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“Interview with Elaine Reichek”

Therese Lichtenstein

Therese Lichtenstein: Your exhibition in the spring of 1992 at the Grey Art Gallery showed the range of mediums you work in — knitting, painting, embroidered samplers, appropriated ethnographic photography. It was also very successful as an installation — a conceptual as well as a pragmatic use of the space. What was the thinking that led you to set up the exhibition in the way you did?

Elaine Reichek: I certainly tried to construct the show to support the intent or content of the work. I wanted to develop a tone, then change it in the last room — if people were getting too comfortable in the first rooms, they could "catch" themselves in the last one, there would be something closer to home, something more personal. And physically the space operated that way because that last room is the only one at the Grey where none of the walls is movable — it's a permanent, discrete space. The Grey isn't a great physical plant, but it does have movable interior walls, which I could arrange any way I liked. I wanted the first spaces to flow into one another and the last to be physically a different kind of space. So the first rooms held more of an institutional critique. The first room was a "Tepee Room," with photographs and knitted representations of tepees. I think I made eight of them altogether, and showed six. There were three in black and white and three painted in color. The tepees seemed to me in some ways very straightforward. I was looking at tepee photographs, most of them early, the kind you find in ethnographic museums or books. They're "scientific" documents, made out of an "objective" desire to record the domiciles of "primitive" peoples. That's why, in most of them, the photographers shot without anyone around. From an art point of view, that has a weird consequence: when I look at these photographs I'm just crazy about them, I see primary shape . . . So I misread them too. And that's interesting to me: Why do I like them? It's revelatory to me why I like these tepees.

Lichtenstein: You give that question a very ironic twist.

Reichek: In addition to an institutional critique, I had to get into art. I felt I had to show both black and white photographs and ones I had painted. The black and white ones were photographs I had left alone, the painted ones I had made my intervention in. I went especially for red, yellow, and blue, because those are signifying colors, the "art" colors.

Lichtenstein: That's an interesting choice: it seems to comment not only on your intervention but also on the intervention of the person who took the photograph.

Reichek: Right, I'm pointing to the image as an aestheticized icon rather than a view of a tepee in situ. But one of the photographs, a black and white one of a tepee with polka dots, actually has people in it, which I think is important: when you see this bunch of kids sitting in front of the tepee you begin to ask, How come the other ones don't have anyone in them? What's the matter, did everyone go to Florida for the weekend? I was trying to make this same point about the way things get aestheticized when I used another tepee with the same dot pattern. That one has no people in it; it feels quite poignant and stark. I made its circles red, yellow, and blue, and gave it a yellow sky. And then there's this black and white one with kids in front of it, it has a very different feel, yet both tepees have the same pattern. And when I say "pattern," when I say polka dots, I'm actually describing it incorrectly: this is not pattern, this is pictograph. In the original culture, which is Blackfoot, this particular pictograph is the star sign.

Lichtenstein: Which has a specific meaning in that culture.

Reichek: Exactly. The tepees are in fact vision tepees and medicine tepees. They have an iconography that can be read, if you know the code; it's not just design. But of course I see it as design, and see it from a Western art history background. And probably relatively few of the work's viewers will know the pictographs, or even know that they are pictographs.

Lichtenstein: It also seems that when you show these images in a series, which is of course itself a modern-art reference, that very repetition suggests a kind of aestheticized abstraction, as if the tepees were interchangeable. You're showing how abstracted we are from the culture.

Reichek: I'm commenting on seriality, or, more, on the habits of discourse in general. Because I'm also referring to mechanical reproduction and all those kinds of originality issues — specifically Western issues.

Lichtenstein: I think that's an important point for you. You've been attacked by people who have seen you as a kind of self-appointed go-between among Western and non-Western cultures, and your work certainly occupies that kind of border or boundary space, but it has never seemed to me that you're pretending to speak for Native Americans, say; you're talking about what you know. If anything, you're talking about the distances — temporal, geographic, cultural — that make other cultures inaccessible to us.

