AN ARRANGED DECONSTRUCTION:
THE FEMINIST ART PRACTICE OF LOUISE LAWLER

By

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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the artistic production of photo artist Louise Lawler and the evolution of critical response to her work between the 1970s and 1990s. Of main concern are the manner in which early scholarship and exhibition reviews effectively situated Lawler’s work within the discourse of institutional critique, a field of critical scholarship and artistic production that examines institutions of art such as museums and galleries.

The objective of this thesis is to reexamine Lawler from a feminist art historical perspective using French feminist theory to investigate how her work can arguably be considered to be a feminist intervention into the patriarchal structures of museums, galleries, and connoisseurship. Lawler’s dominant practice is photographic in nature, yet she does not consider herself a photographer. Like many artists of her generation Lawler has capitalized upon the indexical nature of the photographic medium, using it as a tool to create images that “document” art objects in situ. She has made her art in all the places in which artworks circulate or are displayed, be it the curated spaces of museums, an auction house or a private house, well-lit gallery show room walls or crowded and dark storage rooms.

Throughout her forty-year career Lawler has worked to disrupt the patriarchy of the art world by drawing attention to philosophies of display and exhibition. She has shown us what is not on display within art systems by consistently showing us what is on display. She has refused to comply with systems or organization, crafting textual interventions that disrupt the linguistics of wall labels and titles of artworks. She has fragmented and dislocated the authorship of artists to their works, and she has appropriated curatorial practices to claim both the physical spaces of display and gain control of what objects are deemed valuable enough to be shown there. Lawler’s work has consistently interrupted normative practices of art institutions, effectively disrupting the patriarchy inherent within the systems and structures to define art.
Introduction

Few artists have operated as successfully in a chameleon-like manner as Louise Lawler. Over the past thirty years she has skirted the boundaries of definition as an artist, with practices in a wide range of mediums that include photography, installation, performance, and text/image constructions. Uniquely operating from both within and outside of the art world, Lawler’s works have been largely interpreted as a commentary on the institutional systems that drive artworks through museums, galleries, auction houses, and private collections. From her first show in 1978, Lawler’s artistic practice has consistently worked to reveal the structures that support and exchange art and to question the perceived “preciousness” of art objects. This thesis will demonstrate, however, that a close analysis of Lawler’s work reveals an embedded feminist statement that brings attention to the state of women artists in the larger art world in the final decades of the twentieth century.

Lawler’s dominant practice is photographic in nature, yet she does not consider herself a photographer. Like many artists of her generation Lawler has capitalized upon the indexical nature of photography, using it as a tool to create images that “document” art objects in situ. She has made her art in all the places in which artworks circulate or are displayed, be it the curated spaces of museums, an auction house or a private house, well-lit gallery show room walls or crowded and dark storage rooms. Since her emergence as an artist in New York in the late-1970s, Lawler has often defied categorization. In the scant few interviews she has granted throughout her career she has consistently pushed back when academics or critics have attempted to shepherd her into solidly defining or categorizing the intent of her work.1 As an artist whose work

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1 See: Martha Buskirk interviews with Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson, “The Duchamp Effect.” in October 70 (Autumn 1994 issue, and Louise Lawler and Douglas Crimp, “Prominence Given, Authority Taken” in Grey Room no. 4 in Summer 2001 issue.
examines the structures of the art world by looking at how, where, and by whom art is displayed or consumed, Lawler is reticent to serve as an interpreter for her work. For Lawler, her art “works in the process of its reception.”² Often refusing to speak “for” her art, she is cautious about offering too much background information, instead allowing for any commentary or meaning to be found within the work in relationship to how, where, when, and for whom she has elected to stage it.

Within the growing corpus of scholarship investigating and examining Lawler’s artistic career, she has largely been positioned as an artist who is critical of the institutionalization of art and as oppositional to art’s commodification. However, I believe that one particular reading of her early work has been largely overlooked. In this study, I will provide an examination of the feminist undercurrent in much of the work Lawler produced between the 1970s and 1990s. My aim is to reposition Lawler’s early works as a feminist response crafted to both reveal and interrupt the patriarchal hyperframes long present within the systems and institutions of art. I will demonstrate that Lawler has used the perceived objectivity of photography’s capacity to serve as “document” to create bodies of work in which she disrupts normative gallery practices. In a seemingly neutral fashion she has made visible the invisible patriarchal systems of the art world by observing and recording their subtleties, and placing them on display. The cleverness of her project lies not only in the elusive manner in which she operates as an artist, but also within her ability to effectively co-opt curatorial practices to engage the viewer with her or his own action or practice of looking at art and bring attention to the structures through which an artwork is selected for viewing and thereby acquires cultural or monetary value.

The variety of media Lawler works within serves to open multiple dialogs about art and

² Louise Lawler and Douglas Crimp, “Prominence Given, Authority Taken,” Gre Room no. 4 (Summer 2001): 70-81.
its place within economic, political, and cultural systems of value. While acknowledging that Lawler’s work can be, and has been, interpreted as a poststructuralist project occurring within the larger postmodern agenda of the end of the twentieth century. My primary goal in this study is to expand upon the scholarship interpreting her early work as feminist by making connections to French feminist theory emerging in Europe and America at the time. The theoretical work of French philosophers Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva are of particular interest.

In an effort to understand why Lawler’s early work was not more readily interpreted as feminist, I will investigate how the divisions within feminism that developed during the 1970s and 1980s converged with emergent concepts of postmodernism to, as some have argued, effectively negate the momentum of the feminist movement. My interest in reexamining the overwhelming placement of Lawler within the discourse of institutional critique rather than feminism is rooted in a comment made by art critic and performance artist Andrea Fraser. In a dialog published in the journal *October* in 2004, Fraser and art historian George Baker discussed the career of Louise Lawler. During the conversation, Fraser, whose own career has been devoted to disrupting the normative interpretive and display practices of art institutions, acknowledges that a 1985 essay she wrote on Lawler entitled “In and Out of Place” may have “played a central role in the formation of that programmatic reading.”3 The nineteen-year-old Fraser was a novice art critic and student in the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program when she wrote the article. Through her connection to Craig Owens, an editor at *Art in America*,4 Fraser published what would become one of the seminal essays of Lawler’s career which exerted a substantial influence

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4 Andrea Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” *Art in America* 73, no. 6 (1985): 122-9.
upon the interpretation of Lawler as a member of a vanguard of institutional critique artists.\textsuperscript{5}

For this study, I have conducted a thorough examination of the published material on Lawler: scholarly essays, exhibition catalogs, and reviews of exhibitions in which her work is included. I have also conducted a formal analysis of her artistic output to date and have consulted the few interviews she has granted over the years. With an eye toward the interventions of institutional critique artists and critics and the activism of feminist artists and collectives operating in New York at the time, my research on the trajectory of Lawler’s artistic career is augmented by an investigation of the state of feminism during the second half of the twentieth century in America and Europe, specifically France. The result is a thoughtful study of Lawler’s methodology of working from within institutional patriarchy to bring attention to issues, not in an outright effort to condemn or destruct, but to interrupt and deconstruct normative practices by adding, expanding, and redefining concepts of power and representation.

In Chapter One I introduce Louise Lawler and provide a brief biography and an overview of the state of feminism in the New York art world of the 1970s and 1980s. In Chapter Two I examine Lawler’s artistic practice and conduct an investigation into the unique photographic aesthetic that she has employed throughout her career. Included in this investigation is an analysis of why and how critics have assigned the word “document” to Lawler’s practice, despite the fact that this term is not fully applicable. In Chapter Three I analyze the scholarship that has been written on Lawler to draw stronger connections to the overwhelming interpretation of her as an artist dedicated to institutional critique, rather than as a feminist artist as I argue her to be. In Chapter Four I examine the variety of Lawler’s artistic

\textsuperscript{5} My personal interest in pursuing this study relates to my career as a practicing photographer who came of age during the late 1980s and early 1990s and entered the male-dominated field of journalism and documentary work. I am attracted to her efforts to work from within systems of patriarchy.
practice and artistic production between the 1970s and 1990s to reveal the feminist statement embedded within her work. This examination includes analysis of five primary areas: her compositional techniques, her commentary on the commodification of art, the ways in which she has co-opted curatorial practices, her use of text as a tool of disruption, and two performance pieces she staged first in the late 1970s and then later restaged.
Chapter 1

“Why Lawler Now?”

To rewrite a question from Lawler’s 1981 work Why Pictures Now?, it is suitable to ask “Why Lawler now?” As this thesis will demonstrate, much is to be gained from further examination of her forty-year career. As evidenced by the increased scholarship on Lawler published within the past ten years, much of her early work remains relevant today as reinterpretations are conducted to reveal new perspectives on the state of art and the art world during the final decades of the twentieth century. Lawler herself is adding to this discourse. Part of her current practice is to mine her archives, searching for new interpretations of the photographs she made during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to find innovative connections to current events occurring within the art market and art institutions.

This chapter will probe two areas of focus. I will begin with a brief examination of the state of the art market and art institutions during the last half of the twentieth century, which I will follow with an analysis of the status of women artists during those years. Arguably one of the largest unregulated forms of trade, today’s commercial art market operates very akin to the international stock market. Investors, not necessarily collectors, are buying artworks at increasingly higher and higher price points. It has also become investor practice to become a partial owner of the artwork through the purchase of a share of a painting or other art object. The commodification of artworks, objects reduced to their exchange value, creates questions regarding the reverence of art in popular culture. Artists, too, are gaming the system, as

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7 A number of these artworks are not placed on display but go directly into climate controlled vaults for safekeeping in preparation for a future sale when a desired return on investment can be achieved.
evidenced by Damien Hirst’s auction at Sotheby’s in 2012 where he bypassed galleries and their additional fees to sell his artworks directly to buyers, earning himself nearly $200 million.\textsuperscript{8}

The artworks fetching the multi-million dollar price tags remain predominantly those made by male artists. The report \textit{The Art Market in 2014}, compiled and published by ArtPrice, listed the top 100 artworks with the best auction performance of the year. Of that 100, only one artwork made by a woman was on the list: Georgia O’Keeffe’s painting \textit{Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1} made in 1932. The report also notes that in fine art photography a 1977 print from Cindy Sherman’s \textit{Untitled Film Stills} body of work sold at auction for a record $5.9 million,\textsuperscript{9} the most ever paid for a photograph by a female artist. On the whole, while female artists have made substantial inroads into both the market and permanent collections of art institutions since the feminist movement of the 1970s, they remain vastly underrepresented in museums, gallery exhibitions, and in auctions. The authors of a study published in \textit{After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art} reported that the number of solo museum exhibitions of women artists increased from 11.6\% in the 1970s to 14.8\% in the 1980s, but after peaking at 23.9\% in the 1990s, the number has had a continued slow descent ever since. In gallery shows the numbers are very similar. Between the 1970s and the 2000s\textsuperscript{10} women artists averaged 18.7\% of all solo gallery shows that were tracked in the study.\textsuperscript{11}

\footnotesize
\begin{enumerate}
\item These decades also marked a proliferation of fine art museums constructing new multi-million-dollar buildings often designed by leading architects. The competition to attract visitors had become intense as museums struggled to stage larger exhibitions and try to remain relevant to an increasingly fickle public that had growing options for cultural entertainment and edification.
\end{enumerate}
These developments speak directly to why Lawler’s work is potentially more relevant today than in the years she produced it. It should not be overlooked or oversimplified that the spaces in which Lawler was working — museums, galleries, auction houses, and some private collections — were sites of substantial feminist protest during the 1970s and 1980s. To better situate Lawler’s early work within the feminist discourse developing during these decades, I will provide a brief introduction to related events happening at the time.

A Brief Introduction to Second Wave Feminism

During the 1970s and 1980s waves of social change for women rippled outward from Paris and led to the formation of groups in Europe and America dedicated to strong political activism and active engagement with advancing women’s rights. Set in motion thirty years prior when Simone de Beauvoir published her controversial and pivotal book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex), the movement was a fascinating intersection of both social and political activism with reworked philosophical theory that moved the feminist agenda beyond the fight for equal rights with men. Named “Second Wave Feminism,” this flow of progressive ideas centered

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12 One of the primary projects of feminism in the 1970s was to loosen the grip of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory that the female body’s definition was one that lacks a penis, the phallic locus of power. Embedded within this project was the separation of women’s sexuality from the reproductive capacities of the female body, a project aided by the legalization of abortion in America in 1973. As women’s bodies were freed from unwanted and unplanned pregnancies, women were able to, arguably for the first time in history, explore their bodies as sites of sexual pleasure — an exploration complicated by the realization that the linguistic, philosophical, and psychological “othering” of women left them without a vocabulary with which to speak. Furthering the project of Simone de Beauvoir and Jacques Lacan’s neo-Freudism, the study of linguistics would prove vital to the establishment of “Woman” as a sexualized being. Addressing the ways in which the phallocentric nature of language marginalized women would be the point of connection for the work of Julie Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous.


14 First Wave Feminism, a period of feminist activity during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was largely dedicated largely to achieving equal rights of men, such as gaining the right to vote for women and the right to own property.

15 The primary objective of Second Wave Feminism was the organized resistance to governmental, medical, and legal attempts to define and regulate women’s bodies and sexuality. In France, and many westernized industrial countries, feminism in the 1970s was mobilized by the fight for access to legal contraception and abortion.
primarily upon the denaturalization of sex and gender and coalesced around women gaining the legal and medical freedom to control their own bodies, specifically reproduction. As feminism evolved during these two decades it was informed by theoretical investigations into making visible the ways in which social institutions shape cultural notions of sex, sexuality, and gender roles. Leading these investigations were three emerging feminist philosophers: Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous.

Highly trained in psychology, philosophy, and linguistics, the theoretical work of Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous revealed how invisible structures within language and culture had crafted a fairly uniform identity of women based upon the differences of their physical bodies to those of men. These feminist scholars examined how these structures affected the psychic development of women and men. Integrating the reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical theories on women by philosopher Jacques Lacan of the 1960s with Jacques Derrida’s theories of différence, these three theorists furthered the feminist work of Beauvoir to deconstruct and contest prevailing conceptualizations of “Woman.” Their combined efforts would influence not only the solidification of feminism into a political force, but also would lead to the establishment of women’s studies programs at universities in both Europe and America, and inspire a wide range of feminist publications during the next two decades.

Feminism & The New York Art World

New York, as a primary link to Paris and the European continent, was heavily influenced by feminist theory being imported into America. The 1970s saw the founding of feminist publications and organizations dedicating to fighting for greater awareness, representation, and

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exhibitions of art made by women artists. In 1971 art historian Linda Nochlin pioneered a feminist approach to art history in America when she published her pivotal essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” and the following year the influential international Feminist Art Journal was founded as a quarterly publication. That same year the Women’s Art Caucus was inaugurated at the College Art Association’s annual conference in San Francisco, and in 1973 and 1975, respectively, J.T. Collin published a two volume compendium titled Women Artists in America that provided an early encyclopedic listing of American women artists, primarily painters and sculptors. Adding to the growing trend of revisionist feminist art history, books such as Art and Sexual Politics: Women’s Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History, Anne Tucker’s A Woman’s Eye, and Cindy Nemser’s Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists all


18 The College Art Association is based in New York. San Francisco was the location of that year’s annual conference.

19 At the same time as the conference, in southern California feminist artists staged Womanhouse, a feminist art installation and performance space in a dilapidated seventeen-room house near Hollywood. Organized by artists and teachers Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago, Womanhouse included 28 artworks in rooms throughout the house that addressed women’s experiences. It is reported that approximately 10,000 people viewed the exhibition during the three months it was up.


22 Anne Tucker, The Woman’s Eye (New York: Knopf; [distributed by Random House], 1973). Written and edited by Anne Tucker, one of the most prominent photography curators today, this book includes an introductory essay and portfolio of ten women photographers including Berenice Abbott, Diane Arbus, Margaret Bourke-White, Judy Dater, Frances Benjamin Johnston, Gertrude Käsebier, Dorothea Lange, Barbara Morgan, Bea Neules, and Alisa Wells. Tucker’s introductory essay is a demonstration of the tensions between essentialist and materialist feminist art history. She begins the essay with a question: “Is anatomy destiny?” which she immediately follows with, “All the data currently available reflect the difference between women and men imposed upon us by the patriarchal society in which we live. As long as the divisions between women and men are so rigidly defined and enforced, it is impossible to know whether any differences occur naturally, and if they do, whether they bear any relation to the traditional stereotypes.”

