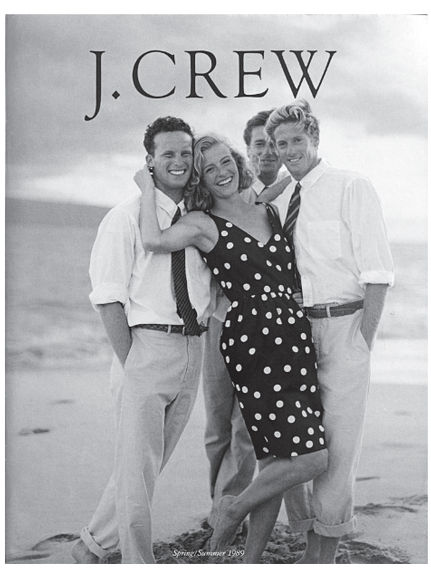

1 J.Crew Catalog, Spring/Summer 1989, photographer unknown, courtesy J.Crew, Inc.

1 Ralph Lauren was the first American clothing designer to create a completeist line for the home (i.e., Ralph Lauren Home). This product series, along with the Ralph Lauren flagship store on the Upper East Side of Manhattan—opened in 1986 in a formerly private domestic setting, the Gertrude Rhinelander Waldo mansion—made it theoretically possible to live in a house (and world) outfitted in the Lauren vision.

2 Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," reprinted in *X-TRA* 8 no. 1 (fall 2005): 17–30. The artists in the show were Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith.

3 *Annie Hall*, with its Marshall McLuhan cameo and brief animated interlude, presents itself as very knowing where media is concerned. Yet its claustrophobic view of social life—as Joan Didion wrote in 1979 in the *New York Review of Books*, its obsession with "a new class in America, a subworld of people rigid with apprehension that they will die wearing the wrong sneaker"—and history give it a promotional air that is difficult to diagnose, at least visually speaking, until one notices the extensive Lauren product placement. Didion has a point, yet I think she is rather shortsighted, because she ignores or feels unable to discuss the film's subtext (i.e., its status as a guide to assimilation). The awkward name-dropping and conspicuous consumption do not occur in a historical vacuum; rather, these are enacted by individuals who are "learning"—to comedic effect, in Allen's coding of these shifts—how to behave and speak as privileged members of society would/must behave and speak. Singer's parents live in a cramped apartment under a roller-coaster at Coney Island, and one of his aunts whom we encounter at a party is a Holocaust survivor, but Singer himself is a successful comic who resides in what appears to be a bright three-bedroom in Manhattan and is mostly concerned with pleasure.

4 Here I indicate the massive proliferation of sportswear brands and so-called fast fashion in the past three decades. The polo shirt, at one time presumably a technical garment, is now so widely reproduced as to have no particular use-based identity. I mention this not to mourn something or other, but rather to underline how the visual realm of fashion has become more "democratic" in the US, even as actual conditions have become less so (i.e., beyond other political and governmental problems, income inequality has increased and personal debt has become a necessity for many, with many of these changes and effects dating from President Carter's massive deregulation of the corporate sphere in 1976 and therefore following a similar timeline as fashion in more than one sense).

5 The tag *né(e)* has historically served as an anti-Semitic dog whistle. See T. S. Eliot's lines in "Sweeney among the Nightingales," for example: "The silent vertebrate in brown / Contracts and concentrates, withdraws; / Rachel *née* Rabinovitch / Tears at the grapes with murderous paws." With thanks to writer and artist Abraham Adams for recollecting this passage.

