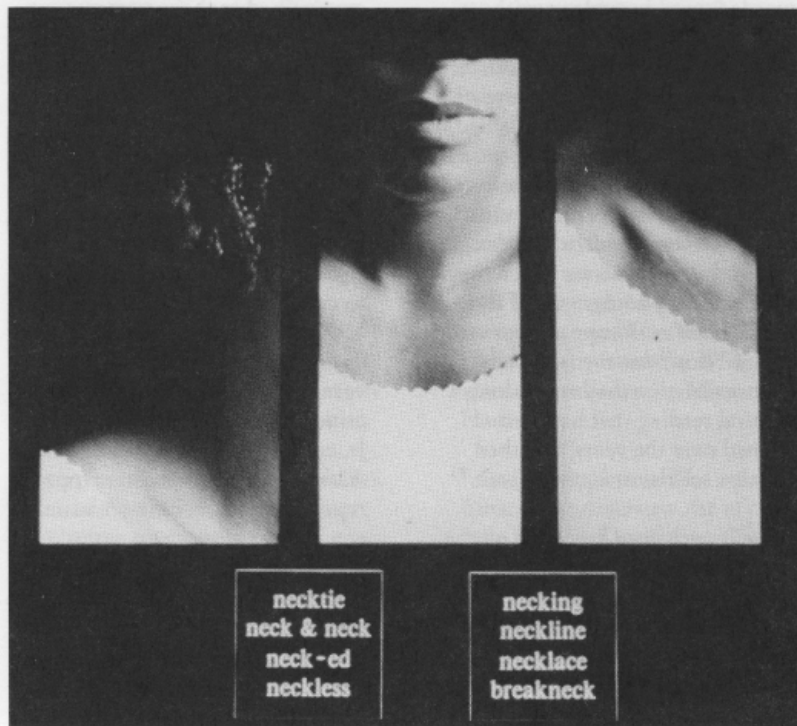


Lorna Simpson  
MATRIX/Berkeley 135

University Art Museum  
early May - early July 1990

*Necklines*, 1989



Whether we encounter a photograph in a museum or in the mass-media, it is rarely uncaptioned. For the most part, these captions serve an affirmative function by harnessing word and image to a single meaning. By contrast, Lorna Simpson's puzzle-like phototext works give us the opportunity to become active participants in the creation of meaning(s). The absent parts of the picture, the ambiguously worded texts, provide us with space(s) to think. When asked, for example, why she never reveals her model's face, a tactic which smacks of gimmickry, Simpson explained, "The viewer wants so much to see a face to read 'the look in the eyes,' or the expression on the mouth. I want viewers to realize that that is one of the mechanisms which they use to read a photograph. If they think 'How am I supposed to read this, if I don't see the face' they may realize that they are making a cultural reading that has been learned over the years, and then perhaps see that it is not a given."<sup>1</sup>

Simpson premises her work on the semiotic theory of photography which maintains that all photographs communicate by means of their association with some hidden or implicit texts, and it is these texts or systems of hidden linguistic and ideological propositions that carry photographs into the domain of readability. Semiotic theory counters the common-sensical belief that a photograph is an unmediated reproduction of some object or event in the real world, and the formalist postulate that images are an independent language system whose semantic properties can be derived from conditions that reside within the image itself. Summarizing the aims

of the semiotic theory of photography, Victor Burgin writes, "The photograph is a *place of work*, a structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by, what codes he or she is familiar with in order to *make sense*....It is therefore important that photography theory take account of the production of this subject, as the complex totality of its determinations are nuanced and constrained in their passage through and across photographs."<sup>2</sup>

Simpson's employment of an African-American rhetorical strategy known as "signifying" has led some critics to assume that she communicates with her audience in a "secret" semiotic code. But, signifying is a relatively easy code to crack. In "The Signifying Monkey," a seminal text that draws analogies between vernacular black discourse and critical theory, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. concludes that signifying is the African-American master trope for repetition and revision (chiasmus).<sup>3</sup>

Signifying is a language game that obliges the participant to arrive at a conclusion about the meaning of a word or phrase through conjecture. The superior player, however, will not be content to correctly guess what his or her opponent's intended meaning is. Instead, the object of the game is to trump one's opponent by turning a phrase around to mean something entirely different. This form of word play, which is strikingly similar to Jacques Derrida's notion of language as an interplay of differences and deferrals, has a serious intent. Once known as the "slaves'-trope," signifying is often employed to undermine pretense

or to reverse someone's opinion about one's own status.

