The Haunting of a Modernism Conceived Differently

by

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Another Modernism

Douglas Crimp's exceptional reputation as an art critic is, of course, in many respects intertwined with his early theorization of postmodernism within the context of fine art. Especially important in this context was the alloying of that nascent postmodern discourse with contemporary photographic-based practices that were becoming increasingly central to the artworld at the tail end of the 1970s. For this reason, this essay seeks to revisit the conjunctions between postmodern theory and photographic practice in Crimp's early writing. And, in doing so, it shall highlight the relation of the postmodernism/photography dyad to a third term, namely the museum. Indeed, Crimp understands the status of photography as significantly *contested within*, and *disruptive of*, the museum's systemic patterns of assimilation and organization. Several of these crucial writings are handily collected in his book *On the Museum's Ruins* and to an extent my own essay serves as an opportunity to look back through that volume and highlight major facets of it.[1] But such highlighting will also disclose complications in those essays—complications which Crimp was perhaps not fully aware of and necessitate reanalyzing his theorization of postmodernism in light of its being *haunted* by modernism.

The text that Crimp identifies as his "first" essay on photography, "Positive/Negative: A Note on Degas's Photographs," is only mentioned rather than republished in *On the Museum's Ruins*. His brief summary of the essay outlines some of the reasons for its later exclusion:

> But my first essay about photography proposed a modernist interpretation. . . . I still wanted to discriminate between a "legitimately" modernist photographic practice and an "illegitimate" presumption that photography is, as a whole, a modernist aesthetic medium. I argued, in "Positive/Negative," that the few existing photographs by Edgar Degas, made around 1895, were about photography (the very notion—"photography itself"—would later seem preposterous to me).[2]

As we see from this statement, Crimp's retrospective worry is that the essay duplicates the logic of medium specificity and autonomy typical of modernist art criticism—Clement Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" is taken to be emblematic of this tendency.[3]

Published in the summer of 1978, in a special issue of *October* dedicated to photography, "Positive/Negative" is sandwiched between the two distinct versions of his classic essay "Pictures." The first version of the essay was published in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition at Artists Space that ran from September 24 to October 29 1977. Discussing a younger generation of artists composed of Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith, Crimp positions their practices in relation to a modernism conceived differently. In a crucial passage at the essay's conclusion, he writes:

> The self-reflexiveness and formalism of recent art appears to have been abandoned, as are interests in the specific characteristics of the medium (Goldstein's films are not primarily about film; Smith's drawings are not about drawing). . . . It would be a mistake, however, to think of this work as effecting a complete break with recent art, or with modernism as a whole. . . . Because the pictures that these artists are making raise issues of the psychology of the

> image so forcefully, the entire tradition of modernism that stems from Symbolism appears once again relevant.. . . . In this, the work of these artists maintains an allegiance to that radical aspiration that we can continue to recognize as modernist.[4]

The stakes in this passage are clear: there is a need to differentiate between the medium-specific modernism of Greenberg, on the one hand, and another modernism that finds its figurehead implicitly in Mallarmé or perhaps in Freud, on the other.[5] Roughly a year-and-half later, in the Spring 1979 issue of *October*, Crimp produced a substantially revised and better-known version of "Pictures," and the rewritten version of the conclusion is worth quoting at length:

> At the beginning of this essay, I said that it was due precisely to this kind of abandonment of the artistic medium as such that we had witnessed a break with modernism, or more precisely with what was espoused as modernism by Michael Fried. . . . The work I have attempted to introduce here is related to a modernism conceived differently, whose roots are in the symbolist aesthetic announced by Mallarmé . . .
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> Nevertheless, it remains useful to consider recent work as having effected a break with modernism and therefore as postmodernist. But if *postmodernism* is to have theoretical value, it cannot be used merely as another chronological term; rather it must disclose the particular nature of a breach with modernism.[6]

Apart from its first appearance at the essay's introduction—obviously written once the essay was complete—the inclusion of the concept "postmodernism" in the essay's concluding paragraphs resembles an afterthought, albeit one of weighty significance. This owes, most likely,

to the still uncertain value of postmodernism within *October*'s pages at that moment. Even if the concept of postmodernism was already prefigured from the journal's inception, it nonetheless seems to be the case that the word itself did not occur until that Spring 1979 issue.[7] Only thereafter did it generate a level of theoretical examination that would set *October* apart from most other art-critical publications, thereby establishing this journal as a model for others. Indeed, the second version of "Pictures" initiated the explication and/or development that typified and distinguished Crimp's output. From that point onwards there could be no analysis of "photography itself"; the 1978 essay "Positive/Negative" would virtually comprise an endpoint of his early oeuvre.

And yet, while it is true that the two versions of "Pictures" differ insofar as the original conjoins its artists with a "modernism conceived differently" and the revision instead proposes the necessity of postmodernism, the doubleness and ambivalence barely hidden in the second version compels remarking. Crimp, after all, holds onto both the "modernism conceived differently" *and* postmodernism where he could have simply replaced the latter for the former in the second version of "Pictures." No doubt this is what gives the reference to postmodernism the character of being an afterthought. Why hold onto both terms? One possible answer would come simply down to the uncertainty of postmodernism's use value in 1979; although conversant with the term already through architectural criticism, neither Crimp nor anyone else amid the *October* circle had quite begun to reckon with its theoretical purchase—it was not available as a readymade discourse waiting to be appropriated and the actual difference between modernism and postmodernism had yet to be secured. That would therefore be the work of Crimp's, and *October's*, subsequent essays.

