

General

Lawler, as Craig Owens once put it, displaces critical attention away from individual works of art and onto their institutional frames, “thereby presenting, rather than being presented by, the institution.”¹

Lawler locates the condition, calls attention to the process and leaves the viewer to contemplate the implications.²

Benjamin

Her works impressively convey the loss of aura in art, which, freed of its cult value, can now circulate on the market as a commodity fetish. At the same time, however, she tries to evoke a bit of that old aura, even if only in our memories. Like Walter Benjamin, who was one of the first to examine art in the age of reproducibility, Lawler’s concern with the loss of the cult value of art is not entirely unambiguous ... Louise Lawler’s art come out of a world of mass media, in which an endless flood of images is caught in a maelstrom of simulation. Walter Benjamin’s optimism about images being liberated through the media has evaporated in the mist of this scenario. The society of the spectacle – the circulation of signs and the attendant osmosis between cultural and economic spheres – has become the self-evident premise of Lawler’s work. Nonetheless, in her case as in Benjamin’s a certain melancholy always creeps into her pictures of long outmoded theater archives or the dusty cellars of a museum where classical Greek statues have come to rest between boxes and ventilators. Lawler’s work seems to be driven by the unfinished task of mourning modernism’s long buried promise of the autonomous art object.³

Matchbooks

Her focus ... is less on art as valued production than on the production of value, and in describing the passage of esthetic signs through different institutional sites, Lawler’s work echoes the circulation of signs within a market economy. The paradigm is given in the matchbooks, neutral or indifferent objects that acquire both meaning and value through their mobility, their capacity for exchange, for motion from place to place and hand to hand.⁴

Lawler’s matchbooks do not remain in their place of origin, but are continually placed, replaced, (and) displaced. While only one aspect of her practice, they are characteristic of much of her work. For Lawler consistently challenges the proprieties both of place (the divisions of art world labor that assigns artists, dealers and critics proper places and functions) and of objects (the ideological mechanisms which establish the authorship and ownership of art). Although she frequently collaborates with other artists, for Lawler artistic production is always a collective endeavor: it isn’t simply artists who produce signification and value, but an often anonymous contingent of collectors, viewers,

¹ Alberro pg 135

² Lefingwell pg 122

³ Kroksnes pg 156

⁴ Linkler pg 99

museum and gallery workers – and ultimately the cultural apparatus in which these positions are delineated.⁵

“Borrowed Time” exhibition matchbook (1983)

For the 1983 “Borrowed Time” exhibition, ... Lawler produced a matchbook which advertised the show with a quote which emphasizes the relation of esthetic to economic value: “Every time I hear the word culture I take out my checkbook. – Jack Palance.” (This statement originates with Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels, who said, “Every time I hear the word culture I reach for my gun.”)⁶ The immediate effect of such matchbooks is one of vulgarization: by employing a format usually used to promote restaurants and driving schools, Lawler amplifies polite art-market mechanisms into travesties of consumer culture.”⁷

Louise Lawler Invites You to Attend Swan Lake (1981)

Unlike matchbooks, which are made available to a general audience, invitations are distributed on the basis of mailing lists which consolidate a small art audience into an even smaller circle of cultural initiates for whose patronage a specific desire is expressed. ... At times Lawler displaces the kind of privileged reception which such private events imply; for example, in her invitation to a performance of *Swan Lake* by the New York City Ballet, the “readymade” spectacle Lawler appropriated remained a thoroughly public event. (In the lower right hand corner, where one would expect to read “RSVP,” Lawler specified instead “Ticket to be purchased at the box office.”)⁸

Matchbooks and invitations

Her matchbooks and invitations come closer to subverting mechanisms of institutional presentation and to constituting a counter-practice. Inasmuch as they do not depend upon an exhibition for distribution and do not even claim the status of art objects, in these works Lawler manages to resist the tendency of many contemporary artists to parody or criticize but nevertheless conform to the traditional position of artists in exchange relations.⁹

Gift Certificates Are Available(1983)

