the school's museum, I declined. I wasn't into contemporary art. I was interested in the history of race relations in the America South and why Duke had so few black faculty members, a topic which became the focus of my senior paper.

At RIT I worked in considerable isolation, making pictures that had little to do with contemporary ways of seeing. My approach was to emulate what I had studied in college, traditional black-and-white street photography—going out into an environment, snapping images, developing negatives by hand, and making fine prints in the darkroom. This was 1997, when digital photography

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was becoming popular. Content wise, I was dealing with stereotypes of feminine beauty, while ignoring influences that have changed the look of the medium since the mid-twentieth century, specifically the rise of advertising photography, California conceptual artists' anti-craft gestures, and Photoshop. I'd never heard of Cindy Sherman, much less appropriation. My art history education had stopped with the 1940s, and I hadn't understood how aesthetic idioms other than those entrenched in documentary could be vehicles for political content.

The program at RIT had few visiting artists and only a handful of graduate faculty, most of whom rarely saw contemporary art, due to Rochester's small art scene and distance from New York, the nearest major art production center. Nevertheless, a couple RIT professors were exceptional. Michael Starenko, an adjunct and former editor of *Afterimage* magazine, taught a thorough course on the basics of postmodernism. I finally read Jameson as well as Douglas Crimp, who was teaching down the street at the University of Rochester, and I began attending lectures there. Jeff Weiss, an artist who had lived in both Los Angeles and New York, would drive every week from Manhattan to Rochester to teach his class, in which he showed hundreds of slides of exhibitions that had taken place in SoHo and Chelsea the previous month. Seeing this work was my first real introduction to contemporary art.

A fellow student had heard that when Richard Serra was a graduate student at Yale, he looked through every art book in the library. Since there was nothing to do in Rochester, some classmates and I killed time by copying this idea. A few of us had a competition to see who could look at the most books. Around this time, I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the politics of taking another person's image. I began constructing objects to photograph. I attempted to use RIT's woodshop and was met with an insane amount of red tape. At RIT, similar to many graduate programs across the country, mediums were housed within distinct departments and comingling was discouraged. At that point I decided I was in the wrong place. I quit the program and resolved to find another.

Before I left Los Angeles artist Lisa Anne Auerbach lectured on her work in Weiss's class. When she spoke, she wore a diamond-

studded tiara. She showed photographs of airplane contrails, a bubble-gum sculpture of a penis, and a collaborative zine about porn and skiing she'd produced with the L.A. writer-artist Benjamin Weissman. What Auerbach was doing was unlike anything being made at RIT. This was when I first learned about Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, where Auerbach had attended graduate school.

In 1999 I returned to the commercial photo world in Manhattan, doing photo research, editing annual reports, and working freelance on different magazines including *GQ*, *Sports Illustrated*, and ESPN. I was also visiting galleries to the point where there wasn't time to make art. I had realized I needed to be looking at current shows. Williamsburg had not become a huge thing; Chelsea did not exist in the form that it does now; SoHo was beginning to dwindle. One day in SoHo I met a young gallerist and asked him what schools he thought were best. The first time I applied to schools I had not conducted extensive research. I now decided to speak with as many people as I could and to see for myself who was teaching where and what they had to offer, even if this method was expensive and time-consuming.

I looked at Columbia. I looked at Yale. I flew to Chicago to visit the School of the Art Institute. In Los Angeles I looked at UCLA, the University of Southern California, CalArts, and Art Center. I applied to each of these schools and a few others. I was accepted by many and offered a couple of scholarships, but I really wanted to go to Art Center. Its program integrated artists from different disciplines. There weren't departments or specialties. There would be a video artist talking about painting, a painter talking about installation art, a theorist talking about performance.

For my application to Art Center, I sent slides of photo work I made at RIT. I wasn't accepted. Andy Ouchi, a friend in the program, told me that a couple students had applied more than once. Encouraged, I called Richard Hertz, then the graduate chair, who told me to interview with a faculty member and reapply with different work. This seemed feasible since the portfolio I had sent wasn't representative of my newer interests. I met with Liz Lerner and, although I probably shouldn't have been allowed, accompanied Ouchi to an admissions meeting. Students in the program could give their opinion on who should be admitted.

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I saw several of my soon-to-be peers' portfolios reviewed and heard why certain applications were accepted. A couple months later, I reapplied with brand new work. To make the next deadline, I threw together images of a bunch of sculptures. I didn't know what I was doing, so everything looked unresolved. I was admitted.

Once in the program, I experimented a great deal. I was cutting out pictures from newspapers and books and taping them to the wall, looking for relationships, and making arrangements of tiny biomorphic sculptures in the language of late-nineties New York accretion art à la Sarah Sze and Diana Cooper. Occasionally, in a variety of kooky materials, I tried out some of the forms I had seen Charles Long use when I interned for him just before moving to California. In my studio there would be an odd assortment of blobs on the floor, some made from lotions and gels, others from resins. People would accidentally step in them. During weekly crits teachers asked, "What's your relationship to all of this? You're not considering the implications of what you're doing." I would make one move and a lot of smart people would tell me all the ways I wasn't making sense.

Students who attended Art Center would often form a mentor relationship with a particular teacher. I preferred to work with many different people. I was intrigued when one person would tell me to do one thing and another would tell me to do the exact opposite. The most influential folks for me were Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Bruce Hainley, and Richard Hawkins. I also had instructive conversations with Ann Goldstein, Mike Kelley, Liz Larner, Tim Martin, Patti Podesta, Stephen Prina, Diana Thater, and Christopher Williams. Ron Jones was there for a stint. Jack Goldstein, Mary Heilmann, and Michael Krebber visited. So many artists, historians, critics, and curators were around. My classmates and I were constantly in awe. It was just before the market superexploded, when everyone was still teaching to make a living. This was 2000 to 2002.