Without rebutting that possible answer, however, it can also be speculated that Crimp elected not to choose postmodernism over "modernism conceived differently" because his comprehension of modernism was *already* ambivalent and inherently double. To an extent, this doubleness is evident—admittedly in a disguised fashion—in Crimp's complex reliance upon Michael Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood." Fried is put to various uses by Crimp: most obviously, the terms underpinning Fried's attack upon Minimalism—presence, temporality, and theater's status "between" the arts—are recuperated and inverted as positive descriptions of the art practices that Crimp supports. Perhaps less immediately noticeable is how Crimp's redirecting of Fried's master word "theatricality" in the second version of "Pictures" effectively displaces the importance assigned to the "cinematic" in the original (thereby extending and complicating what Crimp means by "picture"). And ultimately, it is possible to sense that Crimp's "modernism conceived differently" is answerable to Fried's contention that Minimalism is

> a response to the *same* developments that have largely compelled modernist painting to undo its objecthood—more precisely, the same developments *seen differently*, that is, in theatrical terms, by a sensibility *already* theatrical, already (to say the worst) corrupted or perverted by theater.[8]

Crimp does not quote these lines, yet their force upon his account of a "modernism conceived differently" is surely palpable here. That is to say, the doubling or bifurcation of modernism in response to internal pressures emerging from Greenberg's account of medium specificity is repositioned by Crimp as a division separating Greenbergian modernism and a "modernism conceived differently."[9] At face value, Crimp envisages these two modernisms as parallel but oppositional discourses without asking how they came to be parallel. And insofar as they are presented as strictly parallel, then any question concerning their entanglement is kept to the

sidelines. But once the two modernisms are reconfigured into an epistemological break from modernism to postmodernism, then the question of the two modernisms' parallelism or even of their potential entanglement can no longer be formally posed insofar as there is also an "epistemological break" in Crimp's criticism.

The transition of Crimp's criticism and career from plotting a difference between modernism and a "modernism conceived differently," on the one hand, to a distinction between modernism and postmodernism, on the other hand, partly explains his disparaging comments about—and decision not to include—"Positive/Negative" in *On the Museum's Ruins*. Moreover, it also suggests an explanation as regards to the striking non-inclusion of either version of "Pictures" in that collection of essays—a decision that is all the more striking given how central and influential the 1979 essay quickly became. We might assume that the 1979 "Pictures" was freighted with the same irreducible dependency upon modernism, one conceived differently, to be sure, that "Positive/Negative" was. Under that light, it might equally be supposed that his subsequent essay "The Photography Activity of Postmodernism" was less a follow-up than a critical rethinking of "Pictures." This is a matter to which we shall return.

But, for now, let's remain with "Positive/Negative" for a little longer because it is not unreasonable to claim that Crimp does not, in the passage quoted above, give the most useful summary of the essay. To recapitulate, Crimp stated that his essay "proposed a modernist interpretation" and judged "the very notion—'photography itself'—would later seem preposterous to me." Crimp also remarks that in that first essay he "still wanted to discriminate between a 'legitimately' modernist photographic practice and an 'illegitimate' presumption that photography is, as a whole, a modernist aesthetic medium." These reflections overall suggest that Crimp comprehends his argument as providing an account for photography more or less akin to what Greenberg does for painting. In that case, we might imagine that Crimp is actually

following in the footsteps of John Szarkowski and his 1966 book *The Photographer's Eye* that advances five categories—"the thing itself"; "the detail"; "the frame"; "time"; and "the vantage point"—specific to the photographic medium.[10] Or, casting one's historical gaze further back, as developing Paul Strand's rejection of Pictorialism as an anti-modernist utilization of photography, evincing nothing more than "merely the expression of an impotent desire to paint" to which an authentically modernist photography can be counterposed.[11] All this, however, is precisely what we do not find in "Positive/Negative."

Crimp certainly is interested in contending that "Degas forces recognition of the internal functioning of the medium,"[12] which admittedly does sound like a "modernist interpretation," but where one might expect this to head towards an account in which the medium is progressively stripped back to an irreducible core, "flatness and the delimitation of flatness," the reader is instead faced with an understanding of photography's medium as immanently constituted by a mobile nexus of displacements and divisions. Basing his analysis of Degas's photographs around a series of binary oppositions, Crimp underscores the ways in which they destabilize and entwine with each other. Gradations from black to white in the photograph, for example, are translated from darkness and light via the intermediary of the negative's opacity and transparency. Yet in this process of conversion that entails the switching of negative and positive, the binary oppositions refuse to line up as one might assume: "Thus at the stage of the negative; light and dark are not only reversed, they are radically converted. Anything that reflects light in the world registers itself as opacity on the negative, thereby being given the power to obscure, to block out what is dark; while the absence of light—darkness, shadow, obscurity—registers itself as transparency."[13] According to Crimp, then, these binaries are mobilized, proceeding to a logic of "oscillation," and that oscillation is permanent—what we might designate as "the restlessness of the negative."[14]

To that degree, Crimp's "modernist interpretation" is broadly "poststructuralist" or "deconstructive." Of course, it would be incorrect to identify poststructuralism or deconstruction with postmodernism as such, even though the translation of luminaries such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault did coincide with, and helped delineate, a burgeoning postmodern discourse; Crimp would, indeed, transliterate poststructuralist theory into the discourse of art criticism. Furthermore, Crimp would later also propose that poststructuralism offers not so much a foundation for postmodernism as an "archaeology of modernism." But the fact that his modernist interpretation is, at bottom, poststructuralist suggests another reason for not fully accepting his critical assessment of "Positive/Negative."

