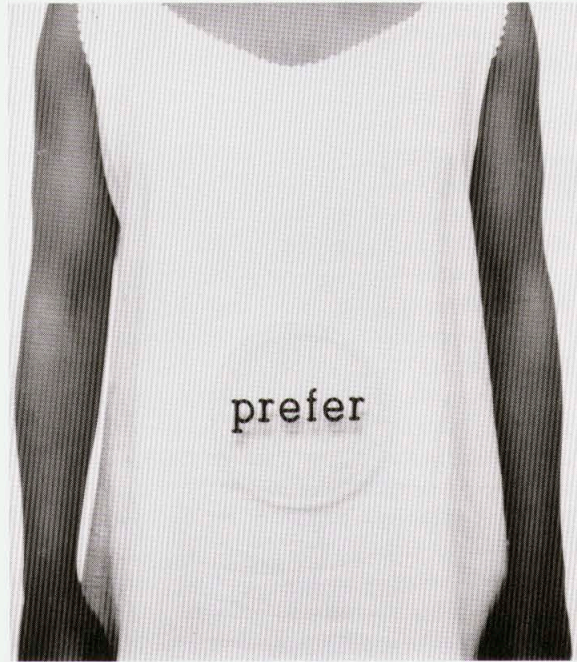


Wadsworth Atheneum  
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

*Lorna Simpson/MATRIX 107*  
*September 23 - November 19, 1989*



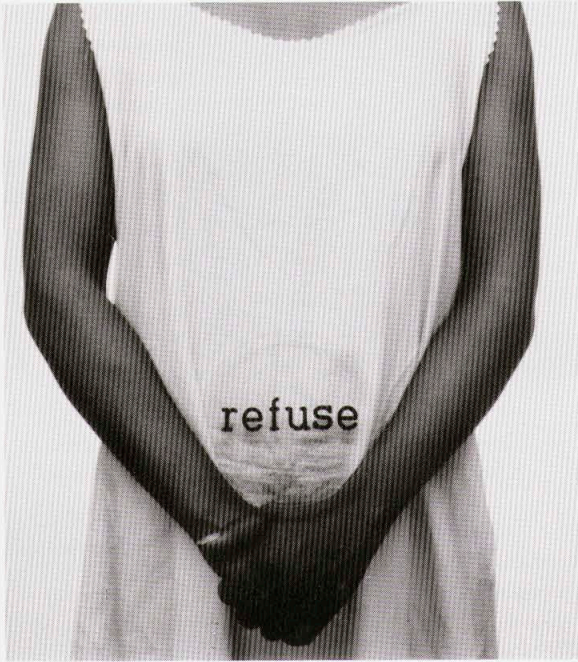
*Untitled ("prefer/refuse/decide"), 1989*  
Photo: Gamma One Conversions, Inc.

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*Lorna Simpson/MATRIX 107*

Lorna Simpson's combinations of photographs and accompanying texts are like mirrors. What we see in these works is as much a reflection of ourselves as of the artist who made them. Simpson's own viewpoint is that of an African-American woman. If you are white or if you are



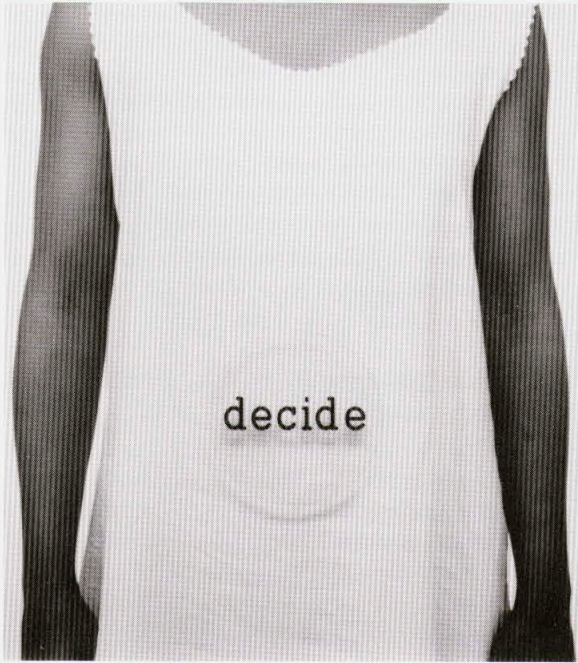
male, the chances are you may read these images, these gestures, and the implications of the texts in this exhibition very differently than will a black female.