23 Nemser, an editor of Feminist Art Journal interviewed twelve living female artists, ranging in age from 30-90, working as painters, sculptors, or installation or performance artists.
aimed to further explore the experience and artistic production of women artists.

Also of note during this decade is the increasing number of women seeking degrees from university studio art programs resulting in a number of trained female artists entering the art world. Addressing this increase was the 1979 publication of *Feminist Collage: Educating Women in the Visual Arts*, a collection of twenty-eight essays edited by Judy Loeb that included early writings by leading feminist art historians such as Nochlin, Lucy Lippard, and Miriam Shapiro.

The early 1970s also saw the opening of artists’s cooperatives and exhibition spaces dedicated to only showing women artists. The Women’s InterArt Center was founded in New York and provided women artists with a space to connect, talk, and hold workshops in a wide variety of artistic practices, as well as stage “happenings,” show films, or give dance performances. Also established during this time were fine art galleries such as A.I.R. gallery in Brooklyn and Soho 20 in Manhattan that were dedicated to only exhibiting art made by women. Feminist collectives such as Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) and the Women’s Ad Hoc Committee continued their demands for the inclusion of women artists in the Whitney Biennial and other leading New York museums. As the decade progressed more cooperative women’s galleries sprung up throughout the region. Along with the advocacy collective Women


25 Both galleries are still-operational and remain dedicated to showing women artists.

26 WAR was founded in 1969 in response to that year’s Whitney Annual art show which included only eight women artists out of the 143 artists selected for inclusion.

27 The Women’s Ad Hoc Committee was founded in 1970 by feminist art critic Lucy Lippard and artist Brenda Miller in an effort to protest the low number of women included in the Whitney Annual exhibition. The Women’s Ad Hoc Committee demanded the 1970 Whitney Annual exhibition be 50% female artists. After the museum refused to comply the Ad Hoc Committee harassed the museum by randomly placing eggs and tampons on the floors of the museum. On the night of the opening reception, members of the group gained entry with forged invitations and staged a sit-in in the center of the exhibition. Members also continued their protest the entire time the exhibition was on display. The Whitney did respond to these pressures. The 1975 Whitney Biennial (the show became bi-annual in 1973) included 25% women artists.
in the Arts (WIA), these groups pressured museums such as the Whitney, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) to exhibit more work by women artists, but these groups achieved little substantial success in their efforts. One ambitious project of WIA in 1973 was an attempt to stage an exhibition entitled “Women Choose Women” at MOMA. Originally designed to be curated by women and exhibit 500 works by female artists, MOMA declined to host the show. After a fruitless search for a space large enough, the New York Cultural Center offered to host the show but due to the limited space available the show was greatly downsized from 500 to 109 works of art.

The feminist agenda advanced into the 1980s, beginning with the controversial issue of the *Art Journal* published in 1980 in which art critic and curator Lawrence Alloway published a satirical proposal for an imaginary exhibition in which he outlined his concept for an exhibition devoted to women’s art which he titled “Post-Masculine Art: Women Artists 1970-1980.” Understanding that an all-women exhibition at MOMA would likely be seen as preposterous, in his mock-proposal, Alloway planned for the show to be held in the first floor exhibition spaces of the museum during the fall of 1981. While Alloway’s project was not intended to be fully realized, his article was seen as an “indictment of the institution’s reluctance to exhibit, purchase, or collect feminist art.” Alloway, who noted that artworks selected for his fictive show would

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28 In April 1972, WIA protested outside of the Museum of Modern Art to bring attention to discriminatory practices toward female artists. The group handed out fliers that shared statistics related to the lack of women in exhibitions at MOMA. A result of this protest was a series of meetings with WIA members and the museum’s directors which WIA members hoped would result in the MOMA staging the “Women Chose Women” exhibition, but to no avail.


30 This issue of the *Art Journal* was edited by guest editor Alessandra Comin who invited contributions to explore essays that outlined fantasy exhibitions of women artists.

include art objects from women’s artists collectives across the nation, wrote, “After a vigorous start, the feminist movement has lagged, and this exhibition is conceived as a corrective. Women’s art has a large audience, comprised in part of wary male artists; but few collectors, curators, respected galleries, or critics are involved.”32

Continuing the struggle for more museum and gallery exhibitions of art by women, the notorious Guerrilla Girls,33 a feminist art advocacy group established at mid-decade, spearheaded a variety of notorious campaigns and public performances in which anonymous female artists wore gorilla masks and assumed pseudonyms of dead female artists. Calling themselves the “Conscience of the Art World,” the Guerrilla Girls protested gender disparity in the arts, often by placing bright yellow billboards and posters around New York and in art publications that asked questions such as “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?”34 These posters highlighted statistical data that demonstrated the paltry percentages of art made by women held or acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in comparison to artwork made by male artists. For example, a 1989 billboard stated that less than five percent of the artworks in modern art museum collections were made by women, while eighty-five percent of nudes in the modern art collection were of female figures (Figure 1).

Furthering art historical and critical discourse, feminist artists Susan Bee and Mira Shorr founded the art journal M/E/A/N/I/N/G in 1986. In operation for the next ten years, the journal published a wide variety of feminist essays, theory, and criticism by writers, historians, and artists such as Amelia Jones, Johanna Drucker, and Nancy Spero. During these years,


33 The Guerilla Girls organization remains an active group. In the year 2015 the group hosted a series of events commemorating the organization’s thirty years of feminist art activism.

34 Abbreviation for the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
feminist scholars also began to reexamine the ways in which feminism and art history had met in the 1970s with Second Wave feminism. The emergence of postmodern feminism in the 1980s was examined in the 1987 essay “The Feminist Critique of Art History”\textsuperscript{35} by Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews who investigated the manners and methods in which feminist art historians were appropriating feminist theory that had begun emerging after the publication of Nochlin’s “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” This appropriation was significantly enabled by an increased importation of radical French feminist philosophical theory, some of which was being made available in English for the first time. Two publications of note are *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*\textsuperscript{36} published in 1980 and Griselda Pollock’s *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art*\textsuperscript{37} published in 1988. Both books were intended for a growing population of students in Women’s Studies programs at American and European universities. With the flood of publications devoted to the research and study of women artists throughout history, The National Museum of Women in the Arts Library and Research Center was founded in Washington, D.C. to collect and preserve the growing scholarship. Opened in 1984, the library remains a leading research center on women in the arts.

**Her Subjects Are Men**

When viewed within the evolution of feminism and the robust production of feminist art during the 1970s and 1980s, the question of why the work of Louise Lawler was not more readily


\textsuperscript{36} *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtiviron, included fifty-three essays by leading French feminist theorists of the day, including Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous.

\textsuperscript{37} Pollock’s book *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* rooted feminist art history within the discourse of French feminist theory.
viewed as part of an overall feminist art project is of great concern. In my extensive examination of Lawler’s oeuvre, it has become evident that she very rarely photographs artworks made by women. The art subjects of her photographs are without a doubt predominantly made by male artists, especially those considered to be part of the canon of art history. This list includes artworks by Antonio Canova, Edgar Degas, Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, Jeff Koons, Piet Mondrian, Gerhard Richter, Robert Longo, Damien Hirst, Allan McCollum, Peter Nadin, Donald Judd, Robert Delauney, Roy Lichtenstein, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Dan Flavin, Joan Miro, Fernand Léger, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, An Kawara, Edward Ruscha, Bruce Nauman, Thomas Struth, Jackson Pollock, and many others.

While women do appear within her photographs, it is primarily through representations of female figures, including nudes and portraits, crafted by male artists in their sculptures, paintings, or appropriations of pop culture. I have found only three exceptions to this. Lawler has photographed a handful of works by artists Cindy Sherman, Jenny Holzer, and Sherrie Levine, all of whom are conventionally considered to be Lawler’s peers.

Given Lawler’s nearly forty-year career photographing art within museums, galleries, auction houses, and private collections, the percentage of images that contain artworks made by women is in the single digits in comparison to the rest of her oeuvre. This near total absence is striking, as is what appears to be a lack of awareness of it by scholars. Within my research on

38 In my research I have not found evidence that she re-photographed any male-produced photographs in which the subject was female.

Lawler I have not found any scholar or critic who has clearly acknowledged Lawler’s focus upon male-generated art works. Lawler’s decision to devote her career and focus her camera largely upon artworks made by men in institutional spaces, which have also been predominantly designed and administrated by men, must be examined in order to provide a greater understanding of Lawler’s art, career, and overarching artistic statement as it relates to feminism during these decades.
Chapter 2

The Object is the Subject

Louise Lawler was born in 1947 in Bronxville, New York, a town just north of New York City. She moved to Manhattan in 1969 after earning a Bachelors of Fine Arts at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and landed a job at Leo Castelli gallery which specialized in pop, minimal, and conceptual modern art. At the gallery Lawler met Janelle Reiring, with whom she collaborated on a number of creative projects, including a small-run artists book entitled Mata Hari. Two years later Reiring co-founded Metro Pictures gallery which has represented Lawler for the entirety of her career.

During her first decades in Manhattan Lawler practiced art in a variety of media, including painting, photography, print making, artists books, film, audio performance, and a

40 Reiring and also Lawler collaborated on an small-run self-published artist book entitled Mata Hari. Published in 1978, the text of the book, written by Reiring, examines the final day of the life of Margaretha Geertruida "Margreit" MacLeod who was convicted by France of being a German spy. An exotic dancer, MacLeod's stage was Mata Hari. Her story is told through two different narratives in the artists book. One narrative is printed in all caps, and follows what is "seen" through the lens of a camera. This "camera" serves as a primary narrative tool throughout the book, although the text never notes that a photograph is "taken" by the pressing of a shutter button. Instead the "camera" functions more like a movie camera, moving slowly between scenes in a cinematic fashion. The second narrative is based upon the text of a 1917 newspaper story by a reporter named Henry G. Wales who published his story told of the events of Mata Hari's execution. Distributed by the International News Service, the story outlines the morning Mata Hari was awakened before dawn and driven by car to her execution by firing squad. The notation in the back of the book gives credit to Wales's story and states, "With only slight alteration this account serves as the voice-over narration during the driving sequence." Two photographs made by Lawler's are included. On the first page of the book is a black-and-white photograph of a sleeping woman. Composed tightly upon her face, the woman appears to sleep peacefully. The second photograph is of a seven of diamonds playing card. The text throughout the book and the odd inclusion of the conventional playing card is disruptive yet captivating. All pages in the book are numbered, but not in numerical order. On each page is printed the number "1917" which is the year in which Mata Hari was executed. The creation and publication of Mata Hari provides insight in to the varied mediums Lawler has practiced as an artist.

41 In 1978, Lawler published Card Books, vol. I and vol. II. Designed as commentary on the arbitrary practice of assigning a price to a given art work, the back of the front cover lists two different prices for the book as either $7.95 or $100.00, depending upon which dollar amount was circled. Volume one has a red cover with interior ink also in red, and volume two has a blue cover with interior ink also blue. Approximately 5 inches by 7 inches in size, there is no writing on the front or back cover, or on the spine. On the pages of the book are reproduced photographs a pack of Bicycle playing cards in what appears to be a random order. Equally random, printed underneath the card images are phrases such as "Seven of Spades," "Four of Diamonds," "Six of Hearts," and so on. The back of the card is never displayed.
wide range of text-based works. In 1978 she participated in her first group exhibition at Artists Space gallery. The show would create much of the momentum for Lawler’s career. Titled, “Louise Lawler, Adrian Piper and Cindy Sherman are Participating in an Exhibition,” the show was designed to call attention to display conventions and the experience of looking at art. Lawler deftly appropriated an 1883 oil painting of a horse and exhibited the artwork under her own name. Strong spotlights placed above the painting were aimed directly into the viewers eyes, partially inhibiting the viewing experience (Figure 2) and pouring light onto the street outside. Demonstrating an early interest in text-based work, which would become a central tool of disruption for Lawler, she also designed a logo for the gallery. The logo, a large white letter “A” placed inside a white circle and set against a black background (Figure 3), was printed on the cover art of the exhibition catalog which was written by Reiring.

Lawler’s first one-woman show at the Metro Pictures gallery in 1982 further illustrated her interest in photography and using art made by others as her muse. In the exhibition, entitled An Arrangement of Pictures, Lawler built her show entirely around work she appropriated from other artists and organized it into three different areas of display. The first area was hung near the gallery entrance. Here, Lawler arranged a grouping of several artworks by Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Laurie Simmons, and others that she pulled from the gallery’s storage room. Hung salon-style, Lawler listed the cluster of artworks for sale for a total of $1,000, the sum of the combined artworks sale prices, with the caveat that the grouping must be purchased in its entirety with 10% of the sale price going to Lawler. Modeled after fees charged by art

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42 Lawler borrowed the painting from Aqueduct Racetrack which had a large collection of art works of horses.


consultants and gallery owners, Lawler’s “fee” for arranging the installation was a symbolic nod to the structures of commodification and profit gained from the sale of artworks in galleries and auction houses.

The second grouping was a collection of photographs Lawler made herself in which “she has gone into museums, corporate offices and private homes and documented the art displays she found there,” as noted by Andy Grundberg, then an art critic for the New York Times, in his review of the show. For the third arrangement, Lawler displayed photographs that she had made by previously building arrangements of other artist’s artworks for the express purpose of photographing them.

An Arrangement of Pictures also demonstrated Lawler’s early interest in interrupting normative practices of art handling and exhibition. Lawler’s arrangement, a performance of sorts, could easily have been mistaken for an odd display of artists which the gallery represented, but the billing of the exhibition as a “one-woman-show” in concert with Lawler’s display of photographs she made inside museums and galleries, raised issues related to the growing practice of artistic appropriation. Coming on the heels of Sherrie Levine’s highly controversial show After Walker Evans at Metro Pictures the year prior, issues of ownership, appropriation, and the commodification of art were themes of increasing interest to artists as prices for artworks on the open market began to soar. In his review Grundberg writes that the combination of Lawler’s arrangements with her own photographs made of arrangements of artworks resulted in a commentary on “selectivity as an esthetic act, and about how context shapes esthetic response.”


46 Ibid.
Before I begin my deeper analysis of her work I feel it is necessary to address Grundberg’s application of the term “document” to Lawler’s photographs. Over the course of her career, critics and historians have openly struggled with how to define the compositional aesthetic Lawler has chosen to employ in her photographic work. Skirting the boundaries between installation photography and photojournalism, but fully qualifying as neither, Lawler’s selection of a seemingly neutral photograph-as-document aesthetic is not accidental. In making artwork that echoed gallery exhibition installation photographs, images often published in the art sections of newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*, Lawler used the perceived objectivity of straightforward, unmediated journalism-like images to unmask the subtleties of patriarchal systems. To more fully understand the cleverness of her project, an analysis of her aesthetic is essential.

**Lawler’s Photographic Aesthetic: Document as Subversion**

Photography’s use as a method of documentation began with British photography pioneer Henry Fox Talbot who invented the calotype process in the 1840s. Talbot believed that a primary application of photography was as a method to visually catalog objects in one’s possession. While early forms of photography were more often used to capture the likeness of a

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47 This struggle is evident in the interview conversation between Louise Lawler and Douglas Crimp published as “Prominence Given, Authority Taken” in *Grey Room* no. 4 published in the Summer 2001 issue, pages 70-81.

48 The calotype process is a precursor to negative-based analog photographic processes that developed during the nineteenth and twentieth century. A calotype is made from coating paper with a light-sensitive silver chloride. When exposed to light, the chemical darkens to produce a negative. Exposure times were lengthily, and sometimes require an hour or more to produce a printable negative.
loved one in a daguerreotype\textsuperscript{49} portrait, the capacity of photography to serve as a two-dimensional object that serves as a pictorial reference to a three-dimensional object has been investigated by philosophers, art critics, and art historians since its inception. One essay of note is theorist Rosalind Krauss’s 1977 essay “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2.” In the essay Krauss works to further ideas introduced by semiotician Roland Barthes in 1964. Barthes posited that photographs must be “decoded” in order to be understood.\textsuperscript{50} The objects or subjects held within the two-dimensional photographic print are “coded” and are read as a representation — an “index” — of the “real” objects or subjects as they are found in the “reality” of three-dimensional space. As Krauss argues, “It is the order of the natural world that imprints itself on the photographic emulsion and subsequently on the photographic print. This quality of transfer or trace gives to the photograph its documentary status, its undeniable veracity.”\textsuperscript{51} It is this, the indexical nature of photography, that Lawler seems to harness. Her photographs capture and suspend her object-subjects within the photographic print, serving as an index to the original object as it was on display next to other objects.