Reichek: That's right — or, anyway, it's certainly the way I see it. I think the controversy about my work comes when people won't accept an art that takes on the issues of cultural identity, or when they think identity can only be addressed by people who belong to the identity in question. The consequence is that you get either a fiercely proprietorial attitude about the ownership of images, which ignores the fact that it is in the border territory between cultures that identity is thrown into sharpest relief; or else a kind of bland blowzy nonspecific p.c. art that really doesn't address how the construction of history came about or even history as a construction. When I paint a tepee red, yellow, and blue, for example, I'm not pretending it actually was red, yellow, and blue — I'm using the classic Western art colors to show how Western viewing habits, Western vision, has subordinated these tepees to its own ends — which, of course, I'm trying to show that I'm complicit in as well. And when I take a tepee image, replicate it in a means as berserk as knitting, collapse the knitted shape, and hang it on a peg next to the photograph, I'm referring to a lot of ideas about originality, as well as to ideas about photography. These photographs were taken as documentary evidence, but the fact is they're nothing more than someone's viewpoint. They're not the "truth" of the objects they show.

Lichtenstein: They're not objective documents, though they pass themselves off as such.

Reichek: So if I present two separate versions of reality, mine and the photographer's, I'm asking the question, What's real. It's really a very simple question. But the way the work operates physically, on a tactile level, means that my knitted replication is in some ways more real: it's out there in your space, it has body, some kind of presence that photography conspicuously lacks. Yet the photograph comes with a kind of a reality tag attached to it, in part because it appears, perhaps too convincingly, to have isolated a certain moment in time. That's something else that interests me — the moment a photo takes to make, as opposed to the long, labor-intensive process of knitting. There are all these echoes bouncing off each other: the long slow process of a traditional Western art like painting, repeated in a medium that is definitely not a traditional art; the obvious "unreality" of the knitted image, which ontologically might not be an image at all (but if not, why not?); and, on the other hand, the appearance of reality in the image that takes a fraction of a second to make, yet the obvious bodilessness and flatness of that image, that reality, compared to the body and texture of the knitted image. So I kind of like it when people ask me how long it took me to knit this or that. It means the element of time has come up in their reading, some idea that this is not an instant reproduction. And from that issue a whole slew of further questions may open up for them.

Lichtenstein: It seems important that you are physically engaged in the work yourself — that it's you who does the knitting.

Reichek: It's certainly labor-intensive — there's a degree of involvement implied by the physical activity of knitting, a kind of twist on the valuation of the hand in traditional painting like Abstract Expressionism. From my point of view, incidentally, let's just call AbEx traditional painting, shall we?

Lichtenstein: And what about knitting as what is seen as a female craft?

Reichek: One thing I'm very much worried about is the exclusion of the female artist, and the embrace of "craft," which isn't much respected in the canon, is a way of pointing that up. But there's also a class nostalgia about knitting: if it was once a craft, it's also now a leisure pleasure, in America anyway, a hobby for women who are relatively well off. Those are also the women who embroider samplers. So that's another thing that operates with handmade stuff — the whole exclusivity of it. For me, also, there's a connection between the warm and fuzzy image of knitting and the nostalgia associated with vintage photographs. There's a lot of baggage tied to all these issues; I hope to get you coming and going.

Lichtenstein: The artist Jimmy Durham, who wrote a catalogue essay for the Grey show, has described the tepees as producing simultaneously a delight and a kind of melancholy in the viewer. And when I saw the tepee room I felt a deep sense of loss. It wasn't necessarily nostalgic but there was this terrible, irrevocable loss from seeing those knitted tepees, useless, absent, nonfunctional, almost a deflation of a culture. There was a kind of sorrow.