6 Peter Galassi, "Afterword," in *Tina Barney* by Tina Barney (New York: Rizzoli, 2017), 221.

Lucy Ives,
(Ralph Lauren, the J.Crew People, and Other) Bluffs

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I pertained to a household that received several general-interest glossy magazines, along with the J.Crew catalog. While there were many items to fascinate a young person (who was only partially literate at this time) between the covers of the magazines, a certain set of advertisements held my attention in a way that little else did: images that celebrated the brand Ralph Lauren were not merely narrative but mysterious, somehow subterranean in their intent; they portrayed (usually, although not exclusively) white Americans in opulent settings, richly dressed. The models, whose symmetrical faces shone with terrifying perfect health, were the focus of every ad. They evinced the specific yet distant psychology of characters in a novel one means to read but has not yet read, heroines of unwatched films. I studied these portraits of anonymous pert beauties (occasionally of a certain age) and glowering hunks in cashmeres, silks, furs, cottons, cotton flannels, and wools. I sniffed the pages, nearly drank them. There was a lesson here about the past, and about how people understood one another now, in the present. The men and women had priceless vintage cars, touched one another's arms, were accompanied by schnauzers, skied with a child, sat on sand or lawns. These images formed a story about family, at once whispered and loudly proclaimed, for those who grasped its codes. It was a story about nation and inheritance, too. I strove to know whatever the person who had created the images knew. I turned to the pages of J.Crew's seasonal offerings as if I might discover the further elaboration of a plot. Here, however, the models were less obsessed by an ancient familial saga; they merely disported themselves at a rented beach house. I assumed that they were probably the liberal cousins of the Lauren figures, yuppies or something, individuals I might today peg as better-adjusted prototypes for HBO's Cousin Greg, of the network's latest sociological study, *Succession*. They lived less well and their garments were thinner, yet these J.Crew people seemed the more likely to survive.

I did not understand, then, that Ralph Lauren was (additionally) a person, since the two terms merely connoted "boy's first name plus girl's first name" as far as I was concerned, and did not quite add up to a human. *Lauren* was an assimilated version of the founder and designer's family name, which had at one time been Lifshitz, Belarusian and Ashkenazi; of course, I did not know this. Nor did I know that Lauren hailed from a modest household in the Bronx, the same borough where my own father—who also had an assimilated last name, Iranian and Assyrian—had been born just a year before Ralph Lifshitz.

Although I believed myself to be encountering a drama about important adults, in looking at Ralph Lauren's ads I was also absorbing a sort of structuralist approach to American social hierarchy, one pioneered by the golden age of Hollywood cinema, if not the mythical Jay Gatsby himself, that was now being leveraged by Ralph Lauren into an empire of something that would soon be termed *lifestyle*. It was a generalized picture language about taste, affluence, and comfort, even as it was also a series—a "line"—of real things one could buy.[1] It is perhaps no accident it was in 1977, the year when Woody Allen and Diane Keaton sported head-to-toe Ralph Lauren in the comedic film *Annie Hall*, that the art critic Douglas Crimp composed his now-famous essay for a late-September show at Artists Space, *Pictures*.

Crimp discusses the regime of pictures, "signifying structure[s] of their own accord," how the removal of syntagmatic context permitted the exhibiting artists to "isolate, distill, alter, and augment" certain appropriated images, such that "representation [is] freed from the tyranny of the represented."[2] In these pictures, the viewer is alleged to see the very mechanism of representation, which Crimp associates, above all else, with memory. Or, as Woody Allen's Alvy Singer winsomely demands of Diane Keaton's Hall when she insists on telling him the family story behind her mannish tie, "What'd you do, grow up in a Norman Rockwell painting?" Although the audience understands Singer and Hall as engaged in a struggle to understand their respective identities and origins and to love each other across various divides (above all, gender) they are also (and I am unsure about Allen's intentions here) acting as Ralph Lauren models. Whatever the other messages of the film, the garments the two wear in every scene present a sort of unified front of floating signifiers by means of which the audience may aspire to a finance-driven America to come, one in which anyone can experience the good life—which is now merely superficially *coded* as white and Protestant—provided he or she has the means and perspicuity to buy it.[3] It isn't cheap, this drag, but soon it will be everywhere. And when it *is* everywhere (i.e., now), it will be cheap, too.[4]