“I don’t want to play the dumb artist. I suppose I knew something about Duchamp and Yves Klein having done something with checks. To be honest, I’m still not exactly sure how theirs worked. I think I looked at Brooks Brothers and Barneys to figure out the terms and the layout, and then designed it to look like Castelli typography. It was another big works-on-paper show, this time downtown. Most of the works were quite large. Around the corner from a Raushenberg, and before you got to the Longo, I installed on gift certificate under a piece of plexi, and in the press type above wrote “Gift Certificates Are Available,” and they still are.”¹⁰

⁵ Fraser pg 122

⁶ Buskirk pg 128

⁷ Buskirk pg 126

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Fraser pg 125-6

¹⁰ Buskirk pg 107

Her gift certificate for the Leo Castelli gallery, “authorized” and exhibited there in a 1983 group show, reduces the art work itself to (practically an institutional letterhead) status. Although it was printed in a limited edition (of 500) the certificates value isn’t contingent upon its singularity (or lack thereof) or the presence of the artists signature, but on the amount for which it is purchased and for which it could be used toward the purchase of a Warhol or Rauschenberg.¹¹

Arrangements

Lawler’s photographs documenting “Arrangements of Pictures” in private, corporate and museum collections demonstrate the social uses to which art is put after it leaves the artist’s studio. These “installation” photographs have been exhibited in galleries and museums, where the documentation of art objects is substituted for the objects themselves; they have also been published, both as independent photo-features and as subtly sardonic illustrations for critical texts.¹²

Throughout her practice the museum functions as the immovable position, beyond the flow of history and all its dis-positions, where meaning might be guaranteed as timeless and value externalized to satisfy our desire for finality. Lawler, of course, notes that this idea of the museum is a historical one, a construction of the dominant culture and, in particular, of specific needs that impel social definitions of significance; it is not “natural,” then, but ideological – “interested” through and through. Similarly, she indicates the artistic devices that society constructs to implement its desire for coherence, including the notions of autonomy, of neatly defined boundaries, and most tellingly, of the creative artist/author as the depositor of meaning in a work. But the latter claim to the base or basis of meaning also motivates the theoretical attempt to “master” significance by referring it to a determining cause.¹³

Living Room Corner Arranged by Mr. and Mrs Burton Tremaine (1984)

In Lawler’s photographs of private collections, art is represented as simply one object among many in a chaos of accumulation; in the domestic interior, art – whether “tastefully” arranged or indifferently juxtaposed – is assimilated into a backdrop of decorative commodities. *Arranged by Mr. and Mrs Burton Tremaine* is more than a picture of a picture hanging over the couch: Lawler includes the television set in front of a Robert Delaunay, next to a Lichtenstein sculpture head used as a lamp base on the coffee table.¹⁴

Paperweights

Lawler’s paperweights necessitate the experience of each object in time and space. In order to be able to read the photograph under the glass dome, the viewer must almost press his/her nose against the object. The space of the gallery is thereby completely blocked out and the viewer immersed in a wondrous miniature world. ... Lawler’s

¹¹ Buskirk pg 126

¹² Buskirk pg 126-7

¹³ Linkler pg 100

¹⁴ Buskirk pg 127

paperweights evoke memories of the object world of the museum without returning to classical modernism's dualism of viewer and world, subject and object. Instead, in perfect postmodern fashion, categories become pervious when the supposed subject of viewing, absorbed in the magic sphere, becomes the object at which other visitors gaze. Lawler undermines the control and autonomy of the viewing subjects who are drawn into the vortex of the omnipresent spectacle. The paperweights underscore this ambivalence: On the one hand, they embody – or are at least reminiscent of – the classical objects of aesthetic contemplation that are traditionally displayed and preserved in museums. On the other, Lawler offers the same paperweights for sale as souvenirs in the museum shop. ... Lawler illustrates the continuity between museum and market by demonstrating how museum methods of conservation turn every work of art into an object of curiosity and a luxury item, ultimately enhancing its market value.¹⁵

Now That We Have Your Attention What Are We Going to Say? (1985)

