

# Misfitting Together

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# MISFITTING TOGETHER

Jon Davies

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*Before Pictures* by Douglas Crimp. Brooklyn, NY: Dancing Foxes Press, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. 288, 151 illustrations. \$39.00 cloth.

This lavishly illustrated book charts art historian and critic Douglas Crimp's first decade in New York from his arrival in 1967 up to his curating the much-mythologized exhibition *Pictures* at Artists Space in 1977. While Crimp is perhaps best known for this project, his 1987 *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* special issue of *October*—where he worked as an editor for thirteen years (247)—and his 2002 *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* are invaluable volumes in queer cultural studies. Crimp has been a mentor to and influence on a generation of queer practitioners and thinkers, providing a model for how to gracefully articulate politics, aesthetics, and affect in times of crisis, famously declaring of AIDS that ultimately, “It is our promiscuity that will save us.”<sup>1</sup>

A striking anecdote from his 1989 essay “Mourning and Militancy” that reappears in *Before Pictures* reads,

In 1977, while I was visiting my family in Idaho, my father died unexpectedly. He and I had had a strained and increasingly distant relationship, and I was unable to feel or express my grief over his death. After the funeral I returned to New York for the opening of an exhibition I'd organized [*Pictures*] and resumed my usual life.

But within a few weeks a symptom erupted which to this day leaves a scar near my nose: my left tear duct became badly infected, and the resulting abscess grew to a golf-ball sized swelling that closed my left eye and completely disfigured my face. When the abscess finally burst, the foul-smelling pus oozed down my cheek like poison tears. I have never since doubted the force of the unconscious. (247)

Crimp's memoir of his first decade in New York—which, not incidentally, also saw the emergence of a thriving gay sexual subculture—similarly seeks to retroactively return the body and its drives to his youthful intellectual engagement with the discourse of contemporary art. Often Crimp's juxtapositions of gay life and art world, personal and professional, are stark, suggesting that they can only partially be bridged with the passing of time and with recourse to the queer vocabulary that Crimp himself has helped develop. (David Velasco's review of *Before Pictures* in *Artforum* aptly observes that Crimp's writing itself seems to dance between "memoir" and "theory" from "paragraph to paragraph."<sup>2</sup>)

The book is loosely structured by the neighborhoods and the specific addresses that Crimp lived in

as he moved south from Spanish Harlem to Chelsea to Greenwich Village to Tribeca and finally to the Financial District apartment in the beautiful Bennett Building that he has inhabited since 1976. The first chapter discusses his escape from his family in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in 1962, and his early art studies in New Orleans. His architecture education there, under the tutelage of a "spectacularly flitty" professor, toured him through ancient temples, Renaissance *palazzi* and local Gothic revival houses (9); these seemed to become spaces of imagination and possibility for him, glamorous alternative "homes" to the nuclear family he fled. This attention to the affective energies of private and public spaces inflects Crimp's narration of the built landscape of New York, whose changes greatly influenced the city's artistic production. Where Crimp lived played a determining role in which world he fell more into; his move from the Village to Tribeca, for example, came from a decision to "get serious about being an art critic" and "exchange . . . one scene for another" (148). When Crimp arrives in New York, he seems to effortlessly fall into an art world full of opportunity—a small scene marked by an openness and ease, which now seems as unimaginable as cheap, cavernous Manhattan lofts. Max's Kansas City, with the "tough-minded" male artists in the front room and the camp,

queer Warhol crowd in the back, is Crimp's spatial metaphor for his own split consciousness and youthful ambivalence about how gay and art worlds fit (14), or rather how they were always "misfitting together," to borrow a chapter title from his 2012 book *"Our Kind of Movie": The Films of Andy Warhol*.

Crimp's present-day attempt to "read" desire into his early career, to use memoir to limn the divide "between the art world and the queer world" (15)—a project that remains tantalizingly unfinished—is matched by his sensitivity to the power of fiction. Early on he quotes Rosalyn Deutsche on history as a narrative fiction, "an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (25). This attempt to reconcile "art" and "gay" becomes all the more moving for its impossibility and the tenuousness of the intersections he finds. Each distinct essay seems to try on a different strategy for a queer reconciliation of serious and decorative, Apollo and Dionysius, classicism and romanticism, real man and swish, front room and back. Crimp's mind/body split is nicely captured in "*Disss-co* (A Fragment)" where he admits to *thinking* at the disco, analyzing his experience rather than submitting whole-heartedly to it (192). His dancing body never fully conquers his overactive mind (199). Crimp's investment in looking anew is also evident in the intensity of the literal re-reading he undertakes

throughout: he scrutinizes his past writing in an effort to grasp the biases behind it, while also commenting on various editorial indignities he has suffered.