Several of Simpson's works engage us in the signifying ritual. In *Necklines*, 1989, for example, Simpson places the words "necktie," "neckline," "necklace," and "neckless" beneath three different shots of a woman's neck. Each repetition and revision of a word that begins with "neck" suggests another situation this woman may encounter. Perhaps she will be forced to compete "neck and neck" with men who wear "neckties," or she will engage in "necking" with her lover. The homonyms "necklace" and "neckless" suggest more gruesome scenarios such as being strangled or decapitated by a piece of her jewelry.

Simpson's pieces remind us that even scientific discourse is not objective, but rather is based upon conjectural or intuitive reasoning, and can be open to several interpretations and appropriations. *You're Fine*, 1988, suggests that discourse surrounding AIDS now enfolds "non-scientific" issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia within its framework. Are government and big business really protecting us by mandating that employees take drug and AIDS tests or will these tests be used to discriminate against people of color and homosexuals? Should workers allow themselves to be inspected like cattle before they are hired? These are the kinds of questions that the young woman on the medical examination table raises.

The institutional silencing of women's protests, either by ignoring or disqualifying the evident source of their complaints,

is another theme which Simpson has been exploring for some time. *Waterbearer*, 1986, the earliest work in the show, suggests that this woman's testimony will be "discounted" because it lacks hard evidence. The two pitchers of river water that she holds in her hand are the only proof that she "saw him disappear by the river."

Whether we are looking at an early or recent piece, Simpson's gift for rendering memorable and mysterious works marks her as one of the most interesting and important artists of this decade.

Lorna Simpson was born in 1960 in Brooklyn, New York.

Yasmin Ramirez Harwood

(Ms. Harwood is a free-lance writer living in New York City and currently working as research assistant at the Studio Museum in Harlem.)

<sup>1</sup> Lorna Simpson in *The Binational: American Art of the Late 80's*, ed. David Ross (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art; Cologne: Du Mont Buchverlag, 1988), p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan Pubs. U.K., 1982) p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and The Signifying Monkey," *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1984), pp. 285-321.

Works in MATRIX (overall dimensions are given for multiple part works, height preceding width):

*Waterbearer*, 1986, silver print, 40 1/2 x 78". Lent by John and Jane Friedman, Easton, Connecticut.

*You're Fine*, 1988, 4 color Polaroid prints, wood plate, ceramic letters, 40 x 103". Lent by Susan Williams, New York.

*Memory Knots*, 1989, 5 silver prints, 10 plastic plaques, 18 x 60". Lent by Brooke and Carolyn Alexander, New York.

*Necklines*, 1989, 3 silver prints, 2 plastic plaques, 68 1/2 x 70". Lent by Emily and Jerry Spiegel, New York.

Untitled, 1989, 3 color Polaroid prints, 25 x 70". Lent by Robert Fogelman, Memphis, Tennessee.

Untitled, 1989, 2 silver prints, 37" diameter ea. Courtesy Josh Baer Gallery, New York.

#### Selected one-person exhibitions:

Just Above Midtown, NYC '86;  
5th Street Market Alternative  
Gallery, San Diego, CA '85;  
Jamaica Arts Center, Queens, NY  
'88; Josh Baer Gallery, NYC '89;  
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford,  
CT '89; University Art Museum,  
Long Beach, CA '90.

#### Selected group exhibitions:

The New Museum of  
Contemporary Art, NYC, *The*

*Body* '86; Group Material  
installation, *Documenta 8*, Kassel,  
Germany, *The Castle* '87; Institute  
of Contemporary Art, Boston,  
MA, *Utopia Post Utopia* '88  
(catalogue); Museum of Fine Arts,  
Boston, and Städtische Kunsthalle,  
Düsseldorf, *The Binational* '88  
(catalogue); Alternative Museum,  
NYC, *Prisoners of Image 1800-  
1988: Ethnic and Gender  
Stereotypes* '89 (catalogue); Studio  
Museum in Harlem, NYC,  
*Constructed Images: New  
Photography* '89 (catalogue).

Bibliography about the artist (see  
also catalogues under exhibitions):

Trend, David. "The Object and  
Subject in Black Photography,"  
*Afterimage*, May '86.

Brenson, Michael. "New  
Visions," *The New York Times*,  
Jan. 9, '87.

Wallis, Brian. "Questioning  
Documentary," *Aperture  
Magazine—Storyteller*, no. 112  
(Fall '88).

Plagens, Peter. "Under  
Western Eyes," *Art in America*,  
Jan. '89, p. 37.

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California State University, Long  
Beach.

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