Reichek: Well, that's one aspect of them. You know absence is a powerful presence, and sorrow is seductive. On one level it's totally appropriate to feel sorrow in these images. On another, it's like, Get real: we've never even seen any tepees as they appear here, and most of us, probably, would never want to live in one. Jimmie is well aware of this tension. I remember once he was telling me about the Smithsonian trying to decide whether to return their vast collection of moccasins — they have thousands of them — to the original tribes. And Jimmie was thinking, Yes, this is the right thing. And then he thought: What the hell are we going to do with all those moccasins? That's why I changed the tone in the last room: just as you were getting into a nice warm bath of absence, I changed the rules. The last room had a much more up-to-date, closer-to-home kind of feeling. For example, there was a work based on a kind of craft kit I got from a catalogue where you could order spurious Indian artifacts. It's interesting, actually, that Native Americans use this stuff too, for powwows. It's not just the white people. There's a kind of "instant Indian" thing — anyone can do it. You can make anything you want with these kits. You can make a peace pipe, you can make moccasins. So I have this piece I call "Ten Little Indians," which talked about the craft kit, and used these little jackets from it. And there were pictures of my own family — my kids and other relatives when they were younger, all dressed up in Indian stuff. And there were fabric pieces, with cloth like the kind you used to find in old sleeping bags with pictorial prints of cowboys and Indians, but also with added phrases I embroidered on them. Like General Schwarzkopf saying, the Gulf War was like going into Indian country. That was also where I put the embroidered samplers.

Lichtenstein: Who made samplers originally? And what was their function?

Reichek: The sampler, for me, is this fascinating, pregnant combination of text and image. There are many conventions in samplers; if you're knowledgeable about them you can pretty much tell where they come from just by looking at them. And some of the unsung heroines are the people who designed them. In the 17th, 18th, early 19th centuries, this was the first form of education available for girls. They would go to a school where they would be taught embroidery — this happened at home as well — and by making a sampler they would learn the alphabet at the same time. What little girls learned, besides to sit still, was the alphabet, maybe a little geography, and, mainly, churchy maxims. And really that provided all that was expected of them as female participants in the culture.

Lichtenstein: This wasn't just in America, I'm sure.

Reichek: No, it's a European tradition brought over. I've sewn British sampler patterns as well as American ones — I try to pick the appropriate style for whatever point I'm making. In the U.S., the sampler tradition actually died out at the very time when Indians were first being put on the reservations and the Industrial Revolution was coming in — an unhappy conflation of circumstances. But in the context of this show, that made the sampler a terrific vehicle for me because its time frame is the right one — the tradition is kind of finished as the West is opened up. Samplers are inseparable from a certain history — domestic, feminine, relatively affluent, inescapably European (or, in the U.S., colonial). So I thought, What if, instead of embroidering the language of the dominant culture, a colonial girl had embroidered what her neighbors in, say, the confederation of Iroquois were saying to one another — their wisdom instead of the Christian homilies and Home Sweet Home stuff? It was to do with ideas about an alternative history, hearing the unheard voice, subverting form.

Lichtenstein: It's interesting because you really do use that form — your samplers are really samplers, and beautiful ones at that. But at the same time, you overlay the form with other possibilities that interrupt it.

Reichek: Yes, it's like the D.A.R. went berserk. Again, of course, samplers have this class baggage as well — the family-tree, how-many-ancestors-can-you-count-back baggage. That's why I'm using them in a series of works I began last year, discussing questions of Jewish-American identity. I grew up in a Jewish family that lived in a Dutch-colonial house and had samplers on the wall. We were a bunch of Mayflower wannabes.

Lichtenstein: In that sense the last room was more upbeat than the rest of the show, in that there was a lot of comical irony. You could laugh at this subverted Americana.

Reichek: I'm glad — I meant it to be funny.

Lichtenstein: It was very, very funny. The Schwarzkopf piece was hilarious: everyone remembers his macho image, but you threw that memory against this nursery-wallpaper-like cowboy-and-Indian print, which kind of made him into a little boy . . . It was like Mom's revenge.

Reichek: The metaphor of cowboys and Indians was also present in World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam . . . I like the imagery here because it relates childhood games of cowboys and Indians to playing war.

Lichtenstein: The good guys and the bad guys. I remember years ago, when I lived for a while on a Navaho reservation and we'd go to the movies, some of the Navahoes would root for the cowboys, they were so identified as the good guys. It seems to me that your photocollage pieces make points about these contradictory kinds of situation that spring up under the fragmentation of colonialism.

