

Take It or Leave It

Institution, Image, Ideology

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Figure It Out

On the Possibilities of Political Figuration

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON

One of the problems with much recent political art is that artists seem to be trying to achieve a fixed style for political work.

DOUGLAS CRIMP

When Douglas Crimp noted in a roundtable discussion in 1984 that some artists invested in political work were adopting a “fixed style,” he was referring to what he perceived as a troublesome consolidation of formal elements that “tends to reduce the work to a generalized politicized statement, rather than one of real specificity.”¹ Crimp’s point is well taken, and we might extend his critique to institutions and to art history; museums and critics often do their own “fixing” of styles by categorizing artists within movements in order to produce manageable taxonomies, even as artists themselves pursue unruly, multivalent practices that span a range of apparently contradictory genres. This problem is especially acute when artists who are considered “radical” or progressive also pursue stylistic modes that have fallen out of political favor or have been cast as outdated—in particular, representational forms.

Since the 1980s, many aspects of figuration have been viewed with suspicion; this is due in part to the rise of highly valued neo-expressionist painting in those years, which was widely understood as one facet of a conservative backlash against more obdurate and potentially more difficult-to-sell minimalist and conceptualist works. The concomitant art-critical swerve sharply against referential legibility was encapsulated in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh’s seminal article from 1981 on the upsurge of figuration in European painting starting in the early twentieth century, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting.”² Buchloh’s historically specific discussion regarding the

waning of abstraction and the implementation of “outright authoritarian styles of representation” from World War I to neo-expressionism has been taken as a global condemnation of any kind of mimetic reference as pandering to the market.³ Yet many artists who have been deeply involved in the development of the dovetailing discourses of appropriation and institutional critique have employed figuration, reshaping its ideological contours in the process.

In what follows, I track the use of figuration by Adrian Piper, Robert Gober, Sue Williams, and David Wojnarowicz to contend that these vocally feminist and queer artists have utilized drawn and painted representation as a specifically polemical resource. I focus on a small number of images, moving episodically via an associative logic rather than following chronology in order to ask a series of open questions that, following Crimp, aims not to “fix” any one political style: What is at stake when figuration is deployed by artists ostensibly categorized as “conceptual”? What happens when the material specificity of line, tone, and composition—often caricatured as regressively formalist—reemerge as significant terms for feminist and queer artists? And how have contemporary discourses on “the body” in the past few decades (as diseased, disciplined by power, under siege, or anxious) informed the changing reception of figuration?⁴

It has been difficult for art history to assimilate the figurative work of an avowedly conceptual artist such as Adrian Piper, who has

1. Douglas Crimp, in Yve-Alain Bois, Douglas Crimp, and Rosalind Krauss, “A Conversation with Hans Haacke” (1984), reprinted in *October: The First Decade*, ed. Annette Michelson et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 199.

2. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 39–68.

3. *Ibid.*, 40. Recent scholarship has reexamined figurative impulses in the twentieth century and come to different conclusions; for instance, Devin Fore’s look at interwar representation claims that it was far from regressive and potentially laid the ground for later postmodern practices. Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

4. Susan Sontag wrote an early text regarding the anxiety surrounding bodies in the time of AIDS, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989). Since the early 1990s, thinkers within queer theory and feminism have been at the forefront of contesting the ostensibly “naturalized” body; one influential example is Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

painted since the mid-1960s. Her *Multichrome Mom and Dad* (1966; fig. 15), an acrylic-on-canvas portrait of her parents, reminds us that the “monochrome”—a major catchphrase for modernism⁵—is also loaded with racial connotations. In this work she used both a black-and-white palette (around the edges of the image) and colored pigments (in a rectangular window in the center of the image) to depict, in multichrome, a mixed-race couple. Such a painting flies in the face of evaluations of Piper that focus mainly on her work in performance. Kobena Mercer has stated, “Piper’s art has been fiercely antioptical from the start.”⁶ But there is nothing “antioptical” about Piper’s careful attention to framing, visual balance, and hue here—rather, she cannily mobilizes the opticality of modernist painting to highlight the ocular elements of racialized recognition.⁷