As Nancy Martha West writes in her book \textit{Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia}, photography had been not only been available to women soon after its invention, but with the founding of the Eastman Kodak photography company in 1878 its primary use by women as a tool of documentation is well established. Outlining the ways in which Kodak engineered the company’s

\textsuperscript{49} A daguerreotype is an early form of photography, named after one of its inventors, the Frenchman Louis Jacques Daguerre, most commonly used for portraiture. Made from a sheet of silver-plated copper polished to a mirror finish, the sheet treated it with fumes (often iodine) that made its surface light-sensitive. After the plate is exposed to light in a camera, the latent image “burned” on the plate is made visible by exposing it to mercury vapor, which fixes the latent image. The plate, which is susceptible to scratching, is then rinsed, dried, and sealed behind glass in a protective enclosure.

\textsuperscript{50} Barthes presented these ideas in his 1964 essay “Rhetoric of the Image” published in \textit{Communications}, no. 4.

advertising campaigns specifically toward women with their “Kodak Girl,” a willowy young woman in an iconic blue and white striped dress often portrayed outdoors in adventurous situations with her Brownie camera, Kodak enticed young female photographers into becoming the family documentarian, recording life events and family members in photographs. The popularity of vernacular, or snapshot, photography grew exponentially over the next 100 years as photography became established in popular culture. During the 1970s and 1980s artists such as Lawler, Nan Goldin, and Sally Mann each made their own particular modifications to the vernacular style of document photography to craft unique images that gained them entry into a male-dominated fine art world.

As the 1980s began, photography had emerged as an important medium for Lawler. Early signs of her interest in photography’s capacity to serve as a visual document laden with commentary can be seen in an artists book which she collaborated with Lawrence Weiner. Published in 1981, A Passage North, included seventeen photographs made by Lawler in a banal snapshot aesthetic. As the decade progressed, Lawler continued crafting her unique compositional style. Photographing increasingly within museums and gallery spaces to investigate techniques of exhibition and display, she morphed installation document photography into an aesthetic that fragmented art objects and revealed the forced relationships between artworks.

52 Nancy Martha West, Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

53 In a body of work entitled Ballad of Sexual Dependency Nan Goldin used a snapshot aesthetic to photograph herself, her romantic relationships, and the lives of her friends.

54 Like many female photographers before her, Sally Mann focused her camera primarily upon her family, specifically her children.

55 Lawrence Weiner is a conceptual artist whose pioneering installation works were made in the 1960s and 1970s. Like Lawler, he is interested in challenging established relationships between the artists and viewer. He has produced books, films, video, and audio performance works.

56 Although there are a few photographs that include men in them, most of the photos in this book are of women.
Lawler’s photographs “show” artworks *in situ*, wherever that may be, and while her photographs are certainly visual documents, her compositions complicate a purely factual reading of the image. Lawler’s photographs appear to “tell” us something beyond the fact that “this artwork hung next to that artwork at that place.” Noting their stylistic neutrality, a viewer might ask, “Why ever did she photograph that? I know what an artwork hanging in a museum looks like. Why is she showing me this?” Further still, a viewer might ask, “How can a photograph of another object of art be considered an artwork itself?” Lawler seems to set up the situation specifically to make the viewer ask these questions and, hopefully, see the subtexts she is attempting to unveil.

The most effective study of Lawler’s aesthetic style was conducted in 2012 by Sherri Irvin, a professor of philosophy who specializes in the aesthetics of art. In her article “Artwork and Document in the Photography of Louise Lawler” Irvin conducted a deep analysis of Lawler’s use of photography in an attempt to answer the question: What about Louise Lawler’s photographic composition or presentation denotes that the image should be read as an “art object” versus a “document”?

Making it clear that she believes Lawler’s photographs are art, Irvin investigates what conditions must be met for a photograph to be read as “art” even if it aesthetically presents itself in a manner more conventionally aligned with a non-artistic application of the medium such a photojournalism, as many of Lawler’s photographs do. Providing comparisons of Lawler’s photographic work to painters and other photographers, including a museum photographer who, like Lawler, photographs artworks *in situ*, Irwin works scientifically to challenge the “artness” of Lawler’s photographs by running a series of hypotheses.

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To test the artness of Lawler’s work Irvin asks a series of questions beginning with a basic question: “Is photography an artistic medium?” She compares Lawler’s photographs to other artistic mediums that are well established as “artistic,” such as painting, and concludes that an object cannot automatically be considered “art” simply because it is made from materials commonly associated with an artistic medium; therefore, a photograph is not automatically “art” simply because it is a photograph. Next, Irvin wonders: if it is not only about the materials, why are the majority of paintings in existence considered art, but the same is not true of photography? The majority of the applications of photography — family snapshots, scientific documentation, driver’s license photographs, etc. — are non-artistic; therefore, the majority of photographs in existence do not quality as “artistic.” So why are Lawler’s photographs considered “art?” What makes hers different?

In search of clarity, Irvin turns to a statement by performance art historian David Davies who explains that “performing certain manipulations on a kind of physical stuff counts as specifying a certain set of aesthetic properties as a piece, and thus as articulating a particular artistic statement.”\footnote{Ibid, 84.} In other words, an artistic statement has been made if an object has been intentionally manipulated or crafted with a specific attention to aesthetics that demonstrate an individual’s unique way of seeing. Drawing connections between Lawler’s consistent use of a straightforward compositional style and French impressionist painter Vincent van Gogh’s distinctive brushstroke, Irvin concludes that Lawler’s intentional appropriation of the visual aesthetic of photography as document is used by Lawler to craft a specialized and unique personal artistic style.

For Irvin, non-art photographs do not make a statement or ask the viewer to consider the
presence of a layered meaning within the photograph’s subject matter or composition, as is the case with an fine art photograph. Irvin posits that to qualify as art, on some level a photograph must make reference to or be positioned in relation to art movements or art objects of the past. In reaching her conclusion Irvin argues that Lawler’s discursive framing, selective composition, intentional cropping, in concert with her direct referencing of other artworks and artists, calls for an unequivocal reading of Lawler’s photographs as art, despite their initial interpretation as document.

The potency of Lawler’s aesthetic style lies within the apparent neutrality of her photographs. Pointed and intentional, Lawler’s photographs are in fact highly charged images that belie their critical intervention by masking a captious stance within a seemingly straightforward style of photographic documentation. Lawler’s photographs are calm and controlled, nearly always lack people, and are composed in a manner that often makes it hard for the viewer to achieve an understanding of scale or firmly establish a location. Lawler’s images gain their critical force by creating windows through which viewers are invited to become aware of their own experiential process of visually absorbing artworks. Yet, the true cunning of Lawler’s feminist project lies in her ability to allow that voyeuristic window to frame and place on display the patriarchal systems and structures of art institutions that determine and define which artworks and artists are bestowed cultural, political, or economic values.
Chapter 3

Summary of the Literature

A survey of the scholarship written on Lawler’s work reveals the complexities inherent in reading her work. The variety of interpretations of Lawler’s practice are many, none of which can wholly capture either her practice as an artist or the physical art objects she creates. Her work is complex, layered, and works on too many levels for any kind of strictly defined interpretation; yet, as this survey demonstrates, the predominant interpretation of Lawler’s work has situated her strongly within the postmodern exercise of institutional critique.

For the purposes of this study, an examination of the scholarship on Louise Lawler is best performed chronologically. In taking this approach I aim to demonstrate the evolution of the scholarship on Lawler, making connections between early interpretations of her work and those that followed. My goal is to highlight the consistency of interpretation of Lawler as an institutional critique artist, and to also pinpoint the few essays that did read her work as feminist.

The scholarship that I will examine in this summary of literature includes critical essays by art historians and art critics, exhibition catalogs, reviews of exhibitions in which Lawler’s work was included, and the few interviews she has granted. My review will center predominantly on works made between the 1980s and late 1990s but will also address a selection of publications released after the year 2000. This review is organized loosely by decade.

1980s

The first critical essays on Lawler’s work began to appear in a variety of art journals, newspapers, and magazines during the early 1980s. One of the earliest critical analysis of Lawler’s work was published by Artforum magazine in the fall of 1982. Authored by Benjamin H.
D. Buchloh, the article, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” became a foundational reading of Lawler’s work and was cited often by subsequent authors. Buchloh centers his analysis within a Marxist application of Walter Benjamin’s theories on allegorical procedures of Modernist art which Buchloh employed to evaluate the use of montage as a transformative tool in then-contemporary art. Buchloh situates Lawler’s participation in the 1978 show at Artists Space gallery in New York within the company of then-contemporary artists Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, and Michael Asher, stating “We can see both the beginning of an examination of the framework that determines the pictorial sign and an analysis of the structuring principles of the sign itself.” By this, Buchloh is referring to the fact that Lawler did not exhibit in a traditional manner, and instead removed the expectation of artist-as-creator to interrupt normative exhibition practices. For the show, Lawler appropriated an 1824 oil painting of a race horse owned by the New York Racing Association, and exhibited the painting under her own name. By displacing herself as the artist of an exhibited artwork and disrupting the viewer’s expectations, Lawler’s participation in the show, Buchloh argued, “functioned as an allegorical shell” that effectively questioned the historical tendencies of material and physical artistic production and display.

In his article, Buchloh provided a substantial examination of the work of a group of emerging women artists including Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Dara Birnbaum, Sherrie Levine, Martha Rosler, and Lawler. While situating these artists within what he calls a broader “climate of desperation and cynicism,” Buchloh further argues that this group of artists are part

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60 Ibid, 47.

61 The painting was made by the artist Henry Stallman.
of a larger paradigmatic shift, a shift toward inverting the institutions of Modernism. He argues that they are continuing and expanding Modernism’s “impulse to criticize itself from within, to question its institutionalization, its reception, and its audience.”62 Other than identifying their gender, Buchloh does not identify the women as feminist artists nor does he situate their work within a feminist agenda. Instead, he connects their work to the larger semiotic project of Roland Barthes as published in his 1957 book *Mythologies*. Claiming that the work of this group of women creates a “secondary mythology,” Buchloh argues that they are working in ways that either appropriate objects to make allegorical references to the systems of art or to the commodification of art as fetish objects as was part of a postmodern agenda.

A partial rebuttal to Buchloh’s essay was published the following year in an anthology of essays examining the emerging postmodern culture. Entitled *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* and edited by art historian and critic Hal Foster, an Associate Editor at *Art in America* at the time of book’s publication in 1983. The anthology included several articles that, over the past three decades, have become seminal essays, including Rosalind Krauss’s “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Douglas Crimp’s essay “On the Museum’s Ruins” and Craig Owens’s “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” the latter of which references Lawler’s work directly.

Owens offers a critical response to Buchloh’s arguments. Stating that his objective is to investigate the growing tensions between feminism and postmodernism as a means of rectifying an indifference to gender he argues is present within postmodernism,63 Owens finds fault with Buchloh’s failure to assign any significance to the gender of the female artists he profiled. Instead,

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Owens argues that Buchloh “provides them with a distinctly male genealogy in the dada tradition of collage and montage.” Owens questions Buchloh’s failure to recognize that in their manipulation of popular culture and mass media to unveil hidden ideological agendas, this group of female artists are largely appropriating images of women. He asks, “But what does it mean to claim that these women render the invisible visible, especially in a culture in which visibility is always on the side of the male, invisibility on the side of the female?”

This question leads directly to his analysis of Lawler’s work, beginning with “A Picture is No Substitute for Anything,” Lawler’s collaborative work done with Sherrie Levine. Owens positions this series as calling into question how pictures are intended to serve as replacements, i.e., substitutes, of the original subject which is absent. Owens outlines Lawler’s 1979 conceptual performance piece *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* which she held in small movie theaters in Los Angeles and again in New York in 1983. In the Los Angeles iteration, Lawler screened Marilyn Monroe’s last movie *The Misfits*, but true to the name of her performance piece no movie picture was projected for the audience. Only the audio was played in the theater. Owens argues that by withdrawing the picture Lawler also withdrew the visual pleasure gained from viewing Monroe, the “archetypal image of feminine desirability.”

Owens’s essay is notable from others published during the early to mid-1980s in that in addition to citing the theoretical work of male theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, Owens was progressive in his application of French feminist theory from Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. Despite Owen’s very clear feminist interpretation of the work of Lawler,

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64 Ibid, 72.
65 Ibid, 72.
66 Ibid, 73.
Levine, Holzer, Birnbaum, and Rosler, which he made on the heels of Buchloh’s more Marxist reading of their work, Owen’s feminist intervention has been overshadowed by a publishing relationship that was established that same year between Lawler and art critic Douglas Crimp, the editor of the art journal *October*.

Invited by Crimp, Lawler published a portfolio of sixteen photographs in the fall 1983 edition of *October*. Given the title “Arrangements of Pictures,” the photographs demonstrate the complexity of her use of photography as incomplete document and make evident her interest in using text to disrupt the viewer’s reading of her work. They also exemplify the varied spaces in which Lawler was interested in working. She made the images at a variety of spaces devoted to the display, collecting, or selling of art, including Metro Pictures gallery, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the corporate offices of PaineWebber, the law offices of Weil, Gotshal, and Manges, as well as the Hillstead Museum in Farmington, Connecticut, and the private home of art collectors Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kaye. The works she photographed are overwhelmingly made by men.

Although not accompanied by a critical or interpretive essay, Lawler’s portfolio fit into Crimp’s professional project of examining the structures in which art is displayed and commodified. Crimp subsequently published a variety of articles on Lawler’s work, which I will examine throughout my analysis. It is my belief that Lawler’s association with *October* and Crimp played a substantial role in the overwhelming interpretation of Lawler as an institutional critique artist. Crimp, an art critic and historian whose oeuvre has consistently focused on issues related to the art market and the politics of display, referenced Lawler’s work in his essay “The Art of

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67 Founded in 1976 by Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, the journal *October* is credited with introducing French poststructural theory into American intellectual circles.

68 The male artists whose work is photographed by Lawler include Antonio Canova, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Albrecht Dürer, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Auguste Rodin, Robert Longo, Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella, James McNeil Whistler, Seymour Hayden, Robert Smithson, Charles Meyron, August Sander, Ansel Adams, Allan McCollum, Alexander Calder, Claes Oldenburg, and others. The only woman artist included is Cindy Sherman.
Exhibition” published in the fall 1984 issue of October. Noting that she had not been formally invited to participate in the prestigious Documenta 7 art exhibition, Crimp’s essay examines Lawler’s subversive participation in the 1982 exhibition in Kassel, Germany which was directed by artist Rudi Fuchs. As Crimp details, Lawler had infiltrated the show by appropriating and publishing excerpts from a letter Fuchs had sent to the artists invited to participate. Made without his permission, Lawler’s co-optation of Fuchs’s words were printed on the upper and lower margins of two sheets of stationery and matching envelopes. Crimp situates Lawler’s appropriation of Fuchs’s text as a subversive response to the director’s stated desire to use the festival to “restore to art its precious autonomy”⁶⁹ which, according to Crimp, Fuchs attempted to accomplish by designing the exhibition around a return to the conventional modes of sculpture and painting that constituted the canon of art history.⁷⁰ Crimp argued that by employing marginal practices to print and disseminate Fuchs’s ideals, Lawler had effectively undermined Fuchs by having her stationery, “manufactured cheap and sold cheap, quite unlike the paintings and sculptures within the museum building, whose real but disguised condition is that of the international market for art, dominated increasingly by corporate speculation.”⁷¹ With this, he situated Lawler’s works within a broader rebellion against the growing commodification of art during the 1980s.⁷²

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⁷⁰ Crimp notes that neoexpressionist style was dominating the art market in New York at the time.