Reichek: I like the idea of collage. These pieces bump together images of Native Americans and related themes from nineteenth-century painting and photography, and also more recent pictures — from Hollywood, from advertising, from government documentation. I knew that to work them formally I could have rephotographed them after I'd finished them, presenting each one as a continuous, homogeneous image. But I wanted to make it clear that something was stuck on something else. If you knew that multiple photos had been applied, you'd have a sense of a variety of voices, lots of people talking at the same time, each with something to say.

Lichtenstein: And also they weren't smooth, unified wholes. Their artifice was self-evident.

Reichek: Yes, you could see the process of them. And they were all hand-colored. I was imagining the color metaphorically as well as sensually: again, as in the tepee works, by painting these images I was bringing them under my umbrella, and under the umbrella of art. I was subordinating these different materials to art, making art their organizing principle. Art homogenizes what's different — not in the same way the state does, but the processes can be related. Art isn't innocent; you have to understand its place in the culture, the way it helps us digest and accommodate ourselves to what the culture is doing. I had to feel a little uncomfortable painting over the tepees, for example, as Rauschenberg must have when he erased the de Kooning. There are connections between what an artist does and what an ethnographer does when he takes a photograph of someone in the Third World who has no idea really what the photo is or how it's going to be used. By leaving the process of making the photocollages clear, I was leaving space for the viewer to recognize that art had taken these images over, and that art is a social institution.

Lichtenstein: So you see yourself taking this science or media or popular-culture content and subordinating it to a high-culture format, but at the same time making clear what the myth of art leaves out — that there's always this clashing combination of different worlds. Like other postmodernist art, your work interrupts the classical sense of the discreteness of the different aesthetic disciplines, the different elements of culture. Why don't we talk about one of the photocollages in detail — "Red Delicious," for example? What are the meanings of the title?

Reichek: A lot of white people are familiar with the use of the word "oreo" among African-Americans to apply to someone who's black on the outside, white on the inside, like the cookie. Native Americans use "apple" for the same thing — someone who's red on the outside, white on the inside. So that's what "Red Delicious" is about. The central image is Wright of Derby's painting "Grieving Indian Widow." It supposedly shows a Native American woman, though she could be anyone really — she certainly could be white. She has this little headdress on that's like a cocktail hat, and she's sitting on a rock in a sort of Grecian pose with one breast bare. It's the mythology of the noble savage. The painting is deeply romantic, and pictorially its models are Greek revival, neoclassical. I surrounded the woman with stills from B-movies in which an Indian is doing something horrible to a white woman — movie style. They float around her in a circle, like the stars in the Paramount logo. And for me it had to do with how the "other" is always perceived as threatening "our" women. It's all a male construction.

Lichtenstein: This was "his" version.

Reichek: Exactly. So I just kind of pushed that. Because of course that stuff still goes on. It's sexual fantasy about the other.

Lichtenstein: Those inserts themselves read as fantasies — they're almost like the woman's thought bubbles.

Reichek: No one's excluded from having fantasies. The color punches that element up too — the photocollages have an unnatural color. Hand-colored photographs are artificial to the max. But they have a history, too: hand-colored photographs were an industry, and women were often the ones hired to paint them.

Lichtenstein: The way you develop fantasy, the viewer begins to feel that fantasy really has free play, but at the same time realizes its limitations — that the free play of fantasy is very much tied to social constructions.

Reichek: Social constructions and psychosexual constructions . . . which is why it's so riveting. It doesn't get interesting unless it gets into that territory. Some of the tactile elements of the work touch on that too. I

always think that knitting is like heartbeat activity. It's quiet, it's contemplative, you can fantasize as you do it.

Lichtenstein: Sort of background music to what's going on inside. I've always been interested, for example, that when you knit figures, you only knit men — there are no knitted women. Why is that?

Reichek: It's actually largely pragmatic — for whatever reasons, the ethnographic photographs I found were almost always of men. I wouldn't rule out making women by any means.

Lichtenstein: Are your knitted men always taken from photographs of people who no longer exist?