To be fair to Mercer, *Multichrome Mom and Dad* is an early work, yet Piper has consistently continued to display her skills as a student of the human form, including in *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* (1981) and, most notably, in the *Vanilla Nightmares* series, begun in 1986.⁸ In these works, charcoal and oil crayon drawings of bodies and faces cover pages of the *New York Times*, their expressions and body parts responding to both the form of the newspaper and its content, with its stories of white farmers in Zimbabwe and updates about interest rates. In *Vanilla Nightmares #20* (1989; p. 91), Piper’s black faces with white eyes echo the photograph of South African miners on the cover of the newspaper’s *Week in Review* section from July 27, 1986. Hands appear to cradle or support the boxed-off lead article about US sanctions against apartheid, complete with photos of Ronald Reagan and Desmond Tutu, as graphic depictions of male and female sexual organs teem in the lower third of the image.

Combining the techniques of mass-media appropriation with her lushly hand-drawn figures, Piper resists any attempts to box her in to a firmly “antioptical” regime. In *Vanilla Nightmares #20*, medium matters: charcoal (with its own racialized connotations) is a nimble vehicle for her almost iconic forms, gathered together with mouths open as if in a chorus of protest. It may seem an obvious point, but drawing and painting allow for invention, including the



Fig. 15. Adrian Piper, *Multichrome Mom and Dad*, 1966. Acrylic on canvas. 15 x 18 in. (35.6 x 45.7 cm). The Marieluise Hessel Collection at the Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

opportunity to signify “bodies” en masse in a nonspecific manner, rather than tethering the figure indexically, as can be the case with a photograph, to “these particular bodies.” Other artists since the 1960s, like Leon Golub and Ida Applebroog, have turned to figuration because of its ability to blur the lines between the recognizable and the fantastical. As they depict characters that move in and out of the known world and present figures whose very blankness becomes a screen for the viewer’s projection, their canvases have the potency of dreams so vivid they feel real. They are also distinctly politically oriented, as works like Golub’s *Mercenaries IV* (1980) lay bare the interpenetration of violence, domination, and masculinity. Applebroog’s gridded *Couple I* (1983; fig. 16) repeats a pair of schematic figures—a man and a woman seen in profile—whose gestures take on different affective valences as their bodies shift from the vertical to the horizontal and as they are given a variety of formal treatments: outlined, inked in, silhouetted. The generality of their faces opens up interpretative space: is this an embrace or an assault?

Critics have castigated Piper’s *Vanilla Nightmares* series, however, for precisely the way it portrays bodies with a mythic non-differentiation. Wrote Michael Brenson: “Her images are phantoms, often larger than the white people in the advertisements, indeed often larger than life, with no individuality. They are little more than

5. See Thierry de Duve, “The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas,” in *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 199–279.

6. Kobena Mercer, “Decentering and Recentering: Adrian Piper’s Spheres of Influence,” in *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective*, ed. Maurice Berger (Baltimore: Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 1999), 48.

7. Like Piper, the artist Byron Kim deals simultaneously with the visual and racial registers of color in his monochrome paintings based on skin tones.

8. Glenn Ligon riffed on Piper’s work in his diptych *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features / Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features* (1998).

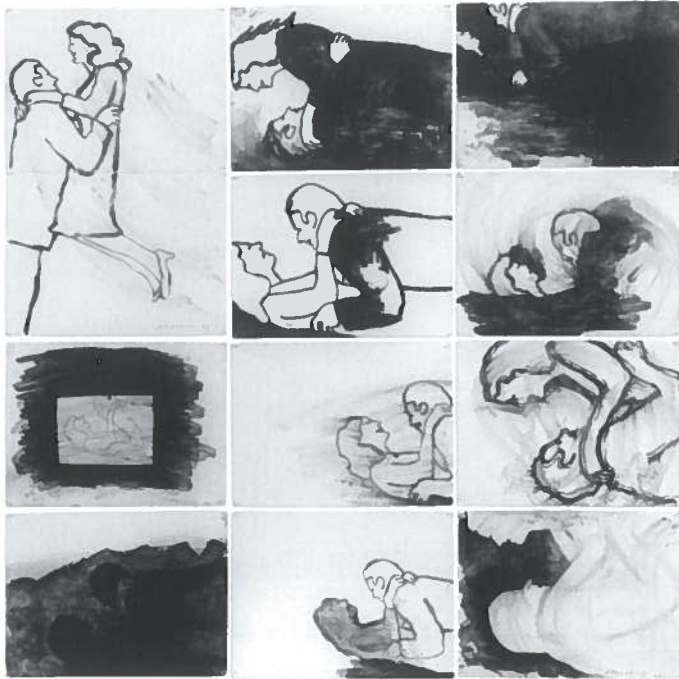


Fig. 16. Ida Applebroog. *Couple I*, 1983. Charcoal on Arches paper. 12 panels, 91 x 92 in. (231.1 x 233.7 cm) overall