⁷² Crimp’s reading of Lawler is echoed in Dan Cameron’s 1984 review in Arts Magazine. The review of “Four Installations: Francesco Torres, Mierle Ukeles, Louise Lawler and Allan McCollum” highlights the changes in installation art that was happening in the 1970s and 1980s, and examines four installations in a variety of spaces. Cameron gives attention the role of the pleasure in the viewing experience, and situates Lawler’s piece “For Presentation and Display: Ideal Settings,” which she collaborated with artist Allan McCollum, within the critical analysis of the commodification of art.
One of the most cited articles on Lawler is Andrea Fraser’s 1985 “In and Out of Place.” As a member of the vanguard involved in institutional critique, Fraser situated Lawler’s work accordingly. Highlighting the transitory nature of Lawler’s art works crafted onto matchbooks, Fraser noted that Lawler “consistently challenges the properties of both place...and of objects.” Fraser also remarked on the collective aspects of Lawler’s practice which is seen in her photographic capture of the display of works by other artists within galleries, museums, or other art institutions. Addressing Lawler’s practice of abdicating what Fraser calls the “privileged place of artistic identity,” to somehow manage “to escape institutional definitions of artistic activity as an autonomous esthetic exploration,” Fraser argues that Lawler’s work provides a “double displacement” in that she not only brings the invisible into the visible, she also situates her work in the margins of “the production, elaboration, and critique of the frame.”

Fraser is careful to differentiate Lawler’s work from other artists that came out of or emerged after the post-studio practices of the 1970s, particularly Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke as previously connected to Lawler by Buchloh, but her differentiation is minor. She argues that rather than situate institutional power within the physical spaces of art institutions as done by others, Lawler instead locates it within a systematic set of presentational protocols. The argument made by Fraser, whose analysis focuses more upon Lawler’s artistic practice than on the art objects Lawler was making, is flawed. In her lack of

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73 The second half of the article examines the variety of Lawler's art works and spatial interventions, including her appropriation of a painting of a race horse for her first show at Metro Pictures in 1978. Fraser also examines Lawler’s slide show installation exhibitions and her text-based art pieces, including her subversive matchbook and art gallery invitation art pieces. Two text pieces given special attention are Lawler’s excerpts of Rudi Fuch’s Documenta 7 letter and the “gift certificates” she made for Leo Castelli’s gallery.

74 Andrea Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” Art in America 73, no. 6 (1985): 122-9.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.
attention or acknowledgement to the patriarchal systems inherent in both the physical spaces and systems of display, Fraser, like Buchloh and Crimp, is unable to interpret the fullness of Lawler’s work.

Next I want to turn to two essays written by art critic Kate Linker. Published within two years of each other, the stark difference between Linker’s articles exemplifies the short period of time in which Lawler’s artistic practice was mildly seen as a feminist commentary earlier but was quickly subsumed within institutional critique. In 1984, Linker published the aptly titled essay “Eluding Definition” in *Artforum*. In the article, Linker, a feminist art historian, applied French theory to examine the increasing number of women artists using the photographic medium as a feminist tool to “dephallicize” art by reclaiming control of representations of women within visual culture. Relating Lacan’s “mirror stage” to the re-photographing practices of Lawler, Linker argues that Lawler’s artistic practice calls into question the meaning assigned to artworks once they are placed within the physical and cultural structures of art. Drawing connections between feminism and postmodernism Linker states, “Feminism is seen to exemplify the post-Modernist concern with the production of the subject rather than the Modernist preoccupation with the subject of the production…feminism joins post-Modernism in exposing the legitimizing apparatus of Western representation as it converges on the patriarchal white male.”

Two years later, in 1986, Linker published another article on Lawler for *Artforum*. In “Rites of Exchange” Linker does not qualify Lawler within feminist discourse at all, but situated her fully within the institutional critique discourse. Continuing the basic idea she presented in her 1984 essay, Linker assesses Lawler’s overall project as an examination of the “networks of meaning” created by artworks within their different environments where art objects gain context.

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and significance. Linker writes, “The message running through her putatively marginal objects is that we never accede to the artwork “in itself,” but only through a fabric of representations, or, rather through specific presentational strategies devised by the prevailing culture.” Situating Lawler’s work as a “counterideology or contextualism,” Linker argues that Lawler’s goal is to question the connections between an artwork and its author as a method to penetrate the “monolith of the institution’s authority” and investigate not only how meaning is created and attributed to artwork and artists, but how museums as institutions function “beyond the flow of history.”

The difference between Linker’s articles over a two year span is revealing. As the decade progressed and feminism became increasingly incorporated into the larger postmodern agenda, the interpretations of Lawler’s artistic practice as feminist began to fade. Increasingly, the critical essays published in the latter half of the 1980s tended to investigate the varied ways in which Lawler’s work could be interpreted as poststructuralist critiques of the institutions of art. For example, Alfred Durante’s 1988 exhibition review of Lawler’s “Projects” at the Museum of Modern Art published in Arts Magazine situated Lawler within a poststructuralist agenda by arguing that her show repeatedly referred to the museum’s exhibition policies by incorporating items into her photograph that symbolized the museum’s ideology. In an apparent continuation of Linker’s analysis, Durante stated that Lawler was most interested in “exploring the materialization of art as a modern cultural phenomenon.”

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79 Ibid.
release — to demonstrate how museums sell their “product” which Durante claims is culture.\textsuperscript{81}

In support of his argument, Durante quotes the statement Lawler printed on the exhibition brochure: “I am showing what they are showing: painting, sculpture, pictures, glasses, and words on painted walls furnishing the same material experience; my work is to exchange the positions of exposition and voyeurism. You are standing in your own shoes.” However, Durante does not further investigate Lawler’s vagueness to examine how the potential interpretations of meaning associated with the objects she shows can radically shift depending upon whose shoes are standing there.

Curator Claude Gintz also examined Lawler’s “Projects” show at MOMA. Gintz analyzes Lawler’s installation of a triptych of three identical prints of a photograph she made in MOMA’s exhibition galleries. The subject of Lawler’s image is a large wooden museum bench placed on the floor in front of Joan Miro’s \textit{Mural Painting} from 1950-51. Gintz makes a unique argument by claiming that Lawler is “fragmenting” the artworks she photographs, offering only slices for viewers to gaze upon. In her work at MOMA, \textit{Untitled, 1950-1951}, Gintz believes that Lawler’s fragmenting is accented by her decision to hang multiples of her image in the exhibition, which he argues provides both an interrogation of the perceived aura of an original art work and provides a deconstruction of MOMA’s authority.

The interpretation of Lawler as a member of the poststructuralist project of institutional critique became further ingrained with the publication of the edited anthology of \textit{October: The First Decade, 1976-1986}. Published in 1987, journal co-founder Annette Michelson edited the volume, selecting essays that celebrated the first ten years of the journal’s publication. Michelson included Lawler’s “An Arrangement of Pictures” and Douglas Crimp’s “The Art of Exhibition,”

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
both of which I examined earlier. Divided into six sections, Lawler’s portfolio and Crimp’s essay were placed under the heading of “Critique of Institutions.” Clearly, the interpretation of Lawler’s work as institutional critique was solidifying.

In the final years of the decade, critical response examined the ways in which Lawler’s work served as a commentary on the increasing commodification of art. Keeping in mind that the art market of the 1980s was witnessing an unprecedented rise in auction prices, the increased attention to this trend by scholars and art critics is not terribly surprising. While a few articles hint at the feminist statements within Lawler’s work, the focus remained on investigating the commodification happening within art institutions.

In 1988 art critic David Joselit published “Investigating the Ordinary” in which he argued that Lawler’s work has the effect of “domesticating” the artworks she elected to photograph. Beginning with quick analysis of the work of institutional critique artists Jeff Koons and Michael Asher, Joselit argues that in her photographing of the modernist art collection of Burton and Emily Tremaine in their New York apartment and Connecticut home, Lawler had “sought and found the living version of the museum period room — but with its absurdities still intact.”

Joselit further argues that the collector’s home is an institution itself, one that serves as a central metaphor where “family values” are an ideological construction, and also, during the 1980s, had become a new kind of gallery space.

Within the same argument, in his 1989 review of a show of Lawler’s work at her gallery Metro Pictures for Art in America, art critic Ken Johnson remarked on a growing trend of artists to explore social and economic conditions related to the ownership of artworks. Opening his review the brash statement: “A pet thesis among cerebrally leftward artists and critics of the 1980s has

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been the notion that for most people, esthetic gratification derives less from the art work’s *intrinsic* nature than from its *extrinsic* social and economic conditions." Johnson credited Lawler with being the artist who “pioneered” the idea earlier in the decade, noting that her work made clear connections to art and its consumption through her photographs of an array of ceramic works by Jeff Koons which she paired with wall a label that listed an exotic menu but otherwise made no reference to Koon’s artworks. Johnson remarked on the ambiguity of her work being read as positive or negative review, commenting “…it remains tantalizingly unclear whether she intends a positive or a negative critique.”

The inclusion of Lawler’s work in three group exhibitions at the end of the decade also reveals the predominant placement of her within institutional critique, but in varied ways. Two of these shows squarely placed Lawler within institutional critique. Firstly, “A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation” exhibited at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in the spring of 1989, explored tensions that were evolving in art during the postmodern era. Curators Mary Jane Jacob and Ann Goldstein’s goals for the exhibition was to examine how the making of art was being redefined during the 1980s as artists grappled with issues of consumption and the growing media saturation occurring during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. The second exhibition, held at the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., in 1989 was Joshua P. Smith’s “The Photography of Invention American Pictures of the 1980s.” A focused investigation of the rapid rise of photography as a form of contemporary art, Smith made the distinction between photographs that are “made” versus those that are “taken” to imply artist’s choices and intent in their composition, selection of


84 Ibid, 191.
subject matter, or form of photography. He notes that appropriation, re-photography, and pastiche began primarily as a feminist critique of both representation and commodification of art objects. Smith strikes a balance between feminism and institutional critique with his observation that the artistic practice of appropriating already existing images or styles began as a “feminist critique of representation and of the commodity status of art objects,” yet Smith does not situate Lawler as a feminist.

The third exhibition, “What is the Same,” took place in Saint-Etienne, France, which I believe accounts for the curator’s inclusion of a feminist interpretation to some of Lawler’s works. For the show, curator Claude Gintz paired Lawler with the artist John Knight. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Gintz examined Lawler’s well-known artwork *Pollock and Tureen.* With hints at a feminist reading, Gintz made a unique connection between the sexual symbolism of the objects in Lawler’s photograph: an action painting by Jackson Pollock and the decoratively fussy soup tureen Lawler centered her composition upon. However, after quickly noting that action painting was predominately done by male artists, Gintz moved on to examine Lawler’s photograph entitled *Monogram 1955-59* in which the white-washed flag painting by Jasper Johns, *White Flag*, hangs in a bedroom. Placed above a bed dressed in white bedclothes, into which a large monogram has been stitched in dark thread, Gintz argues that both *Monogram* and *Pollock and Tureen* capture the manner in which artworks were increasingly becoming a “deluxe” commodity.

Gintz does eventually return to address the feminist nature of Lawler’s project. He writes, “While taking a stance on a “men’s affair” issue, Lawler targets the validity of a patriarchal organization and culture.” Like Linker in “Eluding Definition,” Gintz examines the growing

85 Louise Lawler and John Knight. *What is the Same*, ed. Claude Gintz. (Saint-Etienne, France: Maison de la Culture et de la Communication de Saint-Etienne, 1988): pages are unnumbered.
role of the woman as producer (and re-producer) of visual images, instead of being only the subject of art. Calling attention to the action of a woman behind the camera as one in which women are “acting as a man,” Gintz then analyzes the four different titles Lawler assigned to four artworks, each an identical prints of a photograph she made of a Greco-Roman style sculpture of a woman who appears to be “watched” by the sculptural bust of a man in the near background. Noting that Lawler selected the titles “Eve and Patriarch,” “Wife/Husband,” “Sister/Brother,” and “Daughter/Father,” Gintz argues that Lawler is clearly addressing the varied roles of women and the complex yet confining relationships associated within those roles.

1990s

During the 1990s, the reading of Lawler as a poststructuralist postmodernist continued to solidify as her work was increasingly included in exhibitions designed to examine the systems of art through a postmodern perspective. Most notable was the publication of Douglas Crimp’s book On the Museum’s Ruins, for which Lawler’s photographs are the primary visual illustrations. Published in 1993, the book is an anthology of Crimp’s writings on postmodernism and the museum. In the introduction he writes that he published the collection partly because he wanted to present his overall project “alongside the parallel photographic work of Louise Lawler.”86 In the second chapter, “Photographs at the End of Modernism,” Crimp acknowledges Craig Owens’s criticism of the “skirting” the feminist content and art practice of various women artists in essays Owens published during the 1980s. Despite this acknowledgement, Crimp did not reinterpret Lawler’s works within a feminist perspective. To him she remained an artist practicing within institutional critique. Since its publication, On the Museum’s Ruins has come to be viewed as

a seminal poststructuralist project, which has resulted in a lasting solidification of Lawler’s interpretation as an institutional critique artist.

Johannes Meinhardt took a slightly different track than Crimp when he wrote his essay for a joint exhibition in 1991 that Lawler participated in at the Städtisches Museum Leverkusen in Germany. Meinhardt’s essay, “The Places of Art — The Photography of Louise Lawler” combined poststructuralist ideas with the growing concern for rapidly shifting economics of the art market. By examining how Lawler used the photographic medium to show how the spaces in which economic and semantic valuations are assigned to artworks were most often also the same spaces in which works of art were “turned into simple, readily recognizable tokens of value, like postage stamps or vouchers,” through items in the gift shop, Meinhardt argues that Lawler’s photographs cause the original artwork to disappear as the viewers’ attention is guided toward viewing other objects that surround the artwork, for example, a wall, a frame, a wall label, or other objects of art.

The care of artworks when not on display was explored in a unique exhibition in 1998 that originated at Haus der Kinst in Germany and traveled to P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York and then on to Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. Titled Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art, the show examined what happens to art objects in museums and galleries when they are not on display. Co-curatorial Ingrid Schalau, who wrote Lawler’s essay, situated Lawler within institutional critique and examines the psychology of Lawler’s voyeuristic work and what it reveals about the production, display, and stewardship of culture. That same year Lawler held a solo show in Köln, Germany. The show “A Spot on the Wall” and the accompanying exhibition catalog further demonstrate my observation that Lawler’s body of photographic work centers primarily upon images in which the art objects she photographs are made by male artists. In this
exhibition, Lawler showed her photographs of artworks by the following artists: Donald Judd, two works by Jeff Koons, two works by Gerhard Richter, Piet Mondrian, two works by Frank Stella, Matthew Barney, Richard Longo, Edward Ruscha, Roy Lichtenstein, Dan Flavin, two works by Allan McCollum, Claes Oldenburg, and more.

Commodification remained a thread of interpretation through the 1990s. A slim, but photo-heavy book titled *Louise Lawler: For Sale* was published in 1994. The book showcases a body of work in which Lawler photographed various aspects of the process of art auctions. The project includes images of empty auction house rooms where Lawler shows artworks presented for public viewing prior to the auction in a somewhat haphazard and inelegant system. Also included are images of the same artworks as they had previously hung in the homes of their former owners. The essays, “Behind the Art Scene with Louise Lawler” by Dietmer Elger, and “Art As Always” by Thomas Weski both speak to Lawler’s career focus on the documentation of the representation of art, the art market, and the collector.