This is the essence of the lively dynamic that Simpson's work intends to set in motion. She brings many things into question, including the "truth" of documentary photography. Above all, she structures her works to highlight how deeply embedded racist and sexist stereotypes are in both the visual images and the language of our daily lives. The ambiguity that resides in Simpson's work is intentional. She has a canny understanding that when meaning and intent are left open they create a space we each rush to fill with our own assumptions and prejudices.

Simpson was once a documentary photographer but, disillusioned, abandoned that approach in favor of set-up studio photography. Says Simpson, "Everyone still holds

onto this idea of the truth of the documentary photograph. In my work I try to get the viewers to realize that they are dealing with a plastic medium – that it is all a matter of surfaces and facades."

Simpson's work uses the same model: the performance artist, model, and actress Alva Rogers. Her face is never revealed, thereby denying the viewer the power of "knowing"



her. Deprived of conventionally available information, our attention is redirected to body language, to gestures. Despite the close-up view, intimacy is intentionally withheld. Simpson's model often wears a simple white linen chemise with a feminine embroidered trim. For Simpson, the shape is like a paper doll's dress. She likes the scoop neck and the A-line which are archetypally simple, giving considerable leeway to its interpretation. Reading the garment is intriguingly elusive. It speaks of both refinement and privilege as well as poverty and servitude. Meaning shifts. Is it a dress or a slip? Is the figure fully dressed or partially undressed? In any case, the costume—and it is a costume, chosen by Simpson for the scene—introduces a distinct note of informality. While some may read the chemise as a sign of virginal vulnerability, others may interpret it as provocatively scant. Such multiple readings are consistent



throughout Simpson's work and encourage viewers to examine their own assumptions of class and gender as well as the complex meanings that reside in a supposedly simple photograph.

Simpson chooses images, materials, and words that are common to our daily lives. Her photography is straightforward, usually symmetrical, and close-up. Although the language she brings into the works raises the stakes considerably, the words or phrases are themselves always ordinary and familiar. This is true also of the materials she uses. Works are simply framed, and she uses the same engraved Formica plaques that are frequently encountered on rest-room doors, on office desks, and as "No Smoking" signs. She consciously welcomes the familiarity of routine graphic display into her work.

For Simpson, as for many contemporary artists, the traditional singular image is not an adequately expressive device. This reflects, in part, the age in which we live. Volumes of reproduced images confront us daily. It is from this barrage of fragments that, in the interest of sanity, we try to construct a holistic view of the world. Simpson's work is also made up of fragments: most of her works feature a series of photographic images along with a series of words or phrases, all carefully staged, selected, and arranged.

In **Twenty Questions (A Sampler)** (1986), the same image is repeated four times. The sharp focus on hair and skin zooms in without ceremony on the key visible differences that define race in our daily lives. This then skews how we interpret the accompanying language. Despite the name of the game, **Twenty Questions**, and the ostensibly playful metaphors ("pretty as a picture/or clear as crystal/or pure as a lily/or black as coal/or sharp as a razor"), this piece is a deadly serious reminder of the repressive attitudes that still accost the black female psyche in our society today. Beyond that, it questions attitudes toward women in general. In Simpson's works, it is the addition of language to the images that unleashes the energy and the dialogue.

Simpson places the growing AIDS crisis in a larger societal context in **Kid Glove** (1989). The propriety of white kid gloves, the sequence of polite poses, and the repetition of the word "social" all underscore the public's ready complicity in adopting an attitude of silence toward the current epidemic. Rubber gloves are the first line of defense against infection. The kid gloves speak of obedience, inaction, and paralysis at just a time when aggressive action might make a crucial difference in the course of future events.

For Simpson the apparent inadequacy of response, given the magnitude of the threat, stands as an indictment of such repression. Her concerns about this extend far beyond the immediate issues of public health into the even larger area of personal and political choices.

Although **You're Fine** (1988) is based on Simpson's own experiences as a job applicant and the invasion of privacy she encountered in the process, most of her works are not strictly autobiographical. Themes of class, gender, and race as well as her frequent explorations into the elusive nature of personal memory, as in the Atheneum's **Bits and Pieces** (1989), are broadly shared issues. Says Simpson, "My work comes out of personal experience but I abstract it so that the viewer will not take it as an autobiographical story." The strength of Simpson's work is that she combines personal and political history, mapping life in America at the end of the twentieth century. Despite the works' beauty and intelligence, for many reading her maps the terrain looks harsh, and it would seem few have traversed it unscathed.

Lorna Simpson was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1960. She received a BFA from the School of Visual Arts, New York City, in 1982 and an MFA from the University of California, San Diego, in 1985. She is on the artists' advisory board of The New Museum, New York City, and was recently appointed a board member of Artists Space, New York City. She lives in Brooklyn and is represented by the Josh Baer Gallery, New York City.