The cast of characters that "misfit together" through Crimp's retrospective lens include his formative encounters with the "drapery" of conceptual artist Daniel Buren and of couturier Charles James (32), as well as grappling with the venerable Agnes Martin, who dominates the essay "Back to the Turmoil." The chapter "*Art News Parties*" centers on John Ashbery and his coterie, for whom Surrealism was a key touchstone and whose more personal, lyrical writing style provided an alternate path. Crimp notes, "I was determined to find a critical position that circumvented both the poetic approach associated with *Art News* and the Greenbergian formalism that held sway among many of the *Artforum* critics. . . ." (103). "Hotel des Artistes" chronicles Crimp's obsessive following of Watergate while sunning on Fire Island, and also reveals that Ellsworth Kelly was into "shrimping," or toe-sucking (122)—an image now seared into my mind. Here Crimp reflects on how power differences animated art and gay scenes alike, with Kelly a key participant in both Crimp's sexual life and in his art-world pursuits. (These essays tend to end with a terse conclusion where the figures that had

productively “misfit” are made to fit together more overtly.)

In addition to urban and architectural spaces, the body is central to Crimp’s memoir as the nexus between his passion for dancing—as visible in “*Disss-co* (A Fragment),” inspired by his notes for an unwritten essay on disco from the mid-1970s—and his initiation into *balletomania* via fellow critic Craig Owens. As Crimp’s interest in performance comes to the fore in the second half of *Before Pictures*, the two solitudes find a greater harmony. “Action Around the Edges” begins with his love for Yvonne Rainer and the Grand Union dance group, before discussing how Manhattan’s de-industrialization in the early 1970s shaped artists’ works ranging from Peter Hujar’s “cruising pictures” (156) and Louise Lawler’s *Birdcalls* to the large-scale *Projects: Pier 18* that saw twenty-seven male artists such as Dan Graham and Vito Acconci perform on one of the west-side piers, which were a hotbed of gay sex, debauchery, and “danger.” These heterosexual male performances inadvertently echoed gay cruising rituals, rerouting a sub-cultural aura of risk toward often macho aesthetic ends. Crimp juxtaposes Gordon Matta-Clark’s iconic 1975 *Day’s End* at Pier 52 with photographer Alvin Baltrop’s candid photos of sex at the piers, and suggests that Joan Jonas’s 1973 *Songdelay* “thwart[s] our desire to

know or possess the city beyond our immediate experience of it in the moment of use. . . . We glimpse the city in pieces, in the background, in our peripheral vision—and in recollection” (181).

In his final essay, “*Pictures, Before and After*,” Crimp is haunted by his omission of Cindy Sherman from the exhibition. Her attention to the city as a space of self-fashioning, fantasy and threat in her *Untitled Film Stills* resonates with Crimp’s memoir’s main preoccupations. Part of his retrospective look at his youth, then, entails imagining how the exhibition *Pictures* could have reflected himself—and the “back room” part of his life—and the streets of New York more than it did. In this chapter he goes into detail about the research and curating of *Pictures*, the writing and revision of his accompanying essay, and the project’s storied legacy as it mutated from small exhibition to bellwether of a broader “artistic tendency” (275). *Before Pictures*’s concluding words suggest that the New York art scene between 1967–1977 then seemed “small enough to seem fully comprehensible” in a way that “no longer holds true.” He continues, “And because it is so clearly not true now, it seems unlikely that it could really have been true then” (278).

George Balanchine and ballerina Suzanne Farrell are the focus of the chapter “Agon.” The “oblique

angle” of the seats from which he and Owens watched Balanchine’s ballets (231) becomes another spatial metaphor: not only modern and postmodern but “front” and “back” become unmoored and unstable through a change of perspective. Crimp concludes, with the help of Derrida, that “aesthetics is not about what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic to the work of art but rather is about the impossibility of distinguishing between the two” (235). Performance, and dance in particular, open up new pleasures for Crimp, and the erotics he finds in Balanchine’s ballets are brought to bear on a more analytic artwork like Jack Goldstein’s film *A Ballet Shoe* (1975), which he discusses in “*Pictures, Before and After.*”

One aspect of the irreconcilability of the art and gay worlds that Crimp does not explicitly take up is the gendered tension between a modernist narrative of art history dominated by debate over precedence and influence—the dominant paradigm that shaped Crimp’s approach—and the messier, more labyrinthine circuits that queer cultural lineages follow. How might the ethos of the Cockettes, for example, trouble a teleology of modernist painting? Similarly, the bugaboo to be vanquished in “serious” art at the time was illusionism (129), which one could argue was

precisely the life-blood of queer communities, built as they were on desire and fabulation. (Think of the gay male Hollywood fandom that focused on larger-than-life female stars or the ambiguous pleasures of lesbian pulp novels in the postwar era.) Queer cultures have not typically sought to reveal or purge illusionism but instead to recognize—with both adoration and shade—how it can be decisive for world-making and psychic survival. Crimp’s self-historicization in *Before Pictures* lovingly performs the very tensions it unpacks and, in doing so, opens up fruitful avenues for future fleshing-outs of the dynamics between the sexual, the social, the formal, and the aesthetic.

*Jon Davies is a curator and writer. He is currently a PhD candidate in Art History at Stanford University. One of his research interests is video art's capacity for intimacy and gossip, and how it catalyzed artists' sexual and social experimentation in the 1970s–80s.*

#### NOTES

1. Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 253.
2. David Velasco, “Dance, Memory,” *Artforum* 55, no. 7 (March 2017), <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201703&id=66674315-16>.