Although neither are outwardly mentioned in the essay, Barthes and Derrida by strong implication orientate Crimp's discussion. The manner in which binaries are opened, rendered mobile and mutually parasitic, testifies to deconstruction's influence and justifies the retrospective comment made by Crimp regarding his essay's "Derridian inflection."[15] Another piece of evidence can be gleaned from Mallarmé's presence in the essay. Whilst the reference to Mallarmé foregrounds Degas' position vis-à-vis Symbolism, it should also be noted that Mallarmé's conception of impersonality and writing was a crucial touchstone—partly because of Maurice Blanchot's influence—for both Derrida and Barthes. Crimp argues that Degas's photograph of Mallarmé and Renoir, standing before a large mirror in which we catch the barest glimpse of Degas in the act of taking the picture, is a "Mallarméan photograph" inasmuch as Degas's visual presence is one of self-effacement.[16] This self-effacement is coeval with Mallarmé's requirement concerning the distancing of the poet from the poetry, thereby establishing a fundamental impersonality that gives the ideal poem or book its power through "overwhelm[ing] its ostensible subject and author."[17] Such a strategy underwrites the "degree zero" of writing expounded by Barthes as well as the death of the author. Moreover, it is not only a matter of constructing homologies between Mallarmé's textual impersonality and Degas's

photographic self-effacement, but of, as Crimp appositely remarks in his later revaluation of "Positive/Negative," of perceiving Degas's photographs as a kind of "Mallarméan writing." That point is not made fully perspicuous in the 1978 essay, admittedly, but its relevance can be detected when Crimp writes "It is only in this way that the photo*graph* can be *writing*. For as light passes through the transparent negative, it *inscribes* black onto white."[18]

For the time being, allow me to proffer one more reflection to emphasize the complexity subtending "Positive/Negative." By suggesting that Degas's photographs are a "Mallarméan writing," Crimp effectively discloses that his theorization of the medium operates quite differently from the putative *letter*—though not necessarily the *spirit*—of Greenbergian medium specificity. In Degas's hands, Crimp argues, the internal functioning of photography decries any simple essence of the photographic medium; revealed, on the contrary, is an inherent relation to writing (perhaps an *arche-writing*, if one develops Derrida's influence upon Crimp) as well as to the monotype. There is nothing straightforward about the "photography itself" that Crimp would later denounce, it does not, for instance, mean that "photography itself = photography as a fully autonomous medium." Rather, in its essential correspondence with writing and printing, "photography itself" is unthinkable outside of the logic of an expanded field and displacement that interlinks with Rosalind Krauss's similar critical explorations in *October* around that time.[19]

At this juncture, we might state that it is as if Crimp's transition from a critical stage in which he construed two modernisms to another in which he opposes a singular modernism and postmodernism ultimately resulted in the "forgetting" or "repression" of that earlier stage. One consequence is when speaking of his "modernist interpretation" in *On the Museum's Ruins* he no longer knows or recalls the bivalence undergirding his speaking of modernism—or perhaps, of course, that previous bivalence has since been reduced to a theoretical error as if

there was truly only one modernism all along. Whatever is the case, the forgetting or rejection of that doubled modernism will return to haunt him.

Haunted Postmodernism/Heterogeneous Ghosts

While the revised and republished version of "Pictures" was Crimp's next major essay, the deliberate ambiguity of the word "picture" means that its concerns are not rooted in photography per se. Indeed, as Crimp mentions, not only is the concept of the medium no longer central to a younger generation of artists but also that the medium can be displaced into other mediums, thereby refusing the assumed late-modernist autonomy of each art medium. As Crimp writes in connection to the second point, artists such as Jack Goldstein have made the "literal situation and duration of the performed event a tableau whose presence and temporality are utterly psychologized; performance becomes just one of a number of ways of 'staging' a picture."[20] Such a claim is not at any remove from his previous inclination to comprehend Degas's photographs as "Mallarméan writing" (or Krauss's interpretation of *The Bride Stripped Bare by the Bachelors, Even* as a photograph), indeed these claims share a constitutive reliance upon displacement. But what is different here is that photography is one medium amongst others in Crimp's account and is not particularly spotlighted as such.

His turn towards photography would happen more fully the following year with the publication of "On the Museum's Ruins" and "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism." To publish one major groundbreaking text in a year is common enough; to publish two is extraordinary. On this score, it is also surely noteworthy that the first of these is both the first essay in, and also provides the title for, his book *On the Museum's Ruins*, thus suggestively positioning it as the "origin" of his art-critical endeavor. Presumably insofar as the 1979 version of "Pictures" was in several respects caught within the same problematic as "Positive/Negative," it could not be easily included in *On the Museum's Ruins*; indeed, it might even have

been taken as something of a surpassed precursor to what he regards as his core achievements as an art critic. How, then, does "On the Museum's Ruins" stake its distinction from what preceded it?