The uncanny thing about picture languages is their simultaneous vulnerability (to abrupt recoding) and impenetrability (to historical interpretation). Crimp associated the pared-down aesthetic of the so-called Pictures Generation with the way in which paradigmatic linguistic concepts combine image and word into a sort of mnemonic bundle; it is, to his mind, a crucial, critical gesture for visual art of the late 1970s to point up this underlying mechanism within representation and, therefore, sensemaking. Reporters and fashion critics of the period, meanwhile, were also concerned with memory, although for different reasons. Discussing Ralph Lauren's meteoric ascent, the press would frequently add a "né Lifshitz" tag of some sort to the first mention of his name. In this way they at once indicated his, to them, unforgettable origins, even as they pointed out the miraculous, world-historical artifice Lauren was so busy confecting.[5] I, on the third hand, since not yet reading with any sort of ease in the late 1980s, only encountered an opaque string of pictures, forms. In a sense, I had to take these ads as they were. I would never, for example, have been able to draw particular distinctions between a patrician domestic scene as captured, for example, by Tina Barney and the latest Lauren spread—except perhaps to say that people in Lauren's world looked cleaner and more certain. And I could easily have been guilty, had anyone bothered to demand some art criticism from my prepubescent self, of the naive offense Peter Galassi indicates in a short essay on Barney's photography: "One dispiriting measure of the writing about Barney's work is that the figure most often mentioned (other than Barney herself) is not another artist but the clothing purveyor Ralph Lauren".[6] Indeed, here I'm partly repeating, although for good reason, this very error.

Thus, while the images Buck Ellison creates follow in a tradition of large-scale color portraiture developed by the likes of Barney, along with photographers such as Catherine Opie and Thomas Struth, they also partake, in no small measure, of the critical innovations of second- and third-wave conceptualisms, which tend to identify and play explicitly upon discursive structures located in media and behavior, as in Crimp's description of the work in *Pictures*, indicating larger systems and economies, some of which are historical in nature. I see Ellison's work as at once concerned with the traditional purviews of portraiture—likeness, sentiment, and, yes, beauty—even as it is committed to ends we are more likely to associate with criticism: analyzing the ways in which conventions of image making and image reception structure the world, as well as revealing not just particular lifestyles, but inequalities and assumptions about normality and the status quo.

But how exactly *does* one deploy likeness, sentiment, and, yes, beauty to critical ends? Ellison's portraits are staged, and extraordinarily so: he does not merely arrange his figures but casts models to play parts in, for example, his *Christmas Card* series, depictions of a family that substitutes, visually at least, for Ellison's own. Ellison tells me that he does not instruct the models as to how they should arrange their faces or bodies, but rather takes a large quantity of digital photographs, which he edits together afterwards to achieve an ex post facto collaboration among his stand-ins that constitutes a "yearly" photo. When I look at these images, which are certainly "pictures," in Crimp's sense, I find myself struggling to determine who is who within the artificial family. Ellison's casting at once heightens the significance of roles within the group—such that one says, "OK, *he* is the father; *she*'s the mom," and so on—and removes context to such an extent that there is very little left *to* see within the picture, save one's own attempt to parse it. And, as I remark to Ellison in conversation, it's also true that these people are not actually related to one another. In this sense, the image shows a "family" to which the prohibition against incest does not pertain. While they've clearly been dressed (Ellison tells me he works with the stylist Charlotte Collet, a fact I love) to typify a mid- to late-aughts upper- or upper-middle-class Californian aesthetic, there's also something unavoidably general about the clothes, even slightly unattractive. One person has on a garment I can only describe as semiformal shorts. These are puffy, paired with a childish genre of Adidas sneakers, no socks; if the wearer were not strikingly beautiful, she would look ridiculous. However, instead of looking ridiculous she looks "casual." In fact, she looks like the paradigmatic expression of that category, a sort of Kantian daughter-in-law or older sister, just the sort of person one needs: to make a simple salad for the holiday repast, clean up wrapping paper without being asked, or linger artfully in the kitchen, nursing a glass of prosecco. Meanwhile, the individual I take to be the patriarch sports a hideous patterned shirt indicating an interest in safaris. One is uncertain as to whether he picked this item up on his latest NGO-related excursion or simply got it at the mall, hoping, misguidedly, to broadcast whimsical masculinity. In either case, the colonialism quietly implied is enough to recast the entire scene in a glance: Indeed, what *is* a family without the prohibition against incest, we have to ask ourselves; a team, cult, or corporation? What can their intentions toward one another be, and what sort of system of beliefs regarding history does a family of this sort entail? How is it that they "stay" (I qualify the verb because we know they left the set long ago) together?

