

METRO PICTURES

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Louise Lawler, *Why Pictures Now*, 1981, gelatin silver print, 3 x 6".

CLOSE-UP

Indirect Answers

DOUGLAS CRIMP ON LOUISE LAWLER'S *WHY PICTURES NOW*, 1981

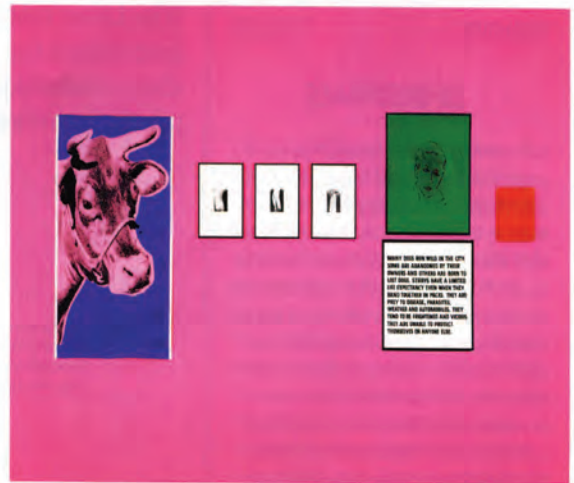
IN 1981, Louise Lawler took a photograph of a matchbook propped in a common restaurant ashtray—a photograph that appears to ask the question printed on the matchbook's cover: WHY PICTURES NOW. Nearly twenty years later, the photograph appeared as the final reproduction in Lawler's book of photographs *An Arrangement of Pictures* (Assouline, 2000). There is little doubt that Lawler thought the question she had asked in 1981 needed to be asked again. *Why Pictures Now* poses its question not least to itself. It asks, in effect, "Why does this work take the form of a picture?" And: "Why am I—Louise Lawler—making pictures now?"

How does the photograph pose the question to itself, apart from the simple fact that it is a picture? The answer lies in the object photographed, the printed matchbook. Anyone familiar with Lawler's practice knows of her affinity for these throwaway objects. She has printed on matchbooks such statements as A PICTURE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR ANYTHING and WHENEVER I HEAR THE WORD CULTURE I TAKE OUT MY CHECKBOOK—JACK PALANCE. The latter comes from Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt*, in which the crass American producer played by Palance paraphrases the infamous threat; Lawler attributes the line to the actor, rather than the character he plays or the film's director, to further confound our understanding of the quotation's authorship.

More throwaway gestures: For the first group exhibition in which she was included, at Artists Space in 1978, Lawler designed a logo for the gallery and had it printed on the cover of the catalogue. For the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's "Museum as Muse" exhibition in 1999, she had cocktail napkins printed with a number of phrases taken from curator Kynaston McShine's organizational rubrics (THE MUSEUM IN USE; THE PERSONAL MUSEUM), to which Lawler added a few of her own (ART FOR MUSEUMS; CEREAL FOR BREAKFAST). My favorite of these ephemeral works dates, like *Why Pictures Now*, from 1981. It consists of an invitation that Lawler sent to an art-world mailing list inviting recipients to see George Balanchine's one-act *Swan Lake* at Lincoln Center. The final line on the card reads TICKETS TO BE PURCHASED AT THE BOX OFFICE.

Certainly one reason Lawler asked herself "Why pictures now?" in 1981 was that, before making the photograph of the matchbook propped in the ashtray, her work did not involve making pictures, but rather consisted solely of wry interventions of the type listed above, each subtly drawing attention to art's institutional conditions of visibility, circulation, and valuation. Yet her most visible work since 1981 has consisted of the sort of photographs reproduced in the 2000 monograph. Thus in its new context the

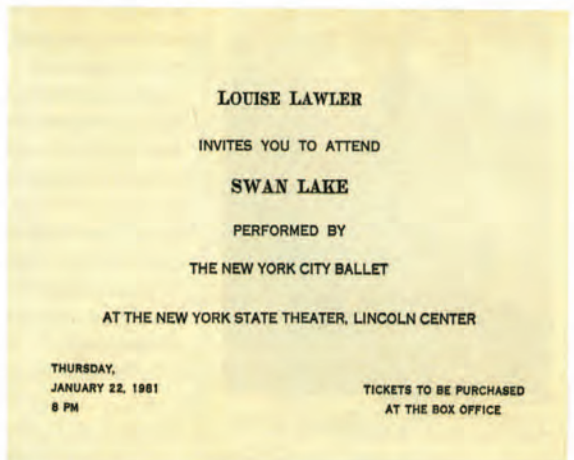
Louise Lawler, (*Andy Warhol and Other Artists*) *Tulp*, 1982. Cibachrome, 38 1/2 x 60 1/4".



Louise Lawler, (*Jenny Holzer and Other Artists*) *Kelly Green*, 1982. Cibachrome, 28 1/2 x 37 1/4".



Louise Lawler invitation card, 1981, 3 1/2 x 5 1/4".



What Lawler's photographs have shown is that institutional critique can take the form of a picture.

Invitation card for Louise Lawler's "An Arrangement of Pictures and Photographs of Arrangements," 1982, Metro Pictures, New York.

LOUISE LAWLER WILL PRESENT AN ARRANGEMENT OF PICTURES AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF ARRANGEMENTS FROM 20 NOVEMBER THROUGH 18 DECEMBER 1982 AT METRO PICTURES 169 MERCER STREET, NEW YORK. TELEPHONE: 212/925.8335.

RECEPTION FOR THE ARTIST, SATURDAY, 20 NOVEMBER, FROM SIX TO EIGHT P.M.