Undoubtedly, the most immediate answer that might come to mind is the confidence in which it tackles the subject of postmodernism. Gone is the hedged bet of "Pictures" and its two modernisms with the second, the "modernism conceived differently," existing in ambiguous relation to postmodernism. Postmodernism's use value, at that point, was becoming impossible to avoid. Just as Krauss's appropriation of Thomas Kuhn's historization of science served as the precondition for understanding modernism as *a* paradigm replaceable by a new one, Crimp directs his attention towards Michel Foucault's early writings and, in particular, his concept of the *episteme*. Utilizing, too, Leo Steinberg's celebrated account of the flatbed picture plane in Robert Rauschenberg's artworks, Crimp writes:

> Thus, in Foucault's terms, if the surface of a Rauschenberg painting truly involves the kind of transformation that Steinberg claims it does, then it cannot be said to evolve from, or in any way be continuous with a modernist picture surface. And if Rauschenberg's flatbed pictures are experienced as effecting such a rupture or discontinuity with the modernist past, as I believe they do, and as I think do the works of many other artists of the present, then perhaps we are indeed experiencing one of those cataclysmic ruptures in the epistemological field that Foucault describes, a rupture as thorough as that which separates the age of classicism (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) from the age of modernism . . .[21]

Deploying Foucault's concept of the *episteme* and highlighting its dependency upon notions of discontinuity and rupture, Crimp is now able to situate postmodernism as a *break* from modernism. Hence, there is no question here of evolution or continuation—at least, not in theory—but there is still the maintenance of temporal succession: postmodernism comes *after* modernism and cannot be equated with the "modernism conceived differently" that previously concerned Crimp.

Also indicating another key difference from his previous outlook is the issue of heterogeneity. This issue dovetails with Crimp's ruination of the museum, but before we turn towards that it is useful to return to the issue of "photography itself" because it is within the field of that problematic that matters of homogeneity and heterogeneity emerge, partly as revisions of modernist purity and impurity that underpinned its commitment to medium specificity. At various points of "Positive/Negative" Crimp does advance statements that suggest photography is a self-contained, autonomous medium, enclosed upon its own conditions of possibility—and it is plausible to argue that acknowledgment of that status would predetermine its availability as a modernist practice. For example, early on in that essay describing one photograph, he writes: "Like phantoms they emerge into visibility through each other. It is no longer possible, then, to speak of that scene that occasioned this (these) photograph(s); caught in the complex web of the photographic medium, it has been transformed into a hallucinatory, spectral image."[22] Elsewhere Crimp speaks of Degas' monotypes as deriving not from the landscape they represent but rather "from the conditions of the peculiar medium Degas was using."[23] And finally, the reference to Mallarméan impersonality leads to, as a corollary, to the spotlighting of "the medium itself—its autonomous *being*."[24] In a similar manner, the 1979 "Pictures" echoes these statements when Crimp proclaims that the artists he is discussing all demonstrate, in one way or another, that the medium must be reimagined "stratigraphically," attesting to layers of representation unmoored from any origin—"underneath each

picture there is always another picture."[25] Speaking of Troy Brauntuch's work in particular, but applicable to the other artists examined, all involved in a "radically new approach to mediums," Crimp writes: "That distance is all that these pictures signify."[26] Distant, that is, because locked away from origin or the "real" spatiotemporal world; there is no outside of representation, so to speak.

Distance need not, to be sure, be tantamount to detachment or autonomy, nor should we overly quickly conjoin it with homogeneity or purity. But in the context of Crimp's analyses, it would appear fair to suppose these terms must have been associated to some degree. Photography and representation, in both "Positive/Negative" and—to a lesser extent—"Pictures," are understood as (semi-)autonomous and self-referential systems distant from or closed off from what is outside. As such, they resemble the museum's own self-understanding as theorized in "On the Museum's Ruins." Crimp's reference to Foucault does not only engage the concept of the episteme as a disjunctive unit of historical periodization in which specific knowledges and discourses are hegemonic, but also proceeds to the institutions that produce those discourses: "Foucault has concentrated on modern institutions of confinement: the asylum, the clinic, and the prison," to which Crimp would enumerate another, namely, the museum.[27] Especially important, furthermore, is Crimp's argument that the museum, alongside the discipline of art history, is the precondition for "the discourse we call modern art." Conjugated in this manner, postmodernism's rupture from modernism is therefore also consequential for the status of the museum (and art history, as such, which perhaps helps explicate Crimp's turn towards visual culture as a field). Modernism is a product of museumification. And thereby, *pace*—while crisscrossing—Crimp's references in "On the Museum's Ruins" to Theodor Adorno and André Malraux, it is also a product of the sealing of what we might call the "imaginary mausoleum."[28]

Palpable here in Crimp's discussion are various pressures and theoretical innovations. The election of Ronald Reagan in January 1980, with its unbounded desire for small government, rampant commodification, and promotion of so-called traditional values, constituted a grave existential threat to alternative spaces. With such alternative spaces becoming endangered due to their incompatibility with market values, it became strategically vital to theorize practices of institutional critique that depended for their efficacy upon occupying the center of the art-world rather than its margins. Hence Crimp, in ways deeply responsive to the writings of Benjamin Buchloh, would play a leading role in formalizing and canonizing institutional critique; this critical activity, moreover, went hand-in-hand with Crimp's instrumental part in positioning museum and exhibition histories as major facets of academic research.