Art critic and historian Rosalind Krauss also wrote about Lawler’s work as a commentary upon and disruption of the commodification systems of art. In the 1995 issue of *Aperture*, which was dedicated to looking at the work of artists “we do not necessarily think of as photographers,” Lawler’s was one of ten portfolios included in the journal’s examination of artists who execute serious investigations into the “representational power of the photographic medium.” Krauss contributed an essay on Lawler’s paperweight art objects. For the paperweights, Lawler printed her photographs of artworks *in situ*, affixed them to the bottom of the glass, and backed the photograph with felt. Noting that the capacity of the spherical glass paperweights to resemble camera lenses, Krauss connects the paperweights to commodity

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culture. She defines Lawler’s photographic aesthetic as pulling from the “visual vocabularies of journalism and commercial photography.” Krauss further writes, “Siding momentarily with photojournalism, Lawler’s image then relapses, however, into the strangly stunned but tender neutrality that one would have to identify as her “style.”” Krauss refers to Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “Photography in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” as a method of addressing Lawler’s paperweights as yet another demonstration of the removal of the aura of the original artwork or artist by effectively creating for the viewer three degrees of separation from the original: the artwork hanging in a space, viewing the artwork through the glass “lens” of the paperweight, and the artwork turned into a tchotchke. For Krauss, Lawler’s paperweights reference the “spectacle” that is made of art. Recalling Benjamin’s projection that photography would forever change art, Krauss provides Lawler’s paperweights as proof of Benjamin’s omniscience. She speaks of photography’s capacity to bring near to us things that are far away, and to miniaturize objects in such a manner as to provide many people with an opportunity to “own” or “possess” those items, or the reproductions of them.

I now want to examine two small exhibitions of Lawler’s work during the 1990s that successfully situated Lawler as an artist working within both feminism and institutional critique. First is the show “Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons” held in Oslo, Norway at Kunstnernes Hus in 1993, and second is Trudy Wilner Stack’s “Art Museum” at the Center for Creative Photography in Arizona in 1995. Both exhibitions, curated by women, were small, did not travel, and were accompanied by slim exhibition catalogs that had small press runs. Both exhibitions were

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88 Ibid, 36.

The curators of the show in Oslo, Leena-Maija Rossi and Asmund Thorkildsen, both wrote essays for the slim exhibition catalog. Thorkildsen begins by stating, “It is worth noting the significance of the fact that it is often women who have grabbed hold of a medium which, to a large degree, has been used against women.” Labeling Lawler as a conceptual artist, Thorkildsen works to differentiate Lawler’s photographic aesthetic from architectural or installation photographs. She states that Lawler’s cropping may seem accidental but is clearly a conscious decision made by Lawler to reveal underlying coded messages that silently exert influence upon viewers. “Her pictures are also heavily coded, and she works quite consciously with the relationship between text and image, with text used as both an inscription for the photograph itself, or in the form of titles as contributing elements,” she wrote.

In her essay “Re-turning the Gaze,” Leena-Maija Rossi situates the work of the show’s three female artists fully within a feminist discourse. Examining the ways in which sexual gender is crafted through cultural and societal norms, Rossi looks at the role of the picture as a key method in the production of signs, both in media and in art, and how it has been effective in “buttressing this gendered structure that functions according to the language and the law of patriarchy.” This connects the semiotic work of Barthes through its attention to “signs” within pictures to Freud’s conceptualization of woman as the negative of man due to her lack of a phallus, and to Lacan’s ideas of binary oppositions. Yet, these philosophers are scarcely mentioned by name. She does lean on the feminist writings of Laura Mulvey, specifically her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Rossi also cites Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s

91 Ibid, 15.
92 Ibid, 30.
work on materialist gender construction and its relationship to gender on either side of the camera. For Solomon-Godeau it is not the function of the camera as an image capturing device, it is the many levels of meaning and systems of valuation held within photographic reproduction. For Rossi, as more women began photographing themselves or other women, they were doing so in an era of greater awareness of the systems of patriarchy in existence around them. The conflation of women’s identities being founded wholly within their physical bodies had previously disallowed enough distance for women to form conceptualizations of identity that differentiated between the physical body and the metaphorical or allegorical body. For Rossi, the cameras of Louise Lawler and Laurie Simmons are a mask through which each can focus their gaze as well as control their own presentation. Rossi gives one of the deepest analyses of Lawler’s work, from the disruption of the “aura” of an original artwork or the artist who made it, to the systems of ownership of beautiful things within capitalistic and inherently patriarchal systems. Rossi effectively argues that Lawler is entrenched in her own style of “guerilla warfare,”93 one in which she is revealing the objectification of art objects within art institutions. Rossi concludes with this: “Louise Lawler focuses on the men behind the artworks and the artworld: not just the artists, but also and principally the dealers and buyers. Including the provenance and names of the owners of the artworks in their titles no longer seems natural...They speak of property right, commodification, of status.”94

In a slightly different interpretation of Lawler’s feminist statement, Trudy Wilner Stacks’s “Art Museum” was rooted in an examination of institutional critique artists. In her essay for the exhibition catalog, Stack surmised that Lawler’s larger goal was to unpack the origins of artworks

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93 Ibid, 40.
94 Ibid, 40.
in an effort to subvert the attempt by museums to present a kind of “immaculate conception” in which artworks spring directly from the hand of an artist. In her analysis of Lawler’s Glass Cage, a photograph Lawler made of a Degas bronze statue placed on display within a large fortified glass box. Stack writes, “Lawler breaks the museum’s spell of preference and preciousness with her text that raises issues relevant to questioning by feminist art historians of the imaging and presentation of women, and refers back to the initial negative reception of the statuette in late nineteenth century Paris. Then, too, the dancer was shown in a case, referred to as a cage, where, based on standards of her time, her physiognomy signaled a primitive, distasteful creature, “an expelled foetus [sic] which if smaller...one would be tempted to pickle in a jar.”

Stack’s reference to the placement of various body parts into jars of formaldehyde for in-depth scientific examination effectively drew connections between Lawler’s photograph and prevailing interpretations of women being defined by their parts of their physical bodies.

2000s - 2010s

Scholarship on Lawler during the 2000s increased dramatically, signaling a trend in which critics and historians embarked on a deeper analysis on her work; specifically the work she produced in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. This greater reflection is demonstrated in the variety of publications and shows, especially monographic and retrospective exhibitions of Lawler’s work.

The decade began with the publication of the first monograph of Lawler’s work, Louise Lawler: An Arrangement of Pictures, and featured an introductory essay by Johannes Meinhardt and Trudy Wilner Stack. 


96 Ibid, 8.
an Q-and-A style interview between Douglas Crimp and Lawler. As demonstrated earlier, both Meinhardt and Crimp have solidly placed Lawler’s work within the discourse of institutional critique. Meinhardt’s essay “Sites of Art: Photographing the In-Between” examined the role of context within Lawler’s works, as well as investigated the way she uses photography “to dislodge and relocate the framework. By photographing not the individual work of art but rather the found situation, surrounding and spatial context, she destroys the boundaries of the work of art in favor of the photographed situation.” He adds, “Her photographs are not about evaluation and analysis, but about allowing the mental and social reality behind the visible surface of situations to reveal itself.” Meinhardt argues that Lawler refrains from interpretation, that her photographs retain their ambiguity resulting in a neutrality that allows for deeper analysis that is neither wholly sociological or aesthetic.

This monograph included one of the few interviews Lawler has granted during her career. Presented more as extensive conversation than a formal interview, Lawler answered questions presented by her long-time colleague Douglas Crimp. At the point of the book’s publication, the pair had been collaborating for nearly twenty years. Crimp begins by calling attention to Lawler’s reticence to participate in interviews due to her preference for her work to be in the foreground, and she as the producer in the background. She remarks that she wants the reception of her work to only be influenced by the juxtaposition to artworks placed near to her work, not by any comments she provides. “I don’t object to providing information about the work but to giving it an interpretation,” she remarked. “The work can never be determined just by what I do or say. Its comprehension is facilitated by the work of other artists and critics and just

by what’s going on at the time,” she said. For Lawler, any meaning found in her artwork will shift from exhibition to exhibition because her work relies upon the physical space and interaction with all artworks in proximity to hers. Speaking about her intentions with her text-based works which have taken the form of matchbooks, invitations, postcards, etchings on drinking glasses, stationery, and napkins, Lawler said, “It’s a way of putting loaded information in a place where you wouldn’t expect it, to give attention to other way of producing meaning without always having to be so artlike.” Again, Lawler is interrupting the canonical categories of art by making and presenting artworks more conventionally defined as ephemera.

In this interview Crimp makes his first published reference to feminism in relation to Lawler when he asks Lawler directly if *Birdcalls*, her performance piece from the late 1970s in which she manipulated the names of male artists into high-pitched chirps that sounded like bird calls, was “a self-consciously feminist work?” Lawler dodges the question by telling the background story as to how that work developed in the early 1970s while she and other women were supporting a Hudson River pier project that was highlighting male artists. In an effort to stay safe while walking home at night she and a friend began to pretend they were a bit crazy by singing off-key. This evolved into the two women attempting to sound like birds which then developed into the series of bird calls made from the names of the male artists. “So, in fact, it was antagonistic, but more in an instinctual response than a programmatic effort at first,” she says. She adds that she restaged *Birdcalls* in 1982 and added more artists to the list, selecting those with name recognition who also happened to be men.

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98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
As the 2000s progressed, Lawler was awarded more solo exhibitions of her work, and she was given shows where she was the lead artist. These shows, such as the 2004 exhibition *Louise Lawler and Others* in Basel, Germany, continued to exemplify the reading of her as an institutional critique artist. In 2007, Lawler’s Tremaine Pictures project would be the subject of a reprised exhibition and a uniquely designed exhibition catalogue. Entitled *Louise Lawler: The Tremaine Pictures, 1984-2007* exhibition was a curious re-staging of a 1984 exhibition Lawler participated in at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford, Connecticut. Originally curated by Andrea Miller-Keller, in the exhibition Lawler’s photographs that she had made of the Tremaine’s art collection inside their New York and Connecticut homes were hung in tandem with original artworks from the collection. The exhibition was re-staged in Geneva and curated by Miller-Keller and Stephen W. Melville, the latter of whom wrote the essay for the exhibition catalog that interpreted Lawler’s project as focusing upon the physical space of museums, primarily upon the walls upon which art objects are hung for display. In the back of the exhibition catalog a bevy of archival emails and correspondence from the planning of the original 1984 exhibition are reprinted, including communications between Miller-Keller, Lawler, the Tremaines, and various staff and leadership of the museum as well as publicity and press reviews for the exhibition.

In 2009 curator Douglas Eklund held an exhibition that defined a decade of artists who used photography as their medium. Held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, situated Louise Lawler in the context of photographic production in the art world between 1974 and 1984. Eklund’s essay speaks to Lawler’s duality as both a producer of works placed into galleries and museums and to her role as a critical voyeur into the homes of art collectors as part of her exploration of the way the art market functions. Lawler was not only a featured artist, but also loaned objects from her personal art collection to the show. Lawler’s
solo work is included, as is her collaborative work with Sherry Levine. Elkhound’s written analysis of Lawler’s work is extensive, examining the layers of her work and the variety of mediums in which she has worked. Citing the influential work of Douglas Crimp’s *On the Museum’s Ruins*, Eklund situates Lawler as an institutional critique artist, and makes nary a reference to feminism.

During the decade, only one exhibition presented Lawler within a feminist agenda. In 2006 Lawler was granted a retrospective show at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University. “Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back),” was curated by Helen Anne Molesworth. The three essays in the catalog clearly situate Lawler within feminism: “Louise Lawler’s Rude Museum” by Rosalyn Deutsche, “In the Company of Others” by Ann Goldstein, and “Louise Lawler: Just the Facts” by Molesworth. In her essay Rosalyn Deutsche performs a critical analysis of Lawler’s photograph *Statue Before Painting, Perseus with Head of Medusa, Canova*, in which she differentiates Lawler from the group of institutional critique artists with whom she is commonly associated. Arguing that artists in this group such as Hans Haacke and Michael Asher drew attention to the economic and political powers at play within art institutions, Deutsche posits that Lawler’s work revealed the layers of patriarchal power within the ideological systems of art where meaning is constructed for artworks in and outside of the museum space, between the physical and the social. Deutsche connects the feminism of Lawler’s generation with the influences and theoretical applications of feminist psychoanalytical philosophy coming out of France at the time. Using French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous’s poignant essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Deutsche performs a reading of Lawler’s photograph *Statue Before Painting, Perseus with Head of Medusa, Canova* in which Lawler’s composition effectively severs the body of Perseus at the waist and cuts his sword in half and interrupts a heroic reading of the statue by focusing attention upon the figure’s genitalia. In her essay Ann Goldstein situates Lawler within
the cadre of women artists working in the United States at the time who Goldstein argues were working with text and image “in order to articulate, dismantle, and reconstruct the means of their own representation in the culture.”\textsuperscript{101} She responds to Craig Owen’s essay “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism” to support her argument that the appropriation of texts and images by these artists was not a simple postmodern response to the proliferation of media but was an “expansive and active compilation of the implications of authorship and its assumptions of possession and occupation.”\textsuperscript{102} And lastly, in her essay Helen Molesworth applied a feminist perspective to the photographs Lawler made within the private homes of art collectors, primarily Lawler’s “The Tremaine Pictures” project. As David Joselit had earlier positioned the work in his article in 1988, Molesworth furthers his argument that Lawler is “domesticating” the artworks by connecting it to Lawler’s larger project of drawing attention to the political, economic, and cultural systems in which value is awarded to objects of art and their makers.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the performance works of Lawler’s early career such as 

*Birdcalls* and *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* have became of significant interest to art historians. In her essay “Without Walls” Molly Nesbit, an art historian at Vassar College, looks at the collegiality that existed amongst artists that during the 1970s and 1980s. In her analysis of the two stagings of *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture*, first in 1979 in Santa Monica, California, and again in 1984 in New York, Nesbit argues that Lawler’s work was crafted to bring viewer’s awareness of their own bodies as figures occupying space.

Vera Dika, an art historian who specialized in cinema studies, published her book *The

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\item Louise Lawler, Helen Anne Molesworth, and Wexner Center for the Arts, *Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (Looking Back)* (Columbus, Ohio; Cambridge, Mass: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Distributed by MIT Press., 2006), 134.
\item Ibid, 135.
\end{enumerate}
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(Moving) Pictures Generation: The Cinematic Impulse in Downtown New York Art and Film in which she devoted a chapter to exploring Lawler’s two performances of *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* at the Aero Theater in Santa Monica, California. In the performance, Lawler showed the last film of Marilyn Monroe, *The Misfits*, but the caveat was that only the audio was played. The visual part of the film was projected onto the screen, nor was the audience made aware of what film was to be “shown.” Making connections between Lawler’s *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* and Andy Warhol’s *Empire*, Dika further investigates Lawler’s possible motivations for selecting *The Misfits* for her project. Dika’s analysis is feminist in part in that she examines the roles in which Hollywood has crafted concepts of women, femininity, beauty, all of which played out in their creation of Monroe as the leading celebrity of her day.

Dika notes the 2008 re-staging of this performance aligned with the re-staging of Lawler’s *Bircalls* at the Huntington Library in California and other venues in the late 2000s. Dika situates the 2008 re-performance of *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* as part of a larger show entitled “Women in the City,” which she posits was “feminist word play inverting the implication of Richard Longo’s own series entitled *Men in the Cities.* Works by Cindy Sherman, Jenny Holzer, and Barbara Krugman were placed on display throughout Santa Monica and surrounding areas, offering, as Dika states, “an incursion into the patriarchal bastion of Hollywood.”

Speaking to Lawler’s project of “reconstruction,” Dika posits that Lawler’s performance piece prompted “viewers” to reconstruct their memories of the film, the actors, the Wild West, and the glory days of Hollywood by denying the visual prompt and affirmation that comes when one views the film footage. I further this argument by positing that Lawler accomplishes this with

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her photographic work as well. By denying the viewer the fullness of the artwork represented
within her selected composition, Lawler is also requiring the viewer to conduct an act of
reconstruction: of “the” or “a” museum space, the experience of viewing art works, of trying to
recall the artist who made the artwork or the name of the artwork. Carrying this argument into a
feminist theoretical discourse, one could argue that by insisting that viewers try to reconstruct any
of these aspects, she could also be attempting to demonstrate what is missing in these
experiences; something that is so simple and whose absence is so normative that it is easy to miss:
the presence of women. Granted, women are represented in a wide variety of manner within
museums as the subjects of artworks but therein lies part of what I view her projects to be: the
subjection of women as items to be presented for consumption, but not for whom consumption is
allowed.