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question might be translated as "Why a book of pictures to represent an art practice that is so much more complex than a selection of photographs reproduced in a book can fully convey?"

An Arrangement of Pictures comprises a large selection of Lawler's photographic works, though several photographs might more properly be called installation shots of Lawler's exhibitions. But are these merely installation photographs of Lawler's works, or are they also photographic works by Lawler? This question occurs to me because many of Lawler's works take the form, only very slightly oblique, of the installation shot—the photograph of a work or works of art in situ—though typically her subjects are other artists' works. The obliquity comes when Lawler focuses on a label as much as a painting or when she photographs works exhibited not in a gallery but at an auction preview or on a museum's storage racks. So if Lawler photographs her own work, too, in situ, why should these photographs not also be examples of Lawler's art? The disorientation that I'm suggesting is a quality of Lawler's book is something the artist works toward in every aspect of her practice. So when she reduces her practice to a book of pictures, it is hardly surprising that she includes as the final note the picture that asks, "Why pictures now?" Lawler's is not simply a self-reflexive practice, however. She is not only re-posing the question of 1981 to her own book of pictures in 2000 but also suggesting that the question has reemerged as necessary with regard to the conditions of art practice generally.

But let's return to the original context of Lawler's photograph, which is something I know a thing or two about. In 1977, I was asked by Helene Winer, then the director of Artists Space, to organize an

exhibition of the work of emerging artists. The title I gave to the show was "Pictures," which I explained in a revised version of the catalogue essay published in *October* in 1979:

In choosing the word *pictures* for this show, I hoped to convey not only the work's most salient characteristic—recognizable images—but also and importantly the ambiguities it sustains. As is typical of what has come to be called postmodernism, this new work is not confined to any particular medium; instead, it makes use of photography, film, performance, as well as traditional modes of painting, drawing, and sculpture. *Picture*, used colloquially, is also nonspecific: a picture book might be a book of drawings or photographs, and in common speech a painting, drawing, or print is often called, simply, a picture. Equally important for my purposes, *picture*, in its verb form, can refer to a mental process as well as the production of an aesthetic object.

For reasons that I do not fully understand, this little exhibition became a landmark, made to stand for a complex history of art practices and discourses that emerged in the late 1970s. Terms like *appropriation* and *postmodernism* are associated with this moment, but so too is the reevaluation of photography by the institutions of art, the repercussions of which we continue to experience today.

Not long after the exhibition, Winer, with Janelle Reiring, opened the commercial gallery Metro Pictures in SoHo. Its stable, partially overlapping with the "Pictures" roster, included a number of artists who came to be associated with appropriation and a number who used the medium of photography; Lawler was among them. As she explained the



Louise Lawler, *Bought in Paris, New York, Switzerland or Tokyo, 1987 Stella/Brass, (detail) Les Indes Galantes IV, . . . purchased from a banker, now located on the Blv. Victor Hugo, 1966–86, five Cibachromes, wall text, 2' 4½" x 23' 7".*

situation in the interview I conducted with her for *An Arrangement of Pictures*:

When Metro [Pictures] asked me to do a show in 1982, they already had an image. They represented a group of artists whose work often dealt with issues of appropriation and was often spoken of and written about together. A gallery generates meaning through the type of work they choose to show. I self-consciously made work that “looked like” Metro Pictures. The first thing you saw when you entered my show, *Arrangements of Pictures*, was an arrangement of works the gallery had on hand by “gallery artists” Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, Jack Goldstein, Laurie Simmons, and James Welling. A wall label titled it “Arranged by Louise Lawler.” It was for sale as a work with a price determined by adding up the prices of the individual pieces, plus a percentage for me. I went to the collectors to whom Metro had sold work and photographed the Metro artists’ works in those contexts. I printed the resulting images a “normal” picture size and titled them “arrangements,” too—for example, “Arranged by Barbara and Eugene Schwartz, New York City.” The Metro situation at that time formed that work, and it also formed a way of working for me.

This final statement is crucial: “It formed a way of working for me.” Lawler’s most typical “way of working” began to be taking photographs, and especially taking photographs of others’ artworks. This might seem like a capitulation to the conventions of the moment. Lawler’s work since 1981, however, has demonstrated that photographs can be used more effectively than, say, a matchbook to make us see art—and art as an institution—differently. What Lawler’s photographs have shown is that institutional critique not only may be leveled at the impulse

toward making pictures—“Why pictures now?”—but can take the form of a picture.

But—and this returns us to the perplexity caused by Lawler’s inclusion of installation shots of her own work in *An Arrangement of Pictures*—can it take the form *merely* of a picture? Lawler’s photographs of artworks pose their manifold questions about those artworks—about how we see them, what we see when we see them, what sorts of meanings they have for us, how they come to have meaning, why some have more meaning than others, why some have greater value than others—especially through their various strategies of exhibition. These include manipulations of the normal gallery or museum installation—painting the walls colors to make the gallery part of the picture; including titles or other texts in the picture; repeating the same picture, sometimes with different texts; digitally stretching pictures to “fit” the walls; and so forth. In contrast to the standard conditions of exhibiting pictures, Lawler’s exhibition strategies undermine our sense of a photograph’s autonomy. Lawler shows her photographs just as she photographs other artworks, presenting them as always impinged on by something else within our frame of vision. In spite of the fact that the critique of modernist ideas of art’s autonomy has been central to the discourse of art since the 1970s, the institutions of art continue to depend on shoring up that autonomy. The contradictions inherent in this phenomenon are among the subjects of Lawler’s photographs. Those contradictions are also, of course, one of the photographs’ conditions of existence. After all, when you buy a photograph by Lawler, all you get is the picture. □

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