Superadding to this response to recent events was also Craig Owens's translation of Jacques Derrida's analysis of the parergon in the Summer of 1979. Within this context, it might be said, that this translation played a crucial part in preparing the interest one might have in the museum and its boundaries or constraints. According to Owens's account, the parergon is the term selected by Kant as indexing "the frames of paintings, the drapery on statutes, the colonnades of palaces."[29] As such, it is constitutively "an adjunct, and not an intrinsic component of the complete representation of an object."[30] Ultimately, the status of the parergon is one of margin, threshold, that marks "the limit between the intrinsic and extrinsic." Because, however, it marks that limit, which is seemingly also a demarcation between the artistic and non-artistic, it discloses that the aesthetic object or artwork itself is unable to establish that boundary by its own lights alone. Even though its official condition is as an adjunct, then, the parergon is structurally fundamental to the aesthetic object that it supposedly serves as a mere adjunct. For this reason, Owens concludes, the parergon "has always been excluded from the aesthetic field."[31]

Hopefully, enough has been said to give a sense of how and why Crimp stakes an interest in the museum. Although Derrida is never mentioned in "On the Museum's Ruins," it is not difficult to imagine that the museum operates as the greater frame enclosing the artworks it displays—as a parergon simultaneously perceived and unacknowledged. Governing what belongs inside its exhibition spaces, the museum-*qua*-parergon also defines what must not be included; its unacknowledged presence, however, obfuscates and naturalizes the museum's functioning, its systems of demarcation. A motley array of items is assembled in the museum and have conferred upon them a *homogeneity*, making them into a collection that is expressive of long-held hierarchal definitions betokening what counts as suitable or even worthy as art. Crimp, of course, was far from alone in this concentrated examination of the museum's formative aspect—it was, in various ways, one of the principal concerns of the 1970s—but he was amongst the earliest to adopt "poststructuralist theory" for those purposes.

If the museum casts a spell of self-containedness alloyed with a formative power that rationally homogenizes its objects, Crimp would, against this, pit photography as a disruptive agent. Again, there is a wider context here, namely the growing inclusion of photography as a viable medium within art institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art. This process has been underway since the 1930s with the appointment of Beaumont Newhall and had gained an especially secure bulwark through the curatorial activities of John Szarkowski, conceptual art's valorization of photography as a non- or anti-aesthetic medium, and postmodernist art and theory's deployment of photographic practices in order to challenge traditional ideas of originality.[32] Crimp generates the connection between photography and the museum in "On the Museum's Ruins" by introducing André Malraux's notion of the *musée imaginaire*, the so-called "museum without walls." Relying upon photographic abstraction, the way it translates its objects into two-dimensional form, Malraux sought to demonstrate the continuity of myr-

iad art forms by showing how they shared stylistic qualities. Here, too, the museum's procedures of homogenizing—creating sense out of—heterogeneity is evident, but the machine that guarantees this process is the camera. Anything that can be photographed, and submitted to the camera's power of abstraction which uncovers the homologies amid highly diverse artefacts, can enter the museum. And yet:

> Malraux makes a fatal error near the end of his Museum: he admits within its pages the very thing that had constituted its homogeneity; that thing is of course photography. So long as photography was merely a vehicle by which art objects entered the museum, a certain coherence obtained. But once photography itself enters, an art object among others, heterogeneity is reestablished at the heart of the museum; its pretentions to knowledge are doomed. Even photography cannot hypostatize style from a photograph.[33]

The force and plausibility of the last part of this argument remains, after all this time, somewhat obscure. It reads, to some extent, as a distant echo of Ludwig Wittgenstein's remark that "A picture cannot depict its pictorial form: it displays it."[34] But more germane in this context is that, for Crimp, the photograph, presumably by dint of its indexical properties, will always point to the lifeworld exterior to the museum. Photography's existence in the museum therefore demonstrates that the museum's self-containment is merely a fiction that strategically legitimizes its operations. Moreover, Crimp argues that heterogeneity is *already* in the museum. Homogenization is very different from homogeneity insofar as to homogenize is only possible when confronted with the heterogeneous. Nothing is ever settled in the museum, its ascension to discursive unity is always undermined by its *ongoing* project of homogenizing its collection. To confess to this essential heterogeneity, however, risks manifesting the museum's efficacy and therefore that knowledge *must* be displaced.

Therefore, notions of heterogeneity and homogeneity become interwoven here in a manner that goes beyond the museum's structuring logic and reconnects with notions of medium specificity. To speak of medium specificity, after all, is to underscore this dynamic insofar as *each* discrete medium is submitted to broadly the *same* process, a homogenizing system, whereby each medium is supposedly rendered "pure." In this way, each medium is distinguished from all the others, thereby emphasizing that they constitute a network—a system of the arts—that is itself fundamentally differentiated, heterogeneous. It is an intrinsic feature of that system of the arts, however, that its essential heterogeneity can serve as the precondition for inter-medium confusion, so that the heterogeneity of the system itself is transferred into each medium. Put differently, it is as if heterogeneity is an internal and essential dimension of the various mediums, that they have a "natural" orientation towards "impurity," which modernists—Greenberg, most preeminently—sought to guard against by defending medium specificity as entailing a process of radical purification. That version of medium specificity would take painting as its principal object during the postwar era; but it relied crucially upon the assumption or hope that, reduced to its essentials, painting and other mediums were not constitutively impure or heterogenous.