The beauty of Art Center was that the faculty understood that the students benefited from diverse viewpoints. I remember some professors helping their friends get visiting gigs, artists certain other faculty members couldn't stand. Eyebrows would be raised, yet these people would be hired anyway. Or when an MFA candi-

date presented his or her final exhibition, six or seven professors would debate the work for hours in front of the entire student body, arguing whether or not the work carried out the student's intent. These reviews would become very heated, and students would rehash them for days afterward.

In the building that housed the grad studios, there were no ceilings between rooms and no privacy. You could hear a faculty member pick apart your next-door neighbor's ideas. Inevitably your own work would be informed by what you overheard, but it felt weird knowing people's private business. This and other factors made Art Center socially dysfunctional. Many students competed for face time with the teachers, who were becoming increasingly famous. Students were ambitious, eager to find galleries, and sought alliances with faculty to make that happen. As is common among artists, some were struggling with drug addiction and others with social anxieties, neuroses, agoraphobia, and depression.

I came to know a lot of my classmates and found some to be particularly inspiring, including Lecia Dole-Recio, Brian Fahlstrom, Stan Kaplan, Mindy Markowitz, Jeffrey Rugh, and Stephanie Taylor. Some students were dealing with problems of painting, others were exploring filmmaking and performance. Taking the advice of a teacher, I began making abstract sculpture. While my peers were experiencing breakthroughs, I was having a huge problem: I doubted the degree to which any of my objects could qualify as art. I began to wonder why I should make a sculpture that looked one way when it could just as well look a tad different. If a work's physical characteristics didn't feel productive—if I questioned any of them—I would destroy the whole thing. I became incapable of finishing work. When people came to my studio they would see scraps of painted wood and paper everywhere. I was uncertain about everything while in my head I was privately enjoying the chaos of the scraps lying about, interacting by chance with the environment. I liked the surprise of seeing these pieces become transformed when I placed them in different corners of the studio. It was like what happened in Josef Albers's color studies. When one scrap was placed beside another, its identity would change.

For the first few years after school, there was a huge pressure to enter the marketplace. I rarely heard, "You should chill and figure out what you're doing. Don't worry about shows." Instead it was, "What do you have coming up? Who's visiting your studio?" The emphasis wasn't on developing a practice; it was about new opportunities. Sometimes I was asked to exhibit and would force myself to finish a sculpture or a drawing, but I'd feel very unsure about it. I didn't understand my identity as its author. I wondered, "What's the world's part in what I'm making and what's mine? How can I own this?" I began thinking the creation of an art object is a collaboration between the artist and the world. For example, available materials and the conventions that determine their forms, these things are beyond the artist's control. Perhaps this paper is out of stock, or that plywood only comes in one size. When the viewer looks at an art object, there's much about its genesis that isn't obvious. I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable exhibiting works under my name.

In 2006 I began a project space in my apartment to show younger L.A. artists with whom I felt a connection. I figured that these people could use my space to develop and cultivate an audience, while I was exploring what it meant to exhibit objects that I had not authored. Around this time, I realized that I had been disliking my work because its influences could be easily located in specific cultural movements: Russian constructivism, AbEx, op art, light and space. In mid 2006 I had to deal with this problem head on. I was in a show at Glendale College with a painter, Hadley Holliday, whose work resembled mine. There was optical confusion about where my sculptures ended and her paintings began. This mix-up prompted me to reconsider the autonomous object, how traditionally when an artist makes a work, his or her name is associated with it and the work has physical and conceptual boundaries that society can agree upon and that the marketplace can sell. By contrast, when a work is nonautonomous, it remains a site of contestation. It can be perceived as incomplete, needing something additional to make it whole, or it can be seen as annexing its environs.

In 2007 I began making objects that depended upon other artists' works. In some cases I invited artists to treat my sculptures as sites that they could act upon, à la Gaylen Gerber. Or I asked artists to lend me pieces to which I could respond. The resulting

relationship would be cooperative, not collaborative. Our pieces would be shown together but would bear individual titles and signatures. The caveat was that my title would suggest an annexation of the other artist's contribution. I was trying to complicate the sanctity of authorship. I figured, if I can suggest that "my work" isn't exclusively authored by me, then I can relinquish some of the responsibility for how it signifies. Some people described what I was doing as parasitic, but I felt that by placing two works together in an absurd relationship I could point to how even viewers "author" art. When a viewer couldn't tell where my work ended and the other artist's work began, he or she would become aware of the ways one chooses what one sees.

Recently I've been exploring different ways to construct works with unclear boundaries. I've been renting Hollywood props and designing sculptures to accompany them. After I exhibit the two together, I return the prop to the rental house. I've also been creating works that riff off others in my oeuvre. Aesthetic choices for sculptures I'm making are visibly informed by paintings I made last year, or ones that will be made in the future. I no longer wonder, "How am I supposed to think about this singular object?" Instead I go about producing many contexts for it, trying to multiply its meanings. If I make an abstract painting that too strongly suggests fauvism or neo-geo, I trust that in the context of later production, that painting will come to mean the next big art movement, or how cowboy hats are out of fashion, or that yesterday I read an article about a Nevada prostitute who maintains a solid relationship with her religious family. Ultimately it's about seeing and how we become set in our ways.