Because Lawler's work isn't reducible to a single theme, mode of production, or place of functioning, it often seems anonymous, or at least difficult to identify without a caption. Her January 1985 slide show at Metro Pictures – *Slides by Night: Now That We Have Your Attention What Are We Going to Say?* – confronted the institutionally organized desire to recognize a unified subject in an artist's work. It also addressed the demands placed on production by the gallery's new space. Rather than exhibiting prints..., Lawler supplied the walls with the enormous images the gallery's vast space seems to require – but immaterial ones (slides) projected on the gallery's back wall and visible only after hours from the street. The program began with slot-machine signs – plums, oranges cherries, apples, baseballs and bells – in random combinations of three until . . . jackpot! The “payoffs” were pictures from a plaster-cast museum, copies of classical sculpture in various states of storage, decomposition, restoration. These images faded into one another in slow dissolves, finally giving way to another random exchange of one-arm-bandit signs and another jackpot – this time Lawler's own “*Arrangements of Pictures*” in homes, museums and corporate offices. Thus Lawler included her own production within the same structure of indifferent accumulation which her “*Arrangements of Pictures*” document, perhaps in order to refuse the audience what is looking for in an artist's work – a lasting identity which seems to transcend the arbitrary exchange and circulation of esthetic signs. The fact that Lawler included her own work does not mean that she has finally acquiesced to the market or passively accepted its mechanisms. By representing her own photographs in slide form, she symbolically withdraws them from market exchange. Once again, her position is double: that of a producer of images, and that of one who actively organizes not simply their presentation, but perhaps a new chain, a counter-discourse in which they are only elements.¹⁶

Something About Time and Space But I'm Not Sure What It Is (1998)

The subject of *Something About Time and Space* is Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds*, an installation of mass-produced, inflatable pillows first shown at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1966. ... Lawler shows Warhol's silver balloons in situ, as it were: floating in midair in a gallery. She also alludes to Warhol's space of production, to the aluminum-foil walls and

¹⁵ Kroksnes pg 160

¹⁶ Buskirk pg 128

psychedelic lights of his infamous Factory, by tinting her pictures in a range of bright yet acrid hues. But instead of representing the telltale signs of physical context- floorboards, sockets, labels, etc. – within the image, Lawler turns the space outside the image (i.e. the literal space of the gallery) into the context of her photographs. She does this by mounting them on museum board and hanging them from the ceiling by nylon thread. This canny display strategy unleashes a chain of repetitions circling a center as absent as, well, the one in a Warhol balloon.¹⁷

First, Lawler's work doubles back on itself, delivering the same information twice. As images, her photographs depict Warhol's silver balloons. As objects, they replicate them. Either way, they remain evocations of an absent original. Or do they? Lawler's pictures were shot at a 1998 reinstallation of *Silver Clouds* at the New York gallery D'Amelio Terras and thus a copy of a work that, because it was mass-produced (this is Warhol remember) was never an original to begin with. Second, Lawler doubles back on Warhol's territory by inverting it. Long before Jeff Koons made his stainless-steel rabbit in 1986, Warhol's *Silver Clouds* announced the artwork's transubstantiation from physical object into sheer, simulacral surface. If in so doing, Warhol subsumed sculpture within the conditions of photography, Lawler both repeats and undoes his initial act, creating work that moves like a Möbius strip from photography to sculpture and back again.¹⁸

But her examination of the simulacral doesn't just lead to repetition – it generates something new. For Lawler also doubles back on her own earlier efforts, transforming them in the process. Her career as a photographer has consistently been punctuated by the creation of sculpture in the form of such things as paperweights, drinking glasses, and matchbooks. Although ongoing, this practice has always felt marginal and not entirely resolved. With *Something about Time and Space*, Lawler weaves object production into the heart of her larger enterprise, fusing her photographic investigation of documentation and framing with the emphasis on seriality and the physical interaction between artwork and viewer more central to her sculptural concerns.¹⁹

Finish

Lawler uses the medium of photography to explore multiple means of accessing and positioning the subject. The objects in her pictures are never in the center of her compositions and never pictured in their entirety; they are always fragmented memories of an intact object and subject. Lawler has lost faith in the modern work of art and its subject, but she still mourns the unfulfilled promise of the autonomous artwork that stands in radical opposition to society.²⁰

¹⁷ Sundell pg 141

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Kroksnes pg 160

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