Throughout her four-decade career, Louise Lawler has quietly upended inherited notions of what artists do, where their work is displayed, and how they relate to other artists.

by Leah Pires

In playing with shadows, of course, you're also doing something Duchampian.

Yes. You can make assumptions about that, but you can't necessarily ascribe them to the artist. You see connections, but that doesn't necessarily mean that's where the artist gets them. But that also doesn't mean that they're not there.¹

THE YEAR IS 1994. The journal October dedicates its pages to "The Duchamp Effect," a special issue that codifies the French artist-trickster's influence on contemporary art. Interviews with Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine—peers, early collaborators, and artists grouped with the "Pictures Generation"—are especially notable for the sharp divergence in the artists' willingness to be enlisted in the task. Levine reinforces the affinities that art historian Martha Buskirk observes, supplementing them with her own; that Duchamp provided her with a way of making sculpture, and that certain of her works refer directly to Duchamp. "It's very Duchampian, this idea of taking the original readymade and making it into a fabricated readymade," Buskirk suggests. "Yes," Levine concurs with characteristic deadpan.²

Lawler offers more resistance; she repeatedly evades Buskirk's attempts to place her work within Duchampian coordinates. Her reaction acknowledges the complex—and uneasy—relationship between artists and those who interpret their work. Lawler concedes that she possesses more than a passing knowledge of Duchamp's activities ("I don't want to play the dumb artist"), but her own relationship to it is remote: "To me, Duchamp signaled a 'bottle rack' (who uses that?), a weird looking urinal, and a lot of pictures of him smoking and enjoying the sun with other people."³ The "effect" of his presence is distant, nebulous.

Lawler and Levine adopt different roles: one reclaitrant, the other cooperative. Of course, this is partly an act. Lawler's most recognizable photographs document other artists' work (including Duchamp's) in situ—not in pristine white cubes necessarily, but in everyday contexts like homes and storage facilities, in transactional settings like corporate offices and auction houses. Pollack and Warhol, Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Connecticut (1984) depicts a paint-splattered canvas in the home of collectors who hung the painting above a complementary piece of antique china. The silkscreened tondo showing Marilyn Monroe in Doa Andy! Warhol Made You Cry? (1988) appears ready for sale in an auction-house preview. Here, the trademark tells of "a Pollock" or "a Warhol" become incorporated into Lawler's own chameleon-like practice.

Levine's apparent willingness to accept a Duchampian lineage should also be read as something of aploy. She is best known for her impressive reproductions of modernist mainstays: "After Walker Evans" (1981), for example, is a series of rephotographed Evans images. Levine's Proust (after Marcel Duchamp, 1991), is a cast bronze urinal. Yet to dismiss these works as mere copies would be to take the bait. Levine's project is a cool examination of the very meaning of originality and ownership. At a panel on postmodernism in 1981, she read a text cut-and-pasted from other artists' statements: "Every image is leased and mortgage'd," she intoned—words borrowed from the German painter Franz Marc that have since been attributed to Levine.⁴

To be sure, the work of Lawler and Levine is distinguished by the relationships it establishes to that of others. But these can hardly be reduced to "influence." In her interview with October, Lawler explicitly questions how, and by whom, connections between artists' work are made, and to what end. Returning to these questions is especially pertinent now that an exhibition culled from four decades of Lawler's work is on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Art historians and curators have coined the "Duchamp Effect," the "Smithson Effect," and the "Cage Effect" to describe how certain protagonists have left their imprint on subsequent art. But what does it mean to say that one artist's work influences, precipitates, triggers, affects, induces, enables, or informs another?⁵

Too often, such a framework overemphasizes apparent similarity at the expense of understanding the specificity and range of


² "Louise Lawler is a PhD candidate in art history at Columbia University, New York. See Contributions page."
cropped in a circle. The show included works by Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and other blue-chip artists. A wall label attributed Lawler's contribution to "Anonymous." This self-effacement was no mere act of modesty; it doubled as a subtle send-up of the overly large wall labels. Lawler again took aim at the currency of boldface names with her sound piece Birdcalls, recorded in 1981. Her voice transforms a roster of artists' names (uniformly white and male, save for Holzer in one version) into a well-disguised call-and-response of warbles, chirps, coos, and squawks. Such gestures sabotage the authority of the proper name, which otherwise eases art's circulation and exchange.

The notion of intellectual property relies on the authority conferred by the proper name: the two concepts interlock to designate the belonging of something to someone.7 Lawler's work examines the importance of propriety in maintaining this relationship. Andrea Fraser wrote in the pages of this magazine in 1985: "Lawler consistently challenges the proprieties both of place (the divisions of artwork labor that assign artists, dealers and critics proper places and functions) and of objects (the ideological mechanisms which establish the authorship and ownership of art)."8 Indeed, Lawler's work is both a sustained examination of positioning—of the artist, of the viewer—and a continual evasion of an artist's "proper" place. This plays out in relation to an art context, but its implications are political: for whom is a given place available, and under what conditions?

one artist's ties to another. Establishing the significance of a work through its artistic lineage also reinforces patrilineal notions of authorship. As theorist Roland Barthes observed, "The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work"—a relation inscribed and enforced by the concept of intellectual property. It's no coincidence, as he notes, that the modern understanding of an author came into being in tandem with copyright law, buttressed by a capitalist understanding of ownership.