Continuing the trend, Stacey Allan revisited Lawler’s 1981 performance piece *Birdcalls* in
her essay “Role Refusal: On Louise Lawler's 'Birdcalls’” which was published in *Afterall: A Journal
of Art, Context, and Enquiry* in 2009. Allan’s essay focuses on Lawler’s audio performance, which
itself was a updated version of the original performance of the piece in 1972 that was initially
crafted to accompany a group gallery show of all male artists at Metro Pictures in New York. In
this performance piece Lawler strains her voice, turning the names of male artist’s into bird-like
calls. Allan outlines how Lawler’s piece called attention to and mocked the patriarchy of the art
establishment and the preferential treatment of male artists by dissecting the names into
fragmented syllables. In the essay Allan references both Andrea Fraser’s 1985 essay on Lawler
and Douglas Crimp’s 2002 interview with Lawler, and she squarely situates Lawler’s 1972 version
of the piece within the publication of Nochlin’s essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women
Artists?” Allan’s argument for reading Lawler’s *Birdcalls* as feminist is positioned partially upon
Owen’s “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism” which she used to support her thesis that in mimicking the names of male artists, Lawler not only flipped the gender norm of men making art with women as their subject and made men the subject of her work she appropriated the position of male-dominated official discourse by creating a work in which she “steals language” in an effort to disrupt the institutional heroic readings of male art production. For Allan, Lawler’s work is decidedly feminist.

Art critic Bruce Hainley also analyzed *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* in his article for *Frieze* magazine, but his larger analysis of Lawler’s oeuvre qualified her work as a “documentation of the ‘life’ of art” in all the spaces in which it is hung, circulated, or otherwise institutionalized. He remarks that she is assuredly not neutral. It is unclear as to whether he is situating her within a deconstruction of Modernism, institutional critique, or feminism. The most poignant part of his hard-to-follow essay is the last paragraph in which he writes: “I repeat. Lawler’s work shows more than can ever be said, more than perhaps she could say, certainly more than her critics or I state – or than can be ever stated by any one person (which is why we keep looking, how her work works): ‘The work can never be determined just by what I do or say. Its comprehension is facilitated by the work of other artists and critics and by what is happening around the art at any given moment.’” Hailey continues, “Lawler’s photographic sensibility is concerned with kinds of knowledge, explicitly and implicitly with how the visual and the verbal convey meaning differently. The unspeakable girds what is spoken, the way the invisible structures the visible and stupidity situates both the beyond and the fundament of the intelligible. What is not spoken becomes an allegory for everything under the sign of the

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aesthetic (the ineffable). Lawler’s work is one of the most daunting dossiers of the knowledge of art, but her pictures deny stabilization of either the political or the aesthetic, using both as passports. Its aesthetic properties and only their speakable operations become an allegory for any politic; much remains beyond knowledge, misfitting. Double agent border crossing.”


The other anthology, *Exhibition*, an edited anthology published by Whitechapel Gallery London in 2014 is a collection of essays focussing on postmodernist debates of individual work of art and the exhibition a the prime cultural carrier of contemporaneity. Edited by Lucy Steeds, *Exhibition* examines the rise of the curator as an influential force in the contemporary art world and addresses artists in their crucial questioning and shaping of “exhibition as phenomenon.”

The interview between Louise Lawler and Douglas Crimp, “Prominence Given, Authority

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106 Ibid.
"Taken," is republished here and positions them both within postmodernism.

And lastly, in 2013 an exhibition of Lawler’s Adjusted project was held in Cologne, Germany. The authors of the essays in the exhibition catalog explore both Lawler’s creative practice and the mediums in which she has worked. While all three essays in the book position Lawler within institutional critique, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh — who wrote the very first article on Louise Lawler that I examined at the beginning of this review — investigates Lawler’s selection of the photographic medium as her method of visual communication. In his essay “Louise Lawler: Memory Images of Art Under Spectacle,” Buchloh revisits Lawler’s Tremaine Pictures in an effort to investigate how photography works differently within private versus public spaces. He captures the duality of Lawler’s work in that it functions as both document and allegory, but he still fails to see how she uses the very duality of photography to make her layered commentary, within which she embeds a feminist critique of the systems of patriarchy.

The amount of scholarship on Louise Lawler is plentiful and growing rapidly. As art historians, critic, artists, and curators continue to seek her work and gain greater understandings of how and why it remains relevant, the variety of interpretations of Lawler’s work will continue to expand. Most commonly grouped with artists such as Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren whose work critiques the systems and practices of institutions of art, it is primarily through Lawler’s collaborative work with art historian and critic Douglas Crimp that she has been so strongly aligned with the poststructuralist project of the art journal October, which Crimp co-edited during the 1980s. As this review demonstrated, the overwhelming interpretation of her as an artist predominantly participating in the critique of institutions is beginning to move beyond the umbrella of postmodernism, and the nuances of Lawler’s artistic practice are now being examined through a greater number of perspectives, including a feminist lens.
Chapter 4

Louise Lawler’s Artistic Practice and Production: Feminist Interruptions

While a smattering of early interpretations of Louise Lawler’s artistic practice recognized a feminist commentary within her work, as the previous chapter revealed she has largely been placed within the postmodern discourse of institutional critique of the 1980s and 1990s. To be clear, it is not my aim to fully refute or deny this interpretation of Lawler’s work. Instead, my goal is to expand upon this interpretation and demonstrate the ways in which Lawler’s work differs from the work of the other institutional critique artists with whom she is commonly associated.

To amplify a feminist interpretation of Lawler’s work, in this chapter I will analyze a selection of her projects and artistic practices to reveal the undercurrents of feminism embedded within. Examining her use of a wide range of mediums, including photography, installation, performance, and text/image constructions, I will begin by looking at how Lawler has employed a disruptive compositional style to not effectively only put patriarchy on display, but also to showcase the overwhelming absence of artworks by female artists within art systems. I will examine how Lawler has co-opted curatorial practices to challenge conventional and dominant systems of display, and how those systems assign cultural or monetary values to art. Throughout my analysis I will demonstrate how Lawler’s complex titles of artworks and her text-infused works have acted as tools of feminist disruption. I will conclude by examining two performance projects Lawler revisited after she first introduced them in the late 1970s. Collectively, my examination will substantiate a feminist interpretation of Lawler’s artistic practice through connections drawn between Lawler’s artistic practice and feminist theory emerging from France during the years in which Lawler produced the bodies of work that remain central to her oeuvre.
Compositional Disruptions: What Lawler Cuts Out of the Frame

One of Lawler’s most well-known photographs is Pollock and Tureen, Arranged by Mr. & Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Connecticut, 1984. (Figure 4) Lawler made the color photograph in the formal dining room of the home of east coast art collectors Emily and Burton Tremaine. Lawler’s introduction to the Tremaines was facilitated by Andrea Miller-Keller, then-curator of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford, Connecticut. In 1984 Miller-Keller organized an exhibition of a portion of the Tremaine’s art collection of twentieth century masters and invited Lawler to create an installation for the museum’s MATRIX program, a series of “innovative, low-budget series of small, one-person exhibitions” designed to bring more contemporary art into the museum.

Unlike an art installation photograph or a published reproduction of the painting that would likely display the entire painting, only a portion of Jackson Pollock’s artwork is made viewable by Lawler’s framing which makes it clear that the soup tureen, not the Pollock painting,

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107 Having begun their collecting in the early 1940s, the Tremaines were known for their support of Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock and pop artists Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein. With wealth gained from operating the family business producing copper base alloys used in the manufacturing of lighting and illumination systems, the Tremaines decorated their New York apartment and Connecticut home with artworks purchased over nearly thirty years of collecting. Comprised of over 400 works by European and American artists, 150 objects from their collection were selected for display in an exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum museum in Hartford, Connecticut in 1984.

108 The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum, founded in 1842, reports itself to be the oldest public art museum in the United States. Its art collection largely focuses upon Italian Baroque, seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, nineteenth-century Impressionism, paintings associated with the Hudson River School, as well as European decorative arts and early American furniture.

is the focal point of her image. By using her composition to edit most of the painting out of the frame, Lawler has shifted attention away from Pollock’s artwork, pointing the viewer to the tureen, a tool of domestic life.

In his 1988 essay “Investigating the Ordinary,” David Joselit examines Lawler’s Tremaine project. He posits that Lawler’s compositional style effectively domesticated the artworks when she photographed them within the residential spaces of the Tremaine’s homes, where they have been “colonized as reassuring decorations.” He continues:

In the home of the late Burton and Emily Tremaine, who were well-known collectors, iconic works of modern art were literally domesticated, installed in ensembles that included television sets, lamps and furniture, as well as decorative objects from earlier periods. The particular embarrassment that these photographs document is not the displacement of great modern objects from the supposedly proper environment of white walls and open spaces, but rather the almost invisible scandal of their easy integration into what appears to be a truly comfortable home.

This domestication of artworks is further found in Lawler’s photograph Livingroom Corner, Arranged by Mr. & Mrs. Burton Tremaine Sr., New York City (Figure 5), and other photographs made for the same project such as Monogram, Bedroom with Fireplace, and Circle, Mantle, Diamond. In

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110 As a photograph, Pollock and Tureen is a near textbook example of the photographic principle Rule of Thirds. The principle, taught in many photography courses, is a compositional technique that divides the frame into thirds, or three distinct bands or registers. It can be used horizontally or vertically. In Lawler’s image, three bands compositionally divide the image on the horizontal axis. Working from the bottom of the frame, the lower band is comprised of what appears to be a side-board atop which sits a decorative soup tureen. Flanked by two smaller pieces of china, both of which only the edges are discernible due to Lawler’s framing which cropped them at the edges, the soup tureen is placed at the center of the composition where it commands attention. Running behind the tureen, a dark yellow wall behind the tureen comprises the middle horizontal band. And lastly, the top third of the photograph is delineated by the lower portion of a drip painting by Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock.


112 Ibid, 150.

113 Ibid, 150.

114 It is significant that Lawler made two versions of this photograph, the second version varying only slightly. Entitled (Stevie Wonder) Livingroom Corner, Arranged by Mr. & Mrs. Burton Tremaine Sr., New York City, the composition of both photographs is identical, but in the second version the television clearly frames musician Stevie Wonder on the screen. Lawler had circulated both images regularly, and both were included in the 2007 re-staging of the 1984 show at the Wadsworth Museum.
Livingroom Corner Lawler captures a living room cluttered with furniture. A faint light filters through partially open white mini-blinds hanging in a window in the far left of the frame, and a lamp atop a console table between the window and a sofa cascades warm light onto a ceramic bust of a female head. Made by pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, the ceramic bust is brightly painted with Lichtenstein’s signature Ben-Day dots. Prominent in the frame is Robert Delaunay’s 1912 circular abstract painting *Premiere Disque*, however Lawler’s composition again denies viewers the fullness of Delaunay’s artwork by not only partially obscuring it behind a large box television but also forcing the painting to compete for attention with a ghostly figure frozen on the television screen.

Throughout her career, scholars have often tended to focus more on how she works as an artist rather than conducting a deeper investigation of the content of her photographs. With close analysis, it becomes clear that Lawler is skillfully applying framing techniques in her images to interrupt interpretations of artworks she has elected to photograph. By using the edge of her photographic frame to effectively “cut” artworks into sections, Lawler parcels artworks into geometric fragments that then perform an indexical function within her frame where they serve as references to the original artwork. Or sometimes, when they are too small or vague for the original artwork to be recognized, these fragments serve only as as in indexical reference to “artwork” in a generic manner. In this manner, Lawler exerts control over the reception of the artworks she photographs, which as I have noted previously are predominantly made by male artists, to effectively disconnect them from their makers. This interruption or reception, I believe, is one layer of Lawler’s feminist activism.

In his essay “The Return of the Real”115 Hal Foster introduces French feminist theorist

Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic concept of “abjection” to examine Lawler’s fragmented appropriation of art made by others. Arguing that Lawler is a poststructuralist artist working to expose systems of patriarchy and question the uniqueness of original artworks, a position he states is “paralleled by the basic position of feminist art, at least in its psychoanalytic guide: that the subject is dictated by the symbolic order.” Foster summarizes Kristeva’s concept of “abject” to be “that which I must get rid of in order to be an I.” He writes:

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116 Born in Bulgaria in 1941 and educated by nuns, Julia Kristeva worked as a journalist before moving to Paris in 1966 to do graduate work with structuralist theorists Lucien Goldmann and Roland Barthes. After earning her first doctorate in French literature, she began her second in psychoanalytic training. Kristeva’s writing is an intersection between philosophy, psychoanalysis, and linguistics, in which she examines cultural and literary theory. One of Kristeva’s most influential contributions to philosophy is her call for a new discourse of Maternity. Kristeva theorized the female body as a place in which identities of woman and maternal coexist but lack definitive understanding. She has asked, “If, in speaking of a woman, it is impossible to say what she is — for to do so would risk abolishing her difference — might matters not stand differently with respect to the mother, motherhood being the sole function of the “other sex” to which we confidently attribute difference?” Kristeva unraveled the complex influence of Christianity upon the symbolic melding of the maternal with the feminine. As a means of disrupting the established translations of the linguistics of the Bible, Kristeva explored the historical polarity of Woman as a concept found in the representations of Mary and Eve. By first calling into question the translation of the term “virgin” and its application to Mary, Kristeva argued that the “epithet “virgin” applied to Mary” was an erroneous substitution of the Greek word parthenos, which denotes a physical or psychological virginity, for the Semitic word that denotes the social-legal status of an unmarried girl. Kristeva argues, “Western Christendom orchestrated this “error of translation” by projecting its own fantasies on it, thereby producing one of the most potent imaginary constructs known to any civilization.” (Susan Rubin Suleiman, The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986), 101.)

117 Foster is referring to French philosopher Jacques Lacan’s concept of the Symbolic Order. In the 1960s Lacan revolutionized psychoanalysis with his reinterpretation of Freud and provided feminist theorists with a platform to further investigate the varied ways in which Woman is crafted as “Other.” At the center of Lacan’s theory — a blend of linguistics, semiotics and structuralism — is the idea that the unconscious is structured much like language. Rooted in Freud’s theory for the formation of the ego, Lacan believed that the realization of self is acquired as one moves from infancy into the Symbolic Order which is where language is gained as humans become speaking subjects. Rooted within the logical construction of binary oppositions, language is utilized to establish identity by differentiating oneself from all others, primarily by distinguishing what one is not. The not is primarily determined by the separation of the child from the mother, resulting in the mother, the women, becoming Other. For Lacan, the rules that govern the use of language were centered within Freud’s notion of the Oedipus complex, which is governed by the power infused upon the phallus and man’s subsequent fear of castration and resultant loss of power. Lacan referred to this locus of power as the “The Law of the Father” and concluded that women, as they have no phallus and therefore no power, lie outside of language and have no place within power structures built upon language. It is this theorization of women and language that becomes a platform utilized by feminist theorists to unveil and unravel the phallocentric nature of culture and society as crafted through language. Language will become the primary strategic tool of analysis with which women will establish the female body as a site of pain, and pleasure.

118 The term abjection refers to the state of being cast off or rejected. Kristeva has used it as a post-structuralist tool to investigate how philosophy, language, and culture has abjected, or rejected, women. Her interpretation of abjection is that of the subjective horror individuals experience when confronted with a breakdown in the boundaries between the “self” and “other.” Kristeva claims that within the boundaries of what one defines as “subject” or “object” resides aspects that can be categorized as a part of oneself or one’s identity that has since been rejected, or the abject.
The abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as the temporal passage between the maternal body...and the paternal law. Both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which subject-hood is troubled, “where meaning collapses”; hence its attraction for avant-garde artists who want to disturb these orderings of subject and society alike.\textsuperscript{119}

He further argues that abjection allows for artists “to rethink transgressions not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde in the symbolic order but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde within the order.”\textsuperscript{120}

This is central to Lawler’s project. Working from within the Symbolic Order, i.e., the systems of power in which artistic identity and import are created, Lawler works to expose the patriarchal structures upon which museums, galleries, and the art market are built. Placing patriarchy on display through her controlled compositions, Lawler’s use of fragmentation juxtaposes artworks to effectively disrupt the subject-hood of artworks as symbols of a heroic male artists. Moreover, Lawler’s compositions collapse any meaning that would ordinarily be produced through attribution of the author as assigned in the symbolic order of museums and institutions of art.