In a certain way, it is terrifying to me that Ellison can succeed in posing all these questions just by replacing individuals related to him with professional proxies—terrifying, much like the terrifying, unreal health of those Ralph Lauren models. Although perhaps I should not write *just*. I have been meaning to specify that these photographs were not taken in 1988 or 1994, years we might associate with Barney and Opie's portraits. Ellison is working within a different image economy, with different technological affordances. However, it is not merely the overwhelming proliferation of photography in our time through digital media that sets Ellison's work apart from other practitioners I mention here; it is also the changing relationship of public and private spheres in the present that renders Ellison's techniques pertinent and necessary. As a contemporary philosopher writes, "An age that has lost its gestures is, for this reason, obsessed with them. For human beings who have lost every sense of naturalness, each single gesture becomes a destiny."[7]

We live in a time when videos posted to YouTube, among other platforms, allow us to explore others' domestic spaces and practices ad nauseam, to question the ways in which they orient their beds, scrub their vegetables, steam their salmon filets. Obviously, this—along with the elephant in the room, social media—is not the only style of permeation of the private sphere endemic to the present: each of us is all but constantly being made public via information processed by software and shared back to the creators of this software. One is not, of course, particularly public in the old-fashioned sense, since the predictive tools our behavior informs are created by corporations and sold to other corporations and governments (entities with proprietary, secretive interiors). Yet there is a sense in which this processing of data is much of what constitutes the so-called public sphere. This is what publicness is: a transformation of what was formerly the private into a species of inscription. My movements between and among various websites, my use of an email platform provided by the same corporation that makes my browser, my manipulations of the applications on my phone, are tracked, taken in. They are anonymized and accrue to massive data caches. In 2012 the law scholar Paul Ohm presciently wrote, "We are embarking on the age of the impossible-to-understand reason, when marketers will know which style of shoe to advertise to us online based on the type of fruit we most often eat for breakfast, or when the police know which group in a public park is most likely to do mischief based on the way they do their hair or how far from one another they walk." Ohm's paper was titled (more terror here), "The Fourth Amendment in a World Without Privacy."[8]

But in spite of these seismic shifts in how we understand the relationships between and among individuality, behavior, and taste—shifts Ellison mimics by documenting the *form* of the individual rather than their instantiation as indexical, documentary, candid, or true visually presenting selves[9]—privacy remains. Privacy is a luxury; it can be expensive to get and maintain, but we know it's out there. One of the ways we know this is on account of the photographic images that we know we do *not* have. Among these, as Ellison argues via a series of stunning staged portraits narrating the story of the DeVos–Prince family, are personal images related to the wealthy and powerful. There are "gaps in our society where there is no imagery," as Ellison told me, noting that when he searched online for childhood and family images of the 45th president's secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, the daughter and daughter-in-law of of Republican megadonors and multibillionaires, he found that this material was mostly private, locating only a pair of yearbook photos.[10] After this discovery, and after seeing that an article about the family in the magazine *Vanity Fair* made use of muddy commissioned paintings rather than photographs for the purpose of illustration, Ellison determined to illuminate this American dynasty. He cast young actors to portray Betsy DeVos (née Prince) as a teen, along with her younger brother, Erik, who would later found the embattled Blackwater USA security corporation; in *The Prince Children, Holland, Michigan, 1975* (2019) they lounge with siblings in an imagined 1970s-era living room, in what would have been their hometown: Holland, Michigan (local truism: "If you ain't Dutch, you ain't much."). Ellison's staging, while essentially historically accurate with its colonial-revival decor and wool knee socks, is not slavishly so; the relative modesty of the room, particularly given the actual wealth in question, speaks to the family's strict Calvinism as well as this interior's distinctness from the sort of fantastical display Ralph Lauren might envision. Here, as in other works in the series, color and poses recall the somber and expensive portraiture of the Northern Renaissance, with its reds and greens, even as the viewer is teased into inventing psychology for those depicted, in spite (or because) of the unavoidable fact that everyone is an actor. Ellison weaves in small, precise clues regarding the family's past and future. Erik, as befits a warrior-to-be, clutches a toy soldier. Ellison informs me that Erik and his father would cast lead