Reichek: Again, I've never done anyone living, but I wouldn't rule it out. In the case of the first body of men, though, based on photographs of the Indians of Tierra del Fuego, that whole people have vanished. They survived the coming of Europeans by several centuries — their islands were actually named Tierra del Fuego by Magellan — but by the 1940s they had all died out.

Lichtenstein: From what?

Reichek: Well, one of the reasons was that Christian missionaries there gave them clothing and blankets. They hadn't worn any clothes before that — they'd just oiled and painted their bodies. The missionaries didn't go for that. It's a horrible climate, very harsh, very rainy, and I'm sure the missionaries thought they were doing something good, though I'm also sure it had something to do with shame as well. In any case, the clothing had germs in it to which they had no resistance. Also, it got wet. They'd survived for centuries without clothes; with clothes, they were cold. They died of upper respiratory diseases, measles, pneumonia.

Lichtenstein: So why did you choose to do this work?

Reichek: I found this cache of photographs of them, taken from 1908 to about 1928 by a German-Jesuit missionary, Martin G?sinde, and then there were no more. It seemed that these photos raised all sorts of interesting questions about photographing other cultures — Is some record better than nothing? What does it mean that this person took these pictures? The photos are all very posed and artificial looking. And the men are wearing masks, so their identities are obscured: the images exaggerate the practice by which the other is photographed without being named, without being identified — without being allowed an identity. And that also means they exaggerate the potential for photos of the other to become foils for any fantasies you want to project onto them. And also the men are wearing this body paint, which of course I read like abstract painting, though like the tepee patterns it was really pictograph, and had meanings I don't pretend to know.

Lichtenstein: The way you transcribe the surface of the photographs, taking as your source, your referent, something that's already one level removed from a real, material thing, works in a way like narrative in traditional cultures: one person says something and then it gets passed on to someone else. There may be a slight alteration; that's the way things get used. Your copying is something like that. It's about taking that so-called master narrative, not as truth or objectivity, but as something to be used, improved, passed on.

Reichek: You have to remember, though, that every method of image-making has its own structure. The language of photography is not the same language as the language of knitting. Information is passed and shaped in different ways in different languages. That seems to me closer to the point — that there are always different translations.

Lichtenstein: Isn't your work always about a reinterpretation of meanings?

Reichek: Yes, but I'm always referring to different referent structures. Each structure can only pass information in a certain way. In photography, for example, you can never talk about texture, and you can never talk about what's behind something — about three-dimensionality. In many ways photography is a learned symbol system. A cat will recognize its reflection in a mirror, or, until it learns better, will at least think it's seeing another cat, but it won't pay much attention to a cat in a photograph. You have to learn to read a photograph like a language. And knitting, of course, is also a language. In fact I've done works in which a knitting pattern appears in a variety of different linguistic systems — as word, as chart, as symbol system, as knitted wool.

Lichtenstein: Does knitting have any sort of personal meaning for you? Did you learn as a child, or anything like that?

Reichek: On a personal level, I couldn't care less about knitting. In fact I didn't learn to knit until I decided to take it up in my work. I was doing a piece that phased the relationship of mother to child through a kind

of conceptual system, somewhat as Mary Kelly did in England at about the same time. And I had some fancy knit baby-clothing that I wanted to transfer into instructions for the physical objects, or into maps of them, so that they could be duplicated and reduplicated. Well, the maps kept getting more and more complicated, and it got too difficult to tell people how to knit them. So I had to learn to knit myself.

Lichtenstein: Knitting doesn't bring up any complicated feelings for you, about, say, the role of women in our culture? You've already talked about it in terms of the exclusions of the canon of art history. And you once did a "pointed," shall we say, but funny little knitting-needle piece about the revenge of Madame Defarge.

Reichek: I certainly think about those questions a lot. But I also know I'm in an ambiguous position myself. I've described the role of women in this society as being not the driver of the car but riding in it anyway, willy-nilly. Sitting in the passenger seat gives you certain advantages and comforts, as you rapidly learn when you come into contact with people who have to walk. It also gives you a viewpoint, a perspective, on the man driving. You don't necessarily approve, but you have to realize that you're complicit. Text: © Copyright, Journal of Contemporary Art, Inc. and the authors