**Feminist Performance: Invisible Women**

At the beginning of her career, before photography had solidified as her primary medium, Lawler experimented with a wide variety of mediums including audio performance. Two performance pieces are of note — *Birdcalls* and *A Picture Will Be Shown Without the Picture.* First staged in the 1970s, Lawler re-staged both performances in the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1972 Lawler recorded *Birdcalls*, a nearly seven minute vocal performance piece in

\textsuperscript{119} Foster, *Return of the Real*, 153.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 157.
which she stretched her voice into screech-like staccato sounds made from the names of twenty-nine contemporary male artists such as Donald Judd, Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Gerhard Richter, and Hans Haacke. Made as a response to a juried group exhibition in 1972 that Lawler was hired to assist with which no women artists were accepted, Lawler fragmented the syllables of each artist’s name into warbled chirps. The result is a series of caw-like sounds such as “Rick-tür, Riiik-tuuur”\(^{121}\) and “Art, Art, Aaaaaartshwagger.”\(^{122}\) The performance, which at first is hard to identify as human-made, fluctuates between being amusing, haunting, and annoying. A poster-like artwork designed to accompany the performance piece (Figure 6) lists first and last names of the twenty-nine artists in green or red type. The red type visually references the names, or parts of names, that Lawler adapted into her performance piece. At very end of the list, centered and printed in all capitals, Lawler placed her name along with the title. The line reads, “Birdcalls by Louise Lawler.”

Lawler re-staged and re-recorded *Birdcalls* to add more names of male artists in the early 1980s. She played the newer audio performance piece at regular intervals during her 1984 show *Home/Museum - Arranged for Living and Viewing* at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Connecticut, discussed above. The feminist statement within *Birdcalls* echoes Lawler’s fragmented compositional aesthetic. In her act of sub-dividing the names of the twenty-nine male artists into syllables which are then stretched into unidentifiable chirps, Lawler yet again interrupted and made unavailable a referent reading of the privileged male artists while also bringing attention to the absence of women artists.

The second performance piece I will address is *A Picture Will Be Shown Without the Picture*

\(^{121}\) Gerhard Richter.

\(^{122}\) Richard Artschwager.
that was first performed in Santa Monica, California in 1979, and re-staged a few years later in New York in 1984. In this piece, Lawler continues to bring attention to women, specifically to the invisibility of women in the arts. At the Aero Theater, a small 1930s era art-deco cinema house, Lawler displayed the 1961 classic film *The Misfits* starring Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, and Montgomery Clift. The last movie made by most of the leading stars, Lawler disrupted the experience of viewing the movie by only playing the audio track for the movie. The visual part of the film was not shown.

Several critics and scholars have written about this piece, largely situating it within Laura Mulvey’s important 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” as a feminist interruption of the pleasure of the male gaze on a female figure. However, I argue that Lawler is making an additional statement, one she has made consistently throughout her career that speaks to the invisibility of women in the arts. By denying the audience the physical viewing of the film, Lawler made Monroe invisible to the audience. Hearing Monroe’s voice, viewers could likely conjure up a memory of her face, one of the most famous actresses in history and one whose likeness has been reproduced and appropriated by pop culture and artists such as Andy Warhol, but that vision would slip away as the plot of the movie moved on. If Lawler had desired to make a statement solely about the pleasure of the male gaze, she could have opted to play the audio track of the movie while displaying a photograph of Monroe for the entirety of the movie. Instead, Lawler removed Monroe, and the entire film, from view. Through this action, Lawler not only placed the invisibility of women on display, but also balanced the playing field, if you will. She made the male actors, filmmakers, screenwriter, and director invisible as well.

**Commodification: Exchange Value**

One consistent interpretation of Lawler’s practice has connected her to the postmodern
poststructuralist agenda of the 1980s and 1990s of addressing the rapid rise of the art market as a site of economic power. As record prices for art increasingly shifted the cultural value of artworks, and by default the artists who made them, into numerical values, the social or cultural value of art objects has become largely eclipsed by its monetary value. As outlined in the first chapter, women artists have largely been denied access to the art market and art made by women seldom sells for amounts on par with works made by male artists. With these facts in mind, it could be argued that any critique of the art market could inherently be, on some level, a feminist critique. To further my project of examining Lawler’s oeuvre to unveil her feminist statements, I turn now to a series of photographs Lawler made at art auction houses.

A small monograph published in 1994, *Louise Lawler: For Sale*,\(^1\) is a collection of images in which Lawler provides a rare behind-the-scenes glimpse of an art auction as objects are readied for sale. Made inside the Christie’s and Sotheby’s auction houses in New York, Lawler photographed artworks by Edward Ruscha, Roy Lichtenstein, Allan McCollum, Jasper Johns, Jackson Pollock,\(^2\) Andy Warhol and others. In some of her images she compositionally fragmented the artworks, and in others she photographed the artwork in full against the nondescript and banal carpeted walls upon which they were hung. The two photographs of Lawler’s that I examine here are *Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?* and its twin *Does Marilyn Monroe Make You Cry?* (Figures 7 and 8).

Much like her use of the near identical *Livingroom Corner* photographs as discussed above, in this instance Lawler has used what is ostensibly the exact same negative to create two identical

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\(^1\) Many of the artworks for sale were objects from the Tremaine Collection, which Lawler had photographed previously as discussed above. The items were placed on auction at New York auction houses Christie’s and Sotheby’s. The book published a collection of images Lawler made of the artworks inside the Tremaine’s home, juxtaposed against the same artwork as it was hung for auction.

\(^2\) Included in the auction is the Jackson Pollock painting in Lawler’s *Pollock and Tureen*. Lawler photographed it against the carpeted wall and titled the image *Lot Number 22*.
artworks. Lawler differentiated the images slightly through titles that mirror each other. In both photographs, *Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?* and *Does Marilyn Monroe Make You Cry?*, Warhol’s distinctive appropriation of the likeness of screen actress Marilyn Monroe is on display. In Lawler’s photographs, the round silkscreened golden cameo-like portrait *Round Marilyn*, appears to float against a wall covered in golden light-brown carpeting. Anchored visually by the shocking white of a basic auction label that details the object’s maker, materials, and six-figure price tag, Lawler’s photographs are undoubtedly placing on view the systems that assign economic value to an artwork. In this action, Lawler is performing a much more complex commentary related to feminist theory.

The ideas of French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray are helpful to more deeply analyze the layers of feminist critique within Lawler’s use of twin or mirror images. Much of Irigaray’s work dissects patriarchal market systems to reveal how objects, specifically women as Irigaray argues, are reduced to an exchange value upon which societies and cultures are largely based. Working largely from within Marxist theory related to the economic effects of divisions of social classes, Irigaray has employed a style of mimetic writing to deconstruct the theories of dominant male philosophers and social theorists: Karl Marx, Jacques Lacan, and Sigmund Freud in particular. Her practice of appropriating the words of men is well demonstrated in her essay “Questions, I,” in which Irigaray mimics Marx, sometimes quoting entire passages of Marx’s

125 Luce Irigaray holds numerous advanced degrees including doctorates in philosophy, psychoanalysis and literature. She moved Paris to study psychology in 1959, earning first a master’s degree in psychology in 1961, then another in psychopathology in 1962. In 1964, Irigaray began work on two doctorates, the second of which resulted in her dissertation, *Speculum de l’autre femme*. Although she received high honors for the progressive nature of the ideas presented in her dissertation, Irigaray was initially blackballed from teaching philosophy at most Parisian universities because her conclusions were effectively a monumental challenge to the canon of philosophical writings. Through close readings of the works of Plato, Aristotle, Poltinus, Freud, and Lacan, Irigaray concluded that the core of historical philosophical writings was the primary locus of the historic distortion of the image of woman as imperfect, lacking, or hysterical object.

writings. In these long appropriated passages, Irigaray substitutes the terms “feminine,” “woman,” and “female” in the places Marx originally used terms such as “capitalism” or “commodity.” Irigaray used this technique to address how capitalistic systems effectively transform women into “objects” which have a quantifiable market value, either as laborers or as mothers who produce future laborers.

By focusing on Warhol’s appropriated image of Marilyn Monroe and its auction price tag, Lawler’s twin photographs *Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?* and *Does Marilyn Monroe Make You Cry?* expose the system that assigns monetary values of exchange to art, and representations of women in visual culture. In a sense, Lawler not only re-appropriated Monroe’s likeness and disrupted Warhol’s commodification of her as icon of popular culture, but Lawler also focused attention onto a deeper layer of women’s commodification present within popular culture, specifically Hollywood where Monroe and other young women are crafted into objects of visual consumption.

This can be seen further in the few photographs Lawler has made of artworks by her peer Cindy Sherman. One of the most celebrated female artists working today, Sherman’s practice is built upon elaborately staged scenes in which she costumes herself in a variety of representations of women and femininity which she appropriates from historic or popular visual culture. In an early body work which is also one of her most famous, “Untitled Film Stills,” Sherman mimicked Hollywood movie promotional photographs, effectively exposing the fictions of “woman” that are crafted within popular culture.

Next, to further examine the mirrored titles Lawler assigned to these identical photographs, I will analyze the attention Irigaray has devoted to words and language. Irigaray employed language as a feminist tool of disruption to force a recognition of the fallibility of an
omnipresent philosophic assumption that language is universal. In her controversial
dissertation\textsuperscript{127} entitled \textit{Speculum de l’autre femme} in which Irigaray expanded on the theoretical
concept of the Mirror Stage as expressed first by Sigmund Freud and later Jacques Lacan,
Irigaray focused upon the semiotic value of language. In her selection of the term “speculum”
Irigaray intentionally made clear connections to the Latin term \textit{speculum mundi}, which translates as
“mirror,” to make literal and metaphorical connections between Freud’s theoretical concept of
the “mirror stage” and the name given to the device used by gynecologists to reveal the sex of a
woman during examinations. Irigaray aimed to demonstrate how language, being a creation of
men, is a mirror that reflects the male lived experience but not the female.\textsuperscript{128}

When Lawler used the same negative to create two identical artworks, giving them titles
that mirrored the other but redirected the focus to the different genders of Andy Warhol and
Marilyn Monroe, she put into practice Irigaray’s argument that language, as an invention of men

\textsuperscript{127} Irigaray made a scandalous argument that if philosophy had both introduced and established the repression of sexual difference of woman, philosophy was therefore inherently flawed as an ethical practice. Although Irigaray participated in the feminist movement in Paris in the 1970s, she never fully aligned herself with either leading feminist group in France, the MLF or Psyche et Po. Despite initially being denied teaching positions, Irigaray eventually did gain an academic position in Paris and made many important contributions that further erode the power of philosophical language, exposing what she sees as a fundamental rejection and ignorance of the female body and lived experience within male-written philosophy.

\textsuperscript{128} Irigaray believed that the creation of sexual difference was established in ancient biblical and philosophical texts. For her, sexual difference was rooted in language and rhetoric of philosophy. Arguing that philosophical language privileged the dominance of the male (i.e. the subject of language) through a fundamental matricide that distorted female sexuality (i.e. the object to be dominated by the subject’s use of language). Irigaray’s work to reclaim female sexual difference and sexual pleasure can be found in one of her most influential essays, “The Sex Which is Not One.” Arguing that female sexuality has been conceptualized only as a binary to male sexuality, she writes about lack of language to express feminine sexuality outside of male sexuality. “I am a woman. I am a being sexualized as feminine. I am sexualized female. The motivation of my work lies in the impossibility of articulating such a statement; in the fact that it utterance is in some way senseless, inappropriate, indecent. Either because \textit{woman} is never the attribute of the verbs \textit{to be} nor \textit{sexualized female} a quality of being, or because \textit{I am sexualized} excludes the feminine gender.” For Irigaray, language has removed her sex, allowing her to only be an object of sex, but never a subject of sex. Irigaray connects this systemic objectification of women with Marxist commodity in her statement, “For woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity. As such, she remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established, in terms of the standard of their work and of their need/desire, by “subjects”: workers, merchants, consumers. Women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for the possession of mother earth.”
and a tool of patriarchy, has played a significant role in the crafting of sexual difference.\textsuperscript{129} By making the artworks identical, Lawler used duplication as a tool of interruption to focuses attention upon the only difference between the artworks: the titles.

**Co-Opting Curatorial Practices**

Beginning with her first exhibition at Artists Space gallery in 1978, Lawler’s exhibition practice has consistently investigated and experimented with a range of curatorial practices. From her first one-woman-show, *An Arrangement of Pictures* at Metro Pictures in 1982, which was closely followed by *Home/Museum - Arranged for Living and Viewing*,\textsuperscript{130} her tandem installation at the Wadsworth Museum in 1984 of images she made of the Tremaine Collection, to her most recent project entitled *No Drones*,\textsuperscript{131} Lawler has demonstrated a keen interest in disrupting conventional systems of display. One exhibition worthy of analysis is her participation in a show entitled “An


\textsuperscript{130}A clear continuation of her *Arrangement of Pictures* exhibit two years prior, *Home/Museum* was comprised of four different groupings and display tactics on each of the four walls of Lawler’s exhibition. Firstly, five photographs Lawler made of the Tremaine collection were framed and displayed together as a piece entitled An arrangement of black and white and color photographs taken by Louise Lawler at the Connecticut and New York residences of Mr. And Mrs. Tremaine, 1984 and hung on a white wall and lit with track lighting on the ceiling. On the wall to the right of her Tremaine photographs, Lawler crafted an arrangement of objects from the museum’s permanent collection. While the three other walls of the room are painted the standard “museum white,” this wall is a warm buttery yellow that is accented by a tall 18\textsuperscript{th} century grandfather clock and two Dutch paintings from the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. The grouping, entitled *A selection of objects from the collections of the Wadsworth Atheneum, Sol Lewitt, and Louise Lawler, 1984*, is highly reminiscent of the way artworks might be arranged for display within a private home but this particular reading of the grouping is disrupted by Lawer’s inclusion of a band of wall text placed horizontally approximately three feet above the floor. Reading, “One standard Air Force dye marker thrown into the sea.” The disjointed and illogical text did not immediately connect to any other object within the grouping. The text was placed nearly level with and to the right of a photograph titled *Device Circle (Corner Cabinet Arranged by Mr. & Mrs. Burton Tremaine Sr., Connecticut).* Made by Lawler in the formal dining room of the Tremaine’s Connecticut home, the photograph is a poorly lit and slightly out of focus snapshot-like image with a difficult to read jumbled composition. The painting captured within Lawler’s photograph, *Device Circle* by Jasper Johns, is bisected by the light coming from a table-top can lamp, competes for the viewer’s attention which is kept busy trying to discern the objects on display in the cabinet to the right.

\textsuperscript{131}*No Drones* is Lawler’s most recent body of work. It includes a number of her more recent photographs made in galleries, as well as black-and-white line drawings made from some of her more famous photographs such as *Pollock and Tureen*. The line drawings are printed on vinyl and are attached directly to the wall in the gallery or museum the work is show within.
Enlargement of Attention” at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in the spring of 1990.

The MFA had invited Lawler to be the second contemporary artist to participate in the museum’s “Connections” series in which artists selected art objects from the museum’s permanent collection to be displayed alongside the artists’s own works. Aiming to connect contemporary artistic production to the wider history of art, Lawler was a logical selection for the series. In this show, Lawler performed a variety of disruptions to normative exhibition styles, nearly all of them feminist in nature.

When museum visitors entered the museum’s Foster Gallery, the show’s shocking subtitle was quickly evident. Printed largely, along with the title, on a wall painted Grecian Pink was the sentence “No one between the ages of 21 and 35 is allowed.” While the declaration was not to be taken literally, it effectively brought to the forefront the ways in which the institutional power of museums can declare whom is given access to art. Against that pink wall Lawler placed an antique chinoiserie cabinet which displayed the Alden Collection of Thimbles, one of the largest collection of thimbles made by the Messein porcelain manufacturer in France. After decades in the MFA’s permanent collection, this was the first time the collection was exhibited as a whole.132 Manufactured primarily as collectible objects, rather than for use in women’s hand-crafts, the highly decorative thimbles had a variety of embellishments ranging from miniature paintings of birds to landscapes. Others were rimmed in gilt.