soldiers using a saucepan and molds, painting them by hand. According to Prince's own autobiographical writing, this craft activity is his first memory. Of course, lead is poisonous, and heavy lead exposure is linked to aggression and mania, among other developmental difficulties. In *Dick and Betsy, The Ritz-Carlton, Dallas, Texas, 1984* (2019), meanwhile, a pregnant DeVos in an approximation of loudly patterned 1980s workwear, barks into a hotel telephone, as her (uxorious?) loafer-sporting partner attempts to distract himself. DeVos is already a political insider here, even as she is busy having it all, procreating to continue the dynasty. In *Erik with Kitty, Blackwater Training Center, Moyock, North Carolina, 1998* (2019), a mature Erik sprawls in a fenced-in field with a kitten and bulletproof vest; he's clearly stumbled into an amusing allegorical representation of the following sentences from his Wikipedia page:

> Prince moved to Virginia Beach and personally financed the formation of Blackwater Worldwide in 1997. He bought 6,000 acres (24 km^2) of the Great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina and set up a school for special operations. The name "Blackwater" comes from the peat-colored bogs in which the school is located.[11]

Some things, as Americans have begun saying with increasing intensity and irony since the presidency of George W. Bush, you just can't make up.

Like the satirical social and historical paintings of such millennial masters as John Currin and Karen Kilimnik, these photographs do not so much represent events as show us how much we do not know, how dependent we are on received ideas, assumptions, and clichés, when it comes to visualizing the lives of the elite.[12] Yet Ellison's images also, and conversely, serve a function that reminds me of the large-scale schematic drawings of the artist Mark Lombardi, depicting the movement of late twentieth-century capital between and among corporations, families, and heads of state: they show history, not as a collection of lived experiences and details, or even heroic events, but rather as a kind of formal data or code, a quantifiable pattern we would do well to familiarize ourselves with and confront.

As you gaze at the Christmas Card series and DeVos allegories, along with the other pictures gathered in this volume—pictures that explain what it looks like when two models consider a four-hundred-dollar "cheeseboard" at the Heath Ceramics store north of San Francisco, for example, or demonstrate the aggressive flexibility of the axles on the Range Rover, a six-figure car—follow the ironies that become visible. These are strategic images. Ellison's photographs demonstrate the expensive and increasingly fugitive privacy that attends contemporary democratic society. And they show that the display of luxury, far from being a dead giveaway of the location and machinations of power, is a bluff.

11 John Currin, *Stamford After Brunch*, 2000, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches. © John Currin. Photo: Andy Keate. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

7 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 52.

8 Quoted in Andrew D. Selbst and Solon Barocas, "The Intuitive Appeal of Explainable Machines," *Fordham Law Review* 87, no. 3 (2018): 1087. In a slightly more current and synthetic account of for-profit behaviorism in the digital realm, scholar Shoshana Zuboff writes, "The typical complaint is that privacy is eroded, but that is misleading. In the larger societal pattern, privacy is not eroded but **redistributed**, as decision rights over privacy are claimed for surveillance capital. Instead of people having the rights to decide how and what they will disclose, these rights are **concentrated** within the domain of surveillance capitalism. Google discovered this necessary element of the new logic of accumulation: it must assert the rights to take the information upon which its success depends," emphasis mine. See Zuboff's magisterial *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 90.

9 To be clear, this is not merely the case because of the use of models as subjects, but also because Ellison composes his images digitally, combining and manipulating numerous photographs to arrive at a final scene.

10 My own searches show this is largely the case. I was interested to see that upon DeVos's nomination, the *Detroit Free Press* published a slideshow of its print archive related to DeVos, some of which showed candid shots of her including a picture of her walking with one of her children. DeVos, of course, has a long and infamous history in Michigan politics. The quote from Ellison comes from a phone call with the author, December 19, 2019.

11 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_Prince.

12 It is worth noting that Ellison's photograph *Pasta Night*, of 2016, is a versioning of Currin's 1999 painting *Homemade Pasta*, which, I would also like to note, sold at Christie's in 2004 for nearly $900,000, this exorbitant price being part of what Ellison is depicting in his own semi-painterly work.