Crimp's "On the Museum's Ruins" is one of several essays published in *October* whereby that Greenbergian account of medium specificity is simultaneously advocated and unraveled. We can observe this, for instance, in Crimp's qualified agreement with Michel Foucault that Manet's paintings were the first "museum" paintings inasmuch as they testified to "the new and substantial relationship of painting to itself, as a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums."[35] As such, museum and painting alike in this account are tied to the same dream—ultimately unfulfillable—in which heterogeneity can be nullified and purity secured. It would be possible to

speak of "painting itself" and, because that dream includes other mediums, "photography itself" would also be conceivable. Each medium would therefore occupy its carefully circumscribed room within the museum, and the museum would find itself confirmed by the achieved specificity and purity of each medium. Yet just as Crimp's essay subtly rewrites and depends upon Greenberg's arguments, making the delimitation of flatness in painting isomorphic with the museum's framing operations via their shared dependency upon the parergon, he also derails that position by contending that there is no "photography itself." "On the Museum's Ruins" ruptures from his immediately previous essays by installing or acknowledging a constitutive heterogeneity that defines photography but is seemingly denied to painting, as if the borders of the photographic frame are inextricably provisional and contingent. And, in this way, photography discloses that the modernist dream—medium specificity, purity, autonomy, self-homogenization—is eventually no more than a dream. For Crimp in those years it is a dream from which painting cannot, or refuses to, wake from; but photography is willing to embrace impurity, heteronomy, heterogeneity. Around 1980-1981, then, Crimp's art criticism synchronized almost perfectly and confidently with the rapid spread of postmodern theory.

On the Museum's Ruins was published three years after Crimp stepped down as a member of *October*'s editorial board. As such, part of the book's function is to encapsulate and thereby close a specific period—a period in which *October* had a determining role—of Crimp's art-critical work. Some of the frustrations with that period are readily noticeable by both what Crimp does and does not say. Concerning the latter, it is telling that only Craig Owens and Benjamin Buchloh are mentioned in the book's acknowledgments, whereas Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson are absent. But more direct is the introduction to *On the Museum's Ruins*, in which Crimp testifies to a dissatisfaction with his writings on postmodernism brought about by his growing involvement in AIDS activism; indeed, it was partly in relation

to this matter that precipitated the breakdown between Crimp and the other members of *October*'s editorial collective. The decisive issues brought to a head by AIDS, issues in which the politics of representation are staged with particular force, enjoined Crimp to not so much as abandon the theorization of postmodernism as rethink the position his writings had hitherto staked. He writes, on this score, that the essays included in *On the Museum's Ruins* are better comprehended as being "about the end of modernism" rather than expounding an emergent postmodern sensibility.[36]

As crucial as his writings on the cultural politics of the AIDS crisis is, then, I want to turn away from that and continue dealing with the thought that Crimp's seemingly postmodern criticism is about modernism's end. Not only does this provide an optic through which Crimp's essays may be reread, but it also hints at the continued or resurgent presence of his "modernism conceived differently." To move the discussion along, and at the risk of opening oneself to the charge of over-reading, it is worth quoting a sentence that appears just a few lines before Crimp speaks of his essays being about the end of modernism: "It was the specter of death that finally revealed to me the limits of my conception of postmodernism."[37] Undoubtedly, the weight of that sentence is upon "death"—the very real human carnage that would take the lives of many during the AIDS crisis—but I hope it is not morally remiss if I seize upon his metaphorical invocation of the "specter."

Such a metaphor would be fairly easy to marginalize as *just* a metaphor if it were not for the fact that it is recurrent in Crimp's writings. In no way have I attempted (yet) to track the presence of ghostly or spectral metaphors throughout his oeuvre; but it is striking that they appear in "Positive/Negative" and in the 1979 "Pictures"—in other words, in those texts where the "modernism conceived differently" is present—as well as in "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism" in 1981. Speaking of Degas's photograph taken in December 1895 at the

home of Daniel Halévy, Crimp emphasizes the spectral effect deriving from its overlapping of two separate negatives but, furthermore, the photograph's ghostly relation to the "original" scene(s):

> But at that point where Taschereau's shoulder and Mme Niaudet's face both fall partially into shadow, neither resolved into black or white, the two appear simultaneously. Like phantoms they emerge into visibility *through* each other. It is no longer possible, then, to speak of that scene that occasioned this (these) photograph(s); caught in the complex web of the photographic medium, it has been transformed into a hallucinatory, spectral image.[38]

Elsewhere, in the same text, Degas's photograph of Mallarmé reproduces the poet as a "phantom" and "specter."[39] Two years later, in "Pictures," Crimp describes the figures in Jack Goldstein's *Two Fencers* as being similarly "spectral."[40] Equally pertinent here is an uncited quotation taken from a Henry James short ghost story, "The Jolly Corner," where he writes "The presence before him was a presence."[41] Crimp deploys James's line as an important hinge from one part of the argument to the next: having just considered Michael Fried's contention that Minimalism was complexly determined by "presence"—a term used negatively and counterposed to a more positive notion of "presentness" in "Art and Objecthood"—Crimp, in a move that simultaneously extends and breaks from Fried's usage, construes presence as a vital dimension of the younger generation of artists he is discussing. That is to say, if Fried's argument concerning presence is a kind of "stage presence" in which a certain withholding (of the actor's true self) is evident and problematic, then Crimp reformats presence as a kind of "ghostly presence" in which it becomes interlinked with absence. For Crimp, it is this comingling of presence and absence that expressly characterizes artists like Troy Braun-

tuch, Robert Longo, and Cindy Sherman. Taking these assorted fragments of evidence together, all of which indicate spectral metaphors, it becomes reasonable to suspect that Crimp's "modernism conceived different" *haunts* his writings.