On the wall next to the cabinet hung framed black-and-white photographs made by Lawler. With previous access to the thimbles, Lawler had selected a few to photograph individually against a nondescript white backdrop. On some, but not all, of her photographs she printed phrases or fragments of text such as “Loot,” “Just Desserts,” and “For some reason or

another, I am attracted to some of them,” on the mat (Figures 9-11). Also hanging on the wall were photographs Lawler had made at another prominent Boston art museum, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, where Lawler photographed a vignette of paintings centered around a painting of Christ. This photograph included the paraphenalia that surrounded the painting, bringing attention to the modern lighting equipment used to illuminate the painting and a vase of fake violet flowers secured nearby with plastic brackets.

On another wall, hung salon-style in crowded clusters, were Lawler’s selection of paintings from the John Taylor Spaulding collection. A Brahmin collector, Spaulding favored still-life paintings of flowers and fruits and had bequeathed his substantial collection to the MFA. Like the Alden thimble collection, Spaulding’s collection had rarely, if ever, been displayed in its entirety. Two other Lawler works rounded out her show, including her photograph *Pollock & Tureen*, which I discussed earlier, and an installation of clear glass drinking glasses etched with the words “WHO SHOWS,” “WHO SAYS,” and “WHO COUNTS,” which I will discuss more in a moment.

Lawler’s cleverly built exhibition put much more on display than a collection of art objects. In her selection of decorative thimbles, drinking glasses, antique curio cabinet, and still-life paintings featuring flowers and fruits — objects substantially endowed with iconic feminine meaning — Lawler placed on display items that slyly call attention to how systems of patriarchy resulted in the significant absence, or outright rejection, of women artists and women’s crafts as worthy of display within museums as purveyors of the history of art. Accented by the soft pastel pink paint on the wall, the chinoiserie cabinet invited a connection to period rooms prevalent in museums which recreated the best examples of the decorative arts of interior and furniture design amongst the elite social classes. Often the domain of women, interior fashions were
regularly augmented by women’s embroidery or other sewing arts for which thimbles were a necessary tool. Further still, the cluttered wall of still-life paintings is a sly reference to the one genre of painting women consistently had access to practice throughout history. As notes by early feminist art historians, female artists were historically given narrow latitudes in the application of their skills. The few female artists who gained entrance to the selective art academies where they were to receive rigorous artistic training, were largely denied the opportunity to study the nude human figure due to concerns of propriety. Unable to study the human form, upon which portraiture and the more popular genre of history painting relied upon, these genres of painting were not widely available to women artists working between the Renaissance and the later years of the nineteenth century. However, the painting of still-lives of flowers or fruits, widely considered a lesser art form, was considered a socially acceptable subject for women to paint.

Lawler’s exhibit “The Enlargement of Attention” is a feminist intervention that not only exemplified arguments made by Nochlin in her essay but also spoke to the difficulty women still experienced in gaining acknowledgment of their historic contributions to the arts. By making a connection between the exhibition’s title and the question-like phrases — “WHO SHOWS,” “WHO SAYS,” and “WHO COUNTS” — etched into the installation of clear glass drinking glasses, Lawler draws attention directly to those who have historically decided whose art is shown within museums and art institutions, and whose is not. In her challenge, Lawler pulled objects from the MFA’s collection that had been deemed not important enough by museum staff to be placed on display. Refusing to comply with the patriarchal systems that have long-excluded women from institutions of art through a devaluation of the art forms allowed to women.

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133 As Linda Nochlin notes, exceptions to this do exist. She writes about a small number of female artists such as Artemesia Gintileschi, Angelica Kaufman, Louise Elisabeth Vigee Le-Brun, and Rosa Bonheur who did paint some portraits.
throughout history by the greater patriarchy present within the history of art, culture, and education, Lawler effectively commandeered the Foster Gallery to reclaim the worthiness of women’s objects as art objects.

**Textual Disruptions**

Throughout her career, Louise Lawler has consistently used text as a tool of disruption. From her text-based artworks to the ambiguous titles she assigns to her works, Lawler’s reliance on words and language as a method to make subversive commentary, interrupt expectation, and highlight gender differences in the art world is a considerable part of her artistic practice. As demonstrated above, Lawler’s use of text in her show at Boston’s MFA show is a form of insurgency that effectively liberates women’s artistic contributions from the constraints placed on them and their historic relegation to the inferior classification of craft not worthy of display.

Lawler’s use of text as a feminist intervention can also be found in the titles she chooses for her images, including *Livingroom Corner, Arranged by Mr. & Mrs. Burton Tremaine Sr., New York City* and other photographs such as *Monogram, Bedroom with Fireplace*, and *Circle, Mantle, Diamond* mentioned earlier in connection with her show at the Wadsworth Museum in 1984. By electing to not name the male artists whose works are framed within her photographs, Lawler denies the artist’s authorship of the artwork and instead transfers attribution to the individuals who purchased and arranged the artworks within their domestic spaces. This is demonstrated well in Lawler’s photograph entitled *Monogram* (Figure 12). In this vertical photograph, Jasper Johns’s artwork *White Flag* hangs in the Tremaine’s New York apartment above a queen-sized bed that is adorned with a white coverlet and decoratively embroidered pillows. The combined whiteness of Johns’s painting and the light beige bedclothes create a monochromatic effect within Lawler’s
photograph. Although the Johns painting is presented full frame above the bed in her photograph, Lawler has yet again shifted the visual focus away from the artwork and onto another object within the image: the monogrammed initials of “ETH” at the center of the coverlet in dark thread. Within this intimate interior domestic space, combined with the monochromatic use of white — often used as a symbol of purity and virginity — ownership of the artwork is offset by Lawler’s composition which transfers the viewer’s attention to the monogram of Emily Tramaine’s initials as if they are the signature of the artwork. Additionally, when we further examine the title Lawler gave to both versions of Livingroom Corner, Arranged by Mr. & Mrs. Burton Tremaine Sr., New York City it becomes clear that she intentionally omitted the individual identity of Emily Tremaine whom both titles refer to formally as “Mrs. Burton Tremaine.” By referencing the age-old practice of women removing their maiden name at marriage and taking the last name of their husband, Lawler134 pointedly subsumes Emily’s identity into that of her husband despite the fact that Emily is widely credited with being equally active in the creation of the collection as her husband.135 By replicating and placing on display the absence of identities, Lawler is effectively making two feminist statements. Firstly, by refusing to name the male artists in the titles of her work, Lawler is arguably denying a glorified or heroized reception of male artists and their artworks. Secondly, by replicating a common museum practice of formally attributing a collection as belonging to “Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine” Lawler is also making a larger statement about the invisibility of women as consumers of art.

When viewed as a feminist intervention, Lawler’s textual disruptions align strongly with

134 Louise Lawler has been married to Benjamin Buchloh, a Marxist art historian and MIT professor, for many years, but has continued to use her maiden name in her professional career.

the French feminist theory of *l’écriture féminine*, or feminine writing,¹³⁶ made popular during the 1980s and 1990s by Cixous,¹³⁷ Irigaray, and Kristeva,¹³⁸ all of whom felt that the study of linguistics could address the ways in which the phallocentric nature of language marginalized women. Cixous’s essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa”¹³⁹ can be considered one of the first calls to action for women to take up writing as a form of feminist insurgency. The essay urges women to write, even if they don’t write well. “Writing is for you, you are for you, your body is yours, take it.”¹⁴⁰ Cixous, along with Irigaray and Kristeva, believed that through the act of writing and speaking “by” and “of” themselves, women could disrupt the greater discourse from which they had been historically denied. Cixous writes: “She must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history.” Through writing and

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¹³⁶ *l’écriture féminine* is a strategy of writing and reading centered up women actively writing themselves into history as a revisionist tool.

¹³⁷ Born in Algeria in 1937, Cixous moved to Paris in 1955 to study English literature. In 1968 — the year of social student unrest — she received her doctorate in literature from the Sorbonne in 1968 with a dissertation thesis on the work of James Joyce. That same year Cixous helped to found an experimental university which eventually became the University of Paris VIII, Vincennes. Six years later, she designed a doctorate program in women’s studies at the university, and also founded the *Centre de Recherches en Études Féminines* to promote the study of issues related to women and gender. A prolific writer, Cixous has published across the nearly every genre of literature, mythology, philosophy, poetry, and theater. She has been connected to Antoinette Fouque, the founder of *Psyche et Po*, since the 1960s. As founder of the publishing house *des femmes*, Fouque has been an important figure in Cixous’s literary career and published her work regularly. Interestingly, after a brief affiliation with *Psyche et Po* in the 1970s, Cixous has consistently refused to label herself as a feminist. For her, feminism’s alignment with political reformation centered upon gender equality doesn’t fit well with her belief that it is necessary not only to affirm sexual difference but to embrace it, primarily through the language.

¹³⁸ Originally published in the 1977 winter edition of the French feminist magazine *Tel Quel*, Kristeva’s essay pivotal “Stabat Mater” is a unique and somewhat jarring combination of theoretical writing accented with a more poetic and mystical style of writing. At time visually difficult to follow, the disjointed layout of the text exemplifies her desire to use writing as a form feminist disruption of patriarchal language structures. Sporadically broken into two competing columns, each column provides different layers of the same story. The primary narrative is offers a theoretical and philosophical argument and is presented in traditional formatting. The secondary column — written in first person and printed in bolded font — is inserted in an apparent random manner, offering a mystical and introspective companion to that is written in first person.


claiming language, woman will return herself to the individual body, and by seizing upon her ability to speak, Woman will break the female from the universal woman to become individual women. “Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible,” Cixous argues.

My objective in this chapter has been to examine a specific selection of Lawler’s creative production and her artistic practice. I have revealed cleverly hidden feminist commentaries embedded within Lawler’s oeuvre. These feminist statements set Lawler apart from other institutional critique artists and demonstrate that while she is making critical observations about the systems and institutions of art, she is making them largely from a feminist perspective. My goal has been to bring attention to her commentary and connect it to the broader philosophies of feminism that were in circulation during the latter decades of the twentieth century. Her insistence on interrupting normative artistic practices and the expected experience of museum and art gallery visitors has brought attention to the absence of art made by women within those spaces.

141 For Cixous, sexual difference is a space where celebration, curiosity, and a space in which both woman and man may desire each other sexual difference is a space of endless possibilities. Cixous’s deconstruction of western metaphysics was explored in her 1975 book The Newly Born Woman, which she co-authored with Catherine Clement. The primary argument of the book is that speech, considered to be masculine, is privileged over writing, which is considered feminine. Cixous contests the assumptions of engendered forms of language, primarily in written form. For her, writing is bisexual, a term she uses to neutralize the engendering of language. Cixous’s theory centers upon the “poetics of sexual difference.” It is perhaps within Cixous that the call for this new, different language to express women’s desire was founded. Throughout her career Cixous has called upon women to reclaim language as a method of reclaim their bodies Cixous writes: “Write your self. Your body must be heard.” By taking control of words, women could lead an evolution of language in which female sexuality is represented whole and free, no longer dependent upon male sexuality for its expression.

142 Kolmar, Feminist Theory: A Reader, 214.

143 Kolmar, Feminist Theory: A Reader, 216.
Conclusion: The Feminist Art Practice of Louise Lawler

My goal in this chapter has been to expand upon the interpretation of Louise Lawler as a feminist artist. Through a careful analysis of both Lawler’s artistic practice and the works she has produced, I have demonstrated the ways in which Lawler’s work differs from the work of the other institutional critique artists. From her unique compositional style that placed patriarchy on display and slyly reveals the absence of artworks by female artists to her strategies that co-opt language and curatorial practices to challenge conventional and dominant systems of display, Lawler’s work clearly has a strong feminist subtext she has embedded within her work. Her methods of feminist disruption are complex, layered, and often subtle. The feminist intervention of her work is that for those who look long enough, or examine her work with a critical eye, the layered statements woven into Lawler’s work begin to emerge from the invisible structures of patriarchy that institutions of art have been crafted upon.

Over the course of her career, Lawler’s fascination with the spaces and systems in which artworks are assigned cultural, political, and economic values has remained evident. For Lawler, it is not only about the artworks and the spaces she has elected to photograph. It is also about how, by whom and for whom artworks are situated for viewing and consumption. The nature of her work in these areas, and the very little she has offered on her intentions, has allowed a range of interpretations to develop. As the literature review revealed, while a smattering of essays did see the larger feminist statement embedded in Lawler’s work, scholarship on her has been largely situated within the discourse of institutional critique.

I now return to where my project began: the 2004 conversation between Andrea Fraser and George Baker in which they discuss the work of Louise Lawler. As she reflected on her role in the way Lawler’s work is understood, Fraser surmised that she may have inadvertently or
unduly influenced the placement of Lawler within institutional discourse through her 1985 article “In and Out of Place.” She remarked to Baker, “There still isn’t much written on Louise’s work, and much of what has been written strikes me a problematic. I was involved in identifying her work as institutional critique. Since then, that framework seems to have been laid out in an increasingly literal and reductive way, as if her strategies developed as a programmatic, even instrumental, response to a particular agenda. I don’t think that’s the case at all,” Fraser is quoted. “However, in retrospect, it may be that I played a central role in the formation of that programmatic reading.”

In my examination I have demonstrated that Lawler’s work differentiates itself from that of other institutional critique artists. Without discounting the manner in which Lawler’s work has in fact served as an institutional critique, I have worked to reveal the feminist subtext she has consistently embedded in her artwork and her artistic practice. As feminism evolved during the 1970s and 1980s it was informed by theoretical and philosophical investigations that worked to make visible the ways in which social institutions shape cultural notions of sex, sexuality, and gender roles. Lawler’s does precisely that. She make visible the invisible. She has excelled at blurring the lines between definition, between the spaces where art is displayed, and even between artworks themselves. Her work reveals the multiplicity of definitions, identities, and interpretations that are constantly in flux within art. To this effect, while Lawler is included in a variety of groupings of artists, she is most often in a category unto herself.

The structures that Louise Lawler has focused her camera upon throughout her career have not shed their patriarchy, nor have women artists achieved parity in the systems of art. As this study has demonstrated, throughout her career Lawler has worked to disrupt the patriarchy

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144 Ibid, 70.
of the art world by drawing attention to philosophies of display and exhibition. She has shown us what is not on display within art systems by consistently showing us what is on display. She has refused to comply with systems or organization, crafting textual interventions that disrupt the linguistics of wall labels and titles of artworks. She has fragmented and dislocated the authorship of artists to their works. And she has appropriated curatorial practices to claim both the physical spaces of display and gain control of what objects are deemed valuable enough to be shown there. As her work continues to become increasingly recognized and respected through a growing number of retrospective shows and publications of her work, the relevance of Lawler’s works will remain constant.
Illustrations

Figure 1: Sign placed by feminist art group Guerrilla Girls in front of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, 1989.

Figure 2: Installation shot of Louise Lawler’s group show at Artist’s Space Gallery from September 23 through October 28, 1978 that shows Lawler’s appropriation of a 1868 Henry Stull painting displayed with two theatrical spotlights directed at viewer, rather than painting.
Figure 3: Logo designed by Louise Lawler for the 1978 show at Artist’s Space Gallery.

© Louise Lawler, 1978

Figure 4: Louise Lawler
Pollock and Tureen, 1984
Cibachrome print

© Louise Lawler, 1984
Figure 5: Louise Lawler
Livingroom Corner, Arranged by Mr. & Mrs. Burton Tremaine Sr., New York City, 1984
Cibachrome print

Figure 6: Louise Lawler
Birdcalls, 1984
Poster
Figure 7 - 8: Louise Lawler
*Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?* and *Does Marilyn Monroe Make You Cry?*, 1988
Cibachrome print

© Louise Lawler, 1988
Figure 9 - 11: Louise Lawler  
*Untitled (Loot)*, 1991  
Gelatin Silver print with mat

© Louise Lawler, 1991

Louise Lawler  
*Untitled (For some reason or another, I am attracted to some of them)*, 1991  
Gelatin Silver print with mat

© Louise Lawler, 1991

Louise Lawler  
*Untitled (Just Desserts)*, 1991  
Gelatin Silver print with mat

© Louise Lawler, 1991
Figure 12: Louise Lawler
*Monogram*, 1984
Cibachrome print

© Louise Lawler, 1984

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