



Repeat, Reveal, React:
Identities in Flux

SELECTIONS FROM THE GRINNELL COLLEGE ART COLLECTION

Curated by the Exhibition Seminar, Department of Art
under the direction of Associate Professor of Art Jenny Anger

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Introduction

— Rebecca Park, Courtney Sheehan, and Amanda Underwood

Repetition: unoriginal, complementary, boring, comforting, mechanical, symptomatic, habitual, universal. These are just some of the associations commonly attached to repetitive actions and images. In order to interrogate such widely held assumptions about the social function of repetition in art, we have purposefully selected works for this exhibition that approach repetition from a variety of perspectives. In *Repeat, Reveal, React: Identities in Flux*, we examine how identities are constructed in art and the way those processes are inflected, shaped, and exposed by repetition. The diversity of the Grinnell College Art Collection provides an excellent opportunity for this focus. Although we have drawn from a spectrum of works, their differences enable us to address the extremely conditional nature of identity formation. Our title foregrounds the multiple resonances of repetition in this exhibition. “Repeat” highlights the show’s structural theme, while “Reveal” conveys our desire to provoke alternative readings. We hope the exhibition encourages visitors actively to engage with each other and the show—to “React.” Our subtitle, “Identities in Flux,” emphasizes our primary focus: repetition’s relationship to the perpetual states of negotiation and instability we experience in our attempts to create and assert identities.

While we are proposing a new dynamic to the consideration of repetition in art, one that emphasizes the social implications of the artist’s production and the viewer’s response, our work is situated in an academic context born decades earlier. *Art in Series*, one of the first exhibitions in recent memory to deal directly with the question of seriality, took place at a small liberal arts institution, Finch College Museum of Art, not too unlike ours, and we are happy to continue what was begun there in 1967 (Kahng 16). That year is not coincidental. Rising out of the rejection of

modernism, minimalist artists throughout the decade embraced quotidian forms and replicated them in series (Kahng 14). Critics, such as Mel Bochner and John Coplans, may have debated the causes and definitions of the trend; undeniable, though, is the shattering of the high-low, original-copy hierarchy left in the wake of the minimalist tide (Kahng 16). Most recently, *The Repeating Image: Multiples in French Painting from David to Matisse* (2007), curated by Eik Kahng at the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, explored this ever-present theme in nineteenth-century French art. Unlike *Art in Series* and *The Repeating Image*, which were rooted in specific historical and artistic contexts, the primary concern of the present exhibition rests in the role of repetition in identity formation, regardless of time or culture. What grew out of the particular artistic concerns of an era ultimately provided the audience with a new lens through which to view (or, perhaps more appropriately, review) repetition in art and its relation to its particular socio-historical context. It is in this spirit that we present *Repeat, Reveal, React*.

In this catalogue, the reader will find multiple interpretations of the meaning of repetition and identity with regard to artworks in *Repeat, Reveal, React*. We have taken care to highlight the major strengths and themes of the Grinnell College Art Collection with respect to this focus. Many of the essay topics grew out of vibrant class discussion as we considered the endless ways that repetition and identity intersect in art. We begin the catalogue with an essay that frames all of the ensuing conversations about repetition across time and culture. **Caitlin Hawley** explores the tension between originality and reproduction in “To Prompt or to Provoke: Diverging Appropriations of the Prints of Francisco Goya.” In her essay, “Bodies that Lack: Exposing

Repetition as a Means to Cohere in the Work of Anna Gaskell, Annette Lemieux, and Koo Kyung Sook," **Amanda Underwood** brings the relationship between repetition and identity into stronger focus by analyzing how repetition functions to reproduce identities in art. In her contribution, "Adventures in Alterity: Enrique Chagoya's *Les Aventures des Cannibales Modernistes* and Marianna Mørkøre and Rannvá Káradóttir's *Memotekid*," **Courtney Sheehan** uses art to trouble the notion that identity politics can ever accurately portray personal experience. With "The American Machine: Calder, Warhol, and Postwar National Identity," **Rebecca Park** explores art as a means of constructing and representing identity on a national level during the period of post-industrialization in America. **Madeleine Cargas**, in "Lenin and Laborers: The Formation of Masculinity and Cultural Identity through Repetition," investigates changing imagery of the ideal masculine worker from nineteenth-century French depictions of agricultural labor to posthumous representations of Vladimir Lenin in the mid-twentieth-century. Her exploration of masculinity in this context serves as a counterpart to "Engagement and Indifference: Glenn Ligon and the Influence of Context," **Nora Frazin's** examination of how the individual man constructs his identity in the face of a history of racial trauma. Also dealing with issues of identity negotiation during times of sociopolitical upheaval, **Caitlin Deutsch** addresses how repeated depictions of anxiety perform the ethos of post-apartheid South Africa in "Confronting a Past Identity: William Kentridge and Alfred Jarry's Ubu in Post-Apartheid South Africa." **Erika Graham** provides further meditation on the shifting impact of cultural symbols with her essay, "From the Home to the Gallery: The Life of a Book of Hours in Medieval and Modern Culture." She explores how different societies project their own identities onto the same visual media. With "Abstracting Community Identities: Sean Scully and the Kuba," **Katherine Robbins** examines how different communities reinterpret the role of repetition in regional artwork. **Thomas**

Bateman analyzes how repetition recontextualizes the female body in both canonical and contemporary representations in his essay, "The Female Subject as a Contemporary Frankenstein: Imagining More Beautiful Futures." Lastly, in "Unlearning Social Constructions of Race through Repetition in the Work of Kara Walker," **Maya Ruiz-Stanbary** argues that repeated forms force dramatic confrontation with legacies of American racial stereotypes.

Alongside the essays, several comics are dispersed throughout this catalogue. In our effort to push the boundaries of identity, we have re-envisioned ourselves as comic book characters and re-imagined our academic discussions in a more visually interactive space. In the spirit of the works of Enrique Chagoya and Roger Shimomura, two artists whose work we include in the exhibition, we have incorporated the form of comics in order to interrogate the discursive mediums considered acceptable for inclusion in an exhibition catalogue. In the words of comics theorist Ole Frahm, "To consider comics a subject worthy of academic interest or theoretical consideration appears to beg some serious effort of legitimation" (178). We feel that comics provide an enticing site of intersection for issues of repetition and identity. Frahm argues that "comics parody the very notion of an original," and it is toward such a challenge to consensus that *Repeat, Reveal, React* strives (179). Accordingly, the comics function to extend and lend texture to our essays.

In the following pages, we offer eleven distinct ways to consider repetition and identity. The richness of content in this collection of essays reflects the array of perspectives deployed by the authors. Some of the essays discuss relationships between works that have never been addressed together before, while others contribute valuable insights to discussions that have been ongoing for decades (or centuries). We hope our thoughts, taken as a whole, push the boundaries of what repetition can mean and encourage the reader to encounter art in new and exciting ways.