forces of lubriciousness, potency, envelopment and night.”⁹ Brenson misses the point. Piper’s drawings respond to the purportedly objective reporting of the *Times*, surfacing repressed collective imaginings; they are meant to articulate unspoken fears about blackness, control, and sex. As the artist has commented: “Many of these drawings utilize the iconography of outlaw sexuality in order to call attention to the distinction between force and power (thus the term ‘vanilla’ originally refers to ‘vanilla sex’).”¹⁰ Perhaps one of the phobias about figuration is that it is not “vanilla” but dives into the realm of messy carnality, including a close association with the artist’s own touch, an association that must be, like a fetish, disavowed.

Piper’s *Vanilla Nightmares* resonate strongly with a more recent series of sexual drawings that similarly take the *New York Times* as a theoretical prompt and a literal support. Several years after the events of September 11, 2001, Robert Gober made a body of works that referenced the media coverage of the attacks, using appropriated pages of the *Times* from the day after—the works’ titular *Sep-*

*tember 12*¹¹—as ground for hand-drawn pastel and graphite figures (pp. 164–65). Gober did not work directly on the newsprint, as Piper did, but created an element of remove by using photolithography to print the newspaper onto ivory wove paper, which then served as a base for his pastels. Like the *Twin Towers*, Gober’s photolithographs are paired: one *Times* spread in each twin has been printed backward, making the words difficult to decipher. (The works on paper were part of a larger installation that included “mirror-reversed” objects as well.)

Overlaying headlines about a “day of terror” and tonally dissonant advertisements for wireless phones are Gober’s tender couplings: fragments of embracing bodies, interlocking limbs, hands clutching torsos, knees tightening around waists. There are no heads or faces here, no overt markers of gender that might firmly anchor them to either heterosexuality or queerness; instead, they float somewhat free of such categorizations. In stark contrast to Piper’s explicit engorged penises and labia, there are no visible genitalia in Gober’s work. What is more, whereas Piper presents easily discernible morphological characteristics vis-à-vis race, there is no way to map race clearly onto Gober’s bodies—though, by and large, they have very pale skin tones and appear to be a self-conscious comment on whiteness. (In fact, Gober is an astute theoretician of whiteness, as evidenced by works such as his wallpaper *Hanging Man / Sleeping Man* [1989; pp. 86–87], in which a white man slumbers in his bed while a lynched black man dangles from a tree.)

Rendered with Gober’s fine, sure outline and delicate modeling of fleshy contours, the drawings, situated in the center of the newspaper spreads, do not occlude the text and images underneath but reframe, if not rupture, the depictions of confusion, horror, and death by introducing moments of physical desire, sexual vitality, and comfort. It is important that the juxtapositions of *September 12* are not produced via photomontage: Gober’s clasping bodies are not indexical representations but ideations conjured in his mind and created through his gestures. The discordant element of sensual artistic figuration combined with mayhem and tragedy led a reviewer in *Frieze* to call the series Gober’s “most transgressive works” when they debuted at Matthew Marks Gallery in 2005.¹² (It was, significantly, the artist’s first show in New York in more than a decade and hence his first since 2001.)

Gober has long explored the vulnerability, penetrability, and porosity of bodies, an interest that has been meaningfully linked

9. Michael Brenson, “Adrian Piper’s Head-On Confrontation of Racism,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1990.

10. Adrian Piper, “Vanilla Nightmares, 1986–1990,” in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, *Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 253.