Upon its emergence in the late 1970s and early '80s, Lawler and Levine's work (along with that of their peers including Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Cindy Sherman) was paradigm-shifting precisely for its reappraisal of authority, ownership, and value. These artists inaugurated, as critic Craig Owens puts it, the "refusal of the role of creator as 'father' of his work, of the paternal rights assigned to the author by law"; they interrupted an understanding of artistic tradition as "a contract between fathers and sons."9 Hence their cagier responses to the news that Duchamp might be their daddy.

**WHAT DO WE OWN? What is the same?** So reads the title of a 1980 print project, collaboratively authored by Lawler, Levine, and Kruger, that appeared in The Flux, a newsletter published by the artist-run New York nonprofit Franklin Furnace. Their title appeared along with four black-and-white photographs of an open book featuring a short story by the Italian author Alberto Moravia. The title articulates the core questions of visual and textual appropriation, the crux of much "Pictures Generation" work (so named for "Pictures," a 1977 exhibition at Artists Space in New York, curated by Douglas Crimp). Yet in other works Lawler took these questions further, not only claiming ownership over images and texts produced by others, but also obscuring her own authorship.

In a 1980 group exhibition at Castelli Graphics in New York, Lawler presented a second photograph of the same book, this time cropped in a circle. The show included works by Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and other blue-chip artists. A wall label attributed Lawler's contribution to "Anonymous." This self-effacement was no mere act of modesty; it doubled as a subtle send-up of the overly large wall labels. Lawler again took aim at the currency of boldface names with her sound piece Birdcalls, recorded in 1981. Her voice transforms a roster of artists' names (uniformly white and male, save for Holzer in one version) into a well-disguised call-and-response of warbles, chirps, coos, and squawks. Such gestures sabotage the authority of the proper name, which otherwise eases art's circulation and exchange.

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One of Lawler's first efforts, the books Untitled (Red/Blue) and Untitled (Black/White), both 1979, prompts these questions. In the books, a playing card motif is juxtaposed with a screenplay by Lawler's future dealer, Janelle Reiring, about the Dutch double agent and courtesan Mata Hari. (Double agent and card player: these two figures rely on a keen awareness of how different positions and contexts can determine what is visible or invisible.) The books were sold at several unorthodox locations—a movie theater, a hair salon, a jewelry store—where they might not read as "art," or at least not right away. Lawler was testing how shifts in context might recast the meaning of an object entirely.

In the early 1980s, Lawler began experimenting with different mechanisms for generating publicity. When she distributed, without permission, matchbooks with the words an evening with Julian Schnabel stumped in red foil lettering at an event of the same name at UCLA in 1982, the chintzy promotional materials (warmly received by the event's organizers, as it turned out) came faced with double-edged commentary on the spectacle surrounding another artist's appearance. Later that year, finding herself without a formal invitation to participate in Documents 7, yet in possession of a copy of the florid, over-the-top letter that the curator, Rudi Fuchs, sent to desired participants, Lawler selectively edited the document and produced stationery printed with the text: "Dear ________, How can I describe the exhibition to you?" The exhibition that floats in my mind like a star. Who meets whom and where: that is our story which will tell about our experiences, our encounters in the forest of art." The stationery was sold, along with other souvenir-like objects made by artists allied with the South Bronx organization Fashion Moda, at a booth outside the official Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany.

Such manoeuvring—which might merely be coy, were it not so canny—would also come to characterize Lawler's work for exhibitions at museums and galleries. "Arrangements of Pictures" (1982), her first solo exhibition at the gallery Metro Pictures in New York, included a hanging of works by gallery artists Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and James Welling, selected by Lawler. The configuration was for sale for the cost of the constituent works, plus a 10 percent fee for Lawler's arranging services. The exhibition also featured a group of photographs that contain the kernel of much of her later work: jigsawlike hangings of work by other artists staged against candy-colored backdrops. Titles such as (Holzer, Nadin, and Other Artists) Baby Blue (1982) playfully mimic the familiar verbal tic by which certain artists are named, while the rest are summarized as also-rans. Lawler here occupied multiple roles—artist, friend, documentarian, curator, art adviser—in order to reshuffle the economy of visibility around a solo gallery show.

Extending this line of thought, "Home/Museum Arranged for Living and Viewing," Lawler's 1984 exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, transformed a gallery into a genteel domestic interior, complete with a grand-
father clock and lemon yellow walls. The walls were hung with an idiosyncratic selection of artworks drawn from the collection of the artist and the museum (Sol LeWitt had donated some of them, including Lawler’s Birddaths, to the Wadsworth). The sole wall label for the installation emphasized the works’ displacement. The paintings and photographs had been “extracted from their locations in the museum (as they had been previously dislocated from the original contexts for which they had been made), in order to be relocated in this matrix.”

Lawler’s work is driven by a fascination with the movement of objects and people across contexts: public and private, alternative and commercial, critical and complicit. This interest is evident in her photographs of other artists’ work in museums, storage facilities, and collectors’ homes. But these images tell only part of the story. Her key move—finessing different roles and contexts—takes place behind the scenes, and can only be read through the traces left by seemingly marginal ephemera and documentation. This practice developed at a time when a clear division between “inside” and “outside” the institution (the battleground of early institutional critique) became untenable. Lawler straddled the roles of insider and outsider, playing each against the other.

LAWLER’S UNEASY relationship to visibility is worth reconsidering at a moment when her work can be seen in one of the most prominent contexts of all: the Museum of Modern Art. “Why Pictures