Under this condition, it becomes difficult to ignore that 1981's "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism" is correspondingly haunted by ghosts. At first blush, we might think, it is the essay that continues to secure a critical imagination in which postmodernism has decisively ruptured from modernism. And that imagination is perhaps bolstered if we regard the essay as being to some degree another revision of "Pictures"; a revision only tenable, however, after the strong foundation provided by "On the Museum's Ruins." Many of the various themes that explicitly and implicitly animate the previous essays are existent here, and it also likewise anticipates "The End of Painting" that would be published shortly later. Signaling the essay's status as a subtle revision is Crimp's reference back to "Pictures," whereby he adjudicates his previous incorporation of the James passage as a "fudge" to overcome a stumbling block. However, he quickly adds:

> What I just said was a fudge was perhaps not really that, but rather the hint of something really crucial about the work I was describing, which I would like now to elaborate. In order to do so, I want to add a third definition to the word *presence*. To that notion of presence which is about *being there*, being in front of, and that notion of presence that Henry James uses in his ghost stories, the presence which is a ghost and therefore really an absence, the presence which is *not there*, I want to add the notion of presence as a kind of increment to being there, a ghostly aspect of presence that is its excess, its supplement.[42]

Here, yet again, Derrida's philosophy quietly materializes—that final reference to supplement—and it is worth holding off from this for the time being. Instead, it is worth sticking with this dialectical presence/absence combo. Despite initial appearances, this third mode of presence does not leave presence/absence behind but rather builds upon it. Photographic reproduction instantiates an additional or supplemental layer of presence that, in turn, establishes another absence, ultimately generating an "unbridgeable distance from the original, from even the possibility of an original."[43]

Operating in contradistinction to the notion of presence as addition/supplement, it seems, is the notion of the aura—the former can be virtually designated "anti-auratic." Crimp's recounting of Walter Benjamin's canonical essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction" is selective at best and straightforwardly a misreading at worst. When he writes, for instance, although "it may at first seem that Benjamin lamented the loss of the aura, the contrary is in fact true," Crimp misses or diminishes the equivocality subtending Benjamin's analysis.[44] But arguably more fundamental here is less the accuracy of Crimp's interpretation than the use Benjamin is put to. Museums have sought, according to Crimp, to reclaim the aura that has supposedly been lost because of technological reproduction. They have done this doubly: firstly, through their endorsement of Neoexpressionism and its return to painting and, secondly, through its acceptance of photography by emphasizing the significance and ascribing the signature of the photographer himself, his authorial presence in the final print. Both seek to abolish the distance, promote nothing but immediacy, between the artwork and its origin, and therefore run counter to the depreciation of aura that has occurred and even advanced by avant-garde practice from Dada to Robert Rauschenberg and beyond.

And yet, aura does not entirely vanish from Crimp's essay. Its existence, or rather, we might say its presence, lingers as a ghost. Indeed, the institutional attempt to restore aura as brute

fact underlying the artwork's immediacy is contrasted to another aura, one living as nothing more than as a spectral presence testifying to the irrevocability of distance. The closing sentences of "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism" are utterly pertinent:

> By isolating, enlarging, and juxtaposing fragments of commercial images, [Richard] Prince points to their invasion by these ghosts of fiction. Focusing directly on the commodity fetish, using the master tool of commodity fetishism of our time, Prince's rephotographed photographs take on a Hitchcockian dimension: the commodity becomes a clue. It has, we might say, acquired an aura, only now it is a function not of presence but of absence, severed from an origin, from an originator, from authenticity. In our time, the aura has become only a presence, which is to say, a ghost.[45]

Aura has truly become, admittedly not exactly in the sense meant by Benjamin, "the unique apparition of a distance . . . ."[46]

Allow me to fix the Derridean reference that a moment ago, to keep the narrative moving, I set to one side. But one can deepen this line of questioning by noting that ghosts have long played a pivotal role in Derrida's philosophy. For example, in his brilliant deconstruction of the dialogue between Martin Heidegger and Meyer Schapiro over Vincent van Gogh's painting of old boots, one of the voices marshalled in response to this discussion exclaims "Who said—I can't remember—'there are no ghosts in Van Gogh's pictures'? Well, we've got a ghost story on our hands here all right."[47] As Derrida would later recognize, a metaphorics of hauntology is revenant in his numerous writings, occurring too frequently to be marginalized as extrinsic to deconstruction, that would be dealt with in his analysis of political imaginaries.[48] These matters become especially pertinent if we highlight the misreading in Owens's

summary of the parergon: it is less a case that parergon is what excludes than, for Derrida, of the *failure* of that exclusion. That failure, analogous to how the unconscious *incompletely* represses damaging content (it *displaces* rather than utterly *refuses* that content), conjoins with Crimp's contention that the museum cannot exclude the heterogeneity that threatens to derail its self-understanding; heterogeneity is *always already* in the museum—what is posited as crucially exterior to the museum is discovered to be internal and definitive of it. All this, too, dovetails with the unstoppable ghosts or ghosting that *puncture* and *lace* van Gogh's canvas according to Derrida; as he writes at one juncture: if it's a question of knowing whether the shoes in question are haunted by some ghost or are ghosting/returning [*la revenance*] itself."[49]