11. The title also hints at the autobiographical: Gober’s birthday is September 12.

12. Katie Stone, “Robert Gober,” *Frieze*, no. 92 (June–August 2005), http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/robert_gober1/.

to the HIV/AIDS crisis.¹³ As *September 12* demonstrates, however, he is concerned with all manner of corporeal fragility and the drive to manage, contain, or mitigate trauma. The newspaper concerns itself with how to depict national nightmares of the scale of September 11. But Gober presses at the edges of representability, deploying figuration to test the limits of what should or should not be represented. Among the photographs reproduced from the *New York Times* is one that stirred controversy around the journalistic ethics of exploitation and privacy: a man in dark pants and white shirt—his facial features almost readable—plummeting headfirst to his death.¹⁴

Incorporating the daily news into artistic objects has been a staple of twentieth-century practices, from cubist collage to Kurt Schwitters to Hannah Höch to Jasper Johns and beyond. David Wojnarowicz's *Death of American Spirituality* (1987; p. 81) is a mixed-media, four-panel work that treats newsprint as an independent, discrete component, using torn bits of a tabloid to form the shape of a cowboy on a bucking bull, rather than appropriating whole pages as Piper and Gober do. Some of the text is still legible—true to its moment, it includes headlines about AIDS, “mob murders,” and a photograph of a sullen Oliver North—but Wojnarowicz also obliterated some of it in this richly colored phantasmagoria. His use of collage, according to Mysoon Rizk, “shuffled meanings and associations, uncovered schisms and contradictions, and generated alternative narratives of his own history and that of the world (for instance, combining references to lost cultures with ones referring to contemporary events).”¹⁵ At the same time, Wojnarowicz was committed to figuration for its imaginative possibilities, for its ability to produce what-ifs, to fashion alternative landscapes both beautiful and sinister. In *The Death of American Spirituality*, mechanical parts, a robot-skull hybrid, smokestacks, a snake, a shark, and a ghoulish Christ with yellowed eyes and a crown of thorns swarm the surface: this is a fire-and-brimstone-inferno with little glimpse of redemption.

Wojnarowicz, who was a fierce activist in fights against homophobia and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, was heavily censored in

his own lifetime and posthumously. During the “culture wars” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, he was targeted by conservative members of Congress and Donald Wildmon's American Family Association for works that directly and indirectly imaged queer sexuality. He became one of a handful of artists labeled “indecent” and “obscene” who were marshaled as evidence in arguments against the federal funding for the arts provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.¹⁶ (More recently, his video *A Fire in My Belly* [1986–87] was controversially removed from the 2010 exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.) The “culture wars” revealed the high stakes of representing bodies—especially bodies experiencing pleasure—in an era fraught with concerns about medicalization, permeability, and contagion.

But Wojnarowicz maintained a commitment to artistic interventions both unequivocal and subtle, writing: “bottom line, emotionally, even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to mark a person's response to this epidemic means whole worlds to me if it is hung in public; bottom line, each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity; bottom line, we have to find our own forms of gesture and communication.”¹⁷ Note Wojnarowicz's special singling out of “a tiny charcoal scratching” that, once made public, might help forge a new language of dissent regarding AIDS—it is a comment about scale, medium, artistic touch, and even abstraction. He expressed incredulity that his work, particularly that which dealt frankly with queer sexuality, touched so many nerves: “As far as I'm concerned the fact that in 1990 the human body is still a taboo subject is unbelievably ridiculous. What exactly is so frightening about the human body?”¹⁸ His painted work implicitly advocates for the generative ramifications of figuration; in this he differed from some political artists of the 1980s who believed that painting, especially representational painting, was best served in small doses. Hans Haacke, talking to Crimp and others in the same roundtable from 1984 quoted at the beginning of this essay, wrote that painting “is almost synonymous with what is popularly viewed as Art—art with a capital A—with all the glory, the piety, and the authority it commands.”¹⁹

13. See, especially, David Joselit, “Poetics of the Drain,” *Art in America* 85 (December 1997): 65–70, as well as Hal Foster, “An Art of Missing Parts,” *October*, no. 92 (Spring 2000): 128–56.

14. For more on this photograph and artistic responses to it, see Andrea D. Fitzpatrick, “The Movement of Vulnerability: Images of Falling and September 11,” *Art Journal* 66 (Winter 2007): 84–102.

15. Mysoon Rizk, “Reinventing the Pre-invented World,” in *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Rizzoli, 1998), 50.

16. Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002). Cynthia Carr's biography *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012) also describes his encounters with censorship.

17. David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 122–23.

18. *Ibid.*, 157.

19. Hans Haacke, in Bois, Crimp, and Krauss, “Conversation with Hans Haacke,” 175.

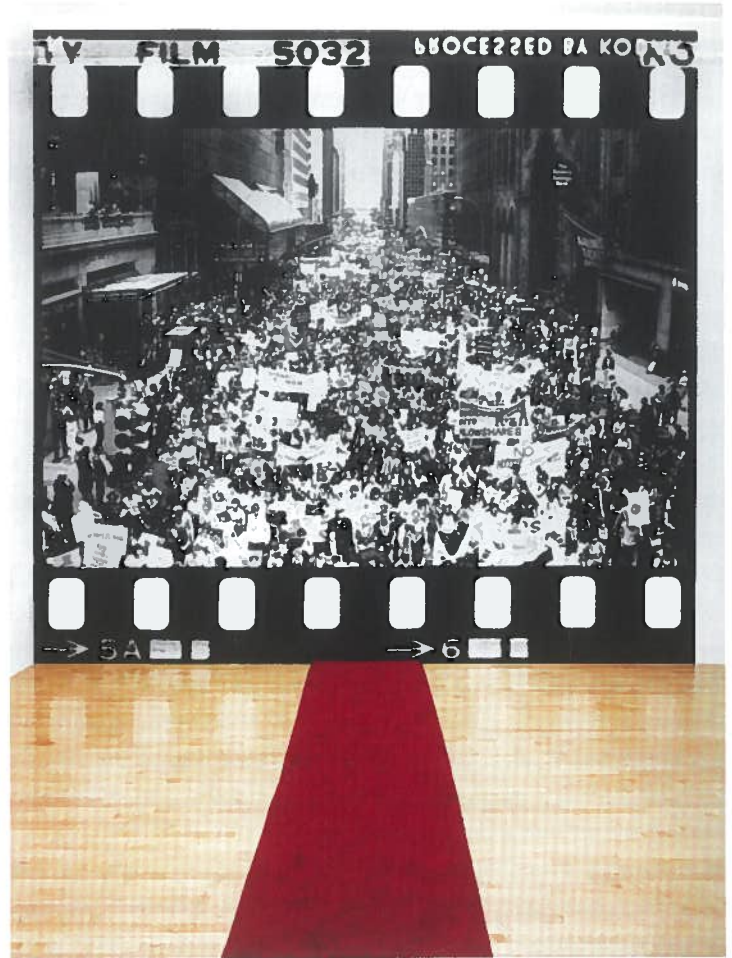


Fig. 17. Hans Haacke, *Ölgemälde: Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers*, 1982. Oil on canvas, stanchions with velvet rope, red carpet, photomural. Installation: 204 x 348 in. (518.2 x 883.9 cm); photo negative: 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm); painting: 35¼ x 29½ x 3 in. (89.5 x 74 x 7.6 cm); stanchion diameter: 12 in. (30.5 cm) each; stanchion height: 39 in. (99.1 cm) each; velvet rope length: 73 in. (185.4 cm); painting light: 5¼ x 8 x 5½ in. (13.3 x 20.3 x 14 cm); plaque: 5½ x 12 in. (14 x 30.5 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Gift of The Broad Art Foundation (M.2001.63.1--6)

One of Haacke's few works that incorporates painting, *Ölgemälde: Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers* (1982; fig. 17) aims to activate that piety and authority by placing an oil painting of Ronald Reagan across from an enlarged photograph of a mass demonstration against nuclear armament, with a red carpet running between the two opposing images.²⁰ In its original installation at Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany, Haacke exhibited a photograph that he took of a protest in Bonn; when the work is shown in the United States, he uses a photograph by Eve Cockroft of an anti-nuclear march in New York. The oil painting—but not the photo—is protected by stanchions and a velvet rope, as Haacke creates a confrontation that pits presidential authority against populist

outrage. The piece also sets up a confrontation between mediums, as painting's honorific functions are contrasted with the documentary uses of photography. For Haacke, figuration is deployed as a central component and necessary counterpoint to institutional critique; in *Ölgemälde* he enacts a critique of the institution of painting. Haacke's painting is meant to be an ironically realistic portrayal of Reagan's wrinkled visage, stiffly aware of its own grandiosity, and might appear worlds apart from Wojnarowicz's darkly irreverent canvas with its flat, iconic cowboy, yet both are grounded in the complex symbolics of the American presidency in the 1980s: Reagan, harnessing some of the roles he played in his Hollywood movie career, groomed his image as a "cowboy."²¹