Andrea Miller-Keller  
*Curator of Contemporary Art*

NOTE: Lorna Simpson will be giving an informal MATRIX Evening Lecture at 7:30 on Tuesday, October 3, 1989, in the Hartford Courant Room. The event is free, and the public is cordially invited.

### *Works in MATRIX:*

*Twenty Questions (A Sampler)*, 1986, four silver prints with six engraved plastic plaques, 34" x 99". Lent by Suzanne and Howard Feldman, New York City.

*You're Fine*, 1988, four Polaroid color prints, fifteen engraved plastic plaques, and twenty-one gypsum letters, 40" x 103". Lent by Susan Williams, New York City.

*Untitled* ("prefer/refuse/decide"), 1989, three Polaroid color prints and three Plexiglass plaques, 25" x 70". Lent by Miani Johnson and Bruce Ferguson, New York City.

*Kid Glove*, 1989, five color Polaroid prints and five engraved plastic plaques, 31" x 135". Lent by Nelson Blitz Jr. and Catherine Woodard, New York City.

*Neck Lines*, 1989, three silver prints and two engraved plastic plaques, c. 68" x 70". Lent by Suzanne and Howard Feldman, New York City.

### *Also on exhibition nearby in Explorations in Art and Language, Avery 107:*

*Bits and Pieces*, 1989, five silver prints and seven engraved plastic plaques, 73 1/2" x 23 1/2". Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum, H. Hilliard Smith Fund, 1989.20.

### *Selected One-person Exhibitions:*

5th Street Market Alternative Gallery, San Diego, CA *Gestures/Reenactments* '85; Just Above Midtown, NYC *Screens* '86; Mercer Union, Toronto, Ontario, Canada '88; Jamaica Arts Center, Queens, NY '88; Josh Baer Gallery, NYC '89.

### *Selected Group Exhibitions:*

Bread and Roses Cultural Project, Inc., District # 1199, NYC *Working Women/Working Artists/Working Together* '82; Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH *Contemporary Afro-American Photography* (traveled) '84; Documenta 8, Kassel, West Germany *The Castle* (installation by Group Material) '87; *Art Against AIDS/On The Road*, San Francisco, CA (traveling) '89.

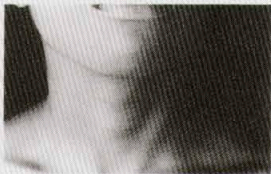
night



skin



loud/pain



carpet



yellow



at the count of 5  
you will remember

at the count of 5  
you will forget

*Bits and Pieces*, 1989  
Photo: Joseph Szaszfai



*Selected Bibliography about Lorna Simpson:*

Trend, David. "The Object and Subject in Black Photography," *Afterimage* vol. 13 no. 10 (May 1986), p. 10+.

Tate, Greg. "The Return of the Black Aesthetic: Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke," *The Village Voice* (Voice Literary Supplement), December 9, 1986, p. 5+.

Brenson, Michael. "New Visions," *The New York Times*, January 9, 1987, p. C24.

Storr, Robert. "Other 'Others,'" *The Village Voice* (Art Supplement), October 6, 1987, p. 15+.

Raven, Arlene. "Colored," *The Village Voice*, May 31, 1988, p. 91.

Heartney, Eleanor. "Strong Debuts," *Contemporanea* vol. 1 no. 2 (July/August '88), p. 112.

Fairbrother, Trevor. "Lorna Simpson" (interview), *The Binational/Art of the Late 80's*, The Institute of Contemporary Art and The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, 1988, p. 175+.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Beyond the Simulation Principle," *Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, 1988, p. 82+.

Heron, Liz. "60 Shows, All Photos, All Women," *The Village Voice*, October 25, 1988, p. 91.

Malen, Lenore. "The Real Politics of Lorna Simpson," *Women Artists News* vol. 13 no. 3 (Fall '88), p. 4+.

Wallis, Brian. "Questioning Documentary," *Aperture*, no. 112 (Fall '88), p. 60+.

Willis, Deborah, and Kellie Jones. *Constructed Images: New Photography*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, (New York) 1989.

Hess, Elizabeth. "Coming Up Empty," *The Village Voice*, May 9, 1989, p. 99.

Smith, Roberta. "Working the Gap Between Art and Politics," *The New York Times*, Sunday, September 25, 1989, p. 33.

Jones, Kellie. *Lorna Simpson*, Josh Baer Gallery, (New York) 1989.

Hess, Elizabeth. "Self- and Selfless Portraits," *Village Voice*, September 26, 1989, p. 93.

Smith, Roberta. "Lorna Simpson," *The New York Times*, September 29, 1989, p. C25.