Where, finally, does all this leave us? One might proffer that, contra to Crimp's own conscious understanding and intentions, we are positioned to reconstrue his postmodernism either as haunted by a modernism that can never be fully disavowed or his "modernism conceived differently" as a spectral prefiguration of postmodernism. However we decide, it is nonetheless very much the case that the transitioning from modernism to postmodernism, even if manifestly theorized in terms of rupture and discontinuity, inescapably admits scattered and nonlinear temporalities. Postmodern epistemology is that of the revenant. When ghosts cannot be exorcized or ignored, all that remains is learning to live with and acknowledge them. Something that renders Crimp's essays on postmodernism difficult is the extent to which such acknowledgment was partially withheld, the belief that the break between modernism and postmodernism could be made cleanly or absolutely, sans remainder. But withholding or repressing acknowledgement is only ever a holding strategy and Crimp's writings "know" that the ghosts always return. To that degree, the authentic countermodel to Malraux's *le musée imaginaire* is, of course, Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* and its attempts to demonstrate the *nachleben* of psycho-cultural forms and paganistic ways of thinking. If *On the Museum's Ruins*, then, serves to encapsulate and wrap up a specific period of his art-critical development,

thereby allowing a move towards other concerns, then that book perhaps also stands as the moment when Crimp can begin to recognize and acknowledge his haunted postmodernism in all its complexity—as testified by his revised conception of his writing as an archaeology of modernism. Rereading in this manner would suggest *On the Museum's Ruins* that amounts to the *closure*, rather than *end*, of Crimp's (post)modernism.[50]

[1] Many of Crimp's major writings are collated and made freely available on his Academia.edu page. For this reason, my footnotes would mostly give page numbers for the original essays published in *October* rather than to their republished versions as the former can be found at https://rochester.academia.edu/DouglasCrimp

[2] Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 1993), 2.

[3] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in Clement Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969,* ed. by John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[4] Douglas Crimp, *Pictures* (New York: The Committee for the Visual Arts, Inc, 1977), 28. The catalogue has been made usefully available, alongside documentary materials, here: http://old.artistsspace.org/exhibitions/pictures (accessed February 16, 2021).

[5] Mallarmé is actually left unnamed in the original version of the essay, but Crimp's references to the poet in subsequent writings makes his implicit presence clear. Greenberg, too, is also unnamed and again the reference is obvious enough.

[6] Douglas Crimp, "Pictures" in *October* 8, Spring 1979, 87.

[7] I have broached this subject elsewhere. See my "*October*'s Postmodernism" in *Visual Resources: A Journal of Documentation,* vol. 31 nos 1-2, 2015, pp. 117-126.
[8] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 160-161.
[9] It is worth saying in passing that Crimp probably did not perceive matters in quite this way. Simply put, he sees Fried as largely continuing Greenberg's legacy rather than as critiquing it with the result that Fried's two modernisms and Crimp's two modernisms are going to be sorted quite differently. There was a pervasive and perhaps strategic misreading of Fried throughout the pages of *October* which only partly masked their dependency on him.
[10] John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).
[11] Paul Strand, "Photography" (1917), reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg (ed.), *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 142.
[12] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 99.
[13] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 91.
[14] My implicit reference to Jean-Luc Nancy is deliberately playful here, but is perhaps also potentially apposite. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002 [1997]).
[15] Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, 3.
[16] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 95.
[17] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 95
[18] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 91.
[19] Although there is insufficient space to elucidate this in the detail required, Rosalind Krauss's two-part essay "Notes on the Index" can be read as proposing a different way of comprehending photography and indexicality. Instead of seeing photography as an example of the semiotic concept of the index, it is as if she ascertains the index as being fundamentally photographic. In this way, she is able to understand an array of art practices—Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by the Bachelors, Even* or the site-specific installations—as secretly photographic or displaced photographs. I have tried to give a slightly wider sense of this in my entry on Krauss in Mark Durden (ed.), *Fifty Key Writers on Photography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 149-154.
[20] Crimp, "Pictures," 77.
[21] Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins" 44.
[22] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 91
[23] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 93.
[24] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 95.
[25] Crimp, "Pictures," 85.
[26] Crimp, "Pictures," 85.
[27] Crimp, "On the Museum," 45.
[28] In a passage cited by Crimp at the start of "On the Museum's Ruins" (p. 42), Adorno writes: "The German word *museal* [museumlike] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art."
[29] Craig Owens, "Detachment from the *Parergon*" in *October* 9, Summer 1979, 44.
[30] Owens, "Detachment from the *Parergon*," 44.
[31] "Detachment from the *Parergon*," 49.
[32] On MoMA, see Christopher Phillips's important survey "The Judgment Seat of Photography" published in *October* 22, Autumn 1982, 27-63. Jeff Wall has provided an incisive account of conceptual art's relation to photography in his essay "'Marks of Indifference': Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art" in in Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (eds.), *Reconsidering the Object of Art 1965-1975* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), 247-267. Postmodernism's engagement with photography was a cornerstone of Crimp's writings.
[33] Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," 53.
[34] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosphicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinnes (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001 [1921]), thesis 2.172.
[35] Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977), 92. Cited by Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," 47.

[36] Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, 22.
[37] Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, 21.
[38] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 91.
[39] Crimp, "Positive/Negative," 94, 95.
[40] Crimp, "Pictures," 78.
[41] Crimp, "Pictures," 77.
[42] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," 92.
[43] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," 94.
[44] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," 95. While there is not space to elucidate Benjamin's deeply ambivalent comprehension of aura, it is hopefully enough to direct the reader to Benjamin's "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" that supplies the necessary pendant to the "Work of Art" essay.
[45] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," 100.
[46] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in its Age of Technical Reproducibility" in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, ed. by Howard Eiland et al, trans. by Edmund Jephcott et al (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2002), 105.
[47] Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian Mcleod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987 [1977]), 257. It is worth noting that the word "ghost" is used some forty-odd times in this book.
[48] See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: the State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 1994 [1993]).
[49] Derrida, *The Truth of Painting*, 259.
[50] On the distinction between closure and end, consult Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London; John Hopkins University Press, 1976 [1967]).