20. Haacke also utilized a painting (this time of Margaret Thatcher) in his *Taking Stock (unfinished)* (1983–84).

21. For more on the rhetoric of Reagan as a cowboy, see Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

I have been mapping a few examples of artists who use figuration *alongside* and *intrinsic to* appropriation, mustering both as necessary complements to their political purposes. As works by Piper, Gober, and Wojnarowicz illustrate, the coexistence of figural production and mass-media reproduction is crucial for these hybrid forms. There are many more artists that one could examine here: Sherrie Levine, for instance, who is rarely discussed in terms of figuration but whose iconographic presidential profile cutouts arguably fit into this realm. Like Levine, who rephotographed reproductions of works by male photographers and rewrote feminist conceptual notions of authorship, Sue Williams, who is known mostly as a painter, occasionally cites male predecessors, as in *Drip* (1994), which humorously takes aim at Jackson Pollock, and *Spiritual America* (1992; p. 123), which quotes the oeuvre of Richard Prince.

In *Spiritual America*, Williams, unlike Levine, blatantly intervenes in her source material. The template here is one of Prince's cartoon paintings—themselves appropriations of popular magazine cartoons featuring bawdy situations—though Williams has emphasized the sexist aggression and misogynist undertones of Prince's canvas to its breaking point (fig. 18). Her painting overlaps various scenarios featuring naked, buxom women in compromised situations, along with an alarming image of a man penetrating a woman from behind while holding a gun to her head. Williams's caption reads, with all its grammatical stutters: "A man walks into his psychiatrist's / He says to the psychiatrist / my dick won't get hard.' The / the man, 'Every time you tell / a joke, a feeling dies.'" Williams deflates Prince's punch lines by referring to impotence and to the failure of humor—rather than a joke provoking a laugh, "a feeling dies." In her title, Williams also references the Prince piece titled *Spiritual America* (1983), an appropriated photograph by Gary Gross of a young, naked Brooke Shields posing amid a misty haze, her face glamorously made up. (Prince's title, in turn, refers back to Alfred Stieglitz's photo of the same name.) Her title, like Wojnarowicz's *Death of American Spirituality*, summons fabled "Americanness," underscoring a shared critique of US nationalism and imperialism from feminist and queer perspectives.

Williams has been at the forefront of what we might call activist formalism for some time. When her work was included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Roberta Smith commented, "There are only a few instances where the political and visual join forces with real effectiveness, among them Ms. Williams's bitter paintings."²²

Williams is firmly understood as a figurative painter, but in a piece such as *Spiritual America*, with its multiple citations, she also demonstrates how central she is for our understandings of the genealogy of appropriation.

Perhaps the lesson here is that art institutions and art history need to make more room for the simultaneity and co-occurrence of a variety of political practices—grappling, that is, with the dematerialized performances of someone like Piper together with her painted and drawn works. The groundbreaking exhibition *Take It or Leave It* incorporates a fluid mix of figuration and appropriation—a far cry from Crimp's reasonable worries about a "fixed style"—including pieces by Piper, Gober, Wojnarowicz, and Williams, among others. Remarkably, it makes the case for the mutual construction of, rather than the separation of or even hostility between, these spheres in the United States since the 1980s. In doing so, *Take It or Leave It* demonstrates that for some artists, there is not—and never has been—a stable or functional dichotomy between a "cerebral" utilization of appropriation and more "physical" forms of hand-rendered representation. These interlocking styles have the potential to be dynamic and critical and necessary.



Fig. 18. Richard Prince, *Untitled (Cartoon)*, 1989–90. Acrylic, silk-screen ink, and spray enamel on canvas. 75 x 58 in. (190.5 x 147.3 cm)

22. Roberta Smith, "At the Whitney, a Biennial with a Social Conscience," *New York Times*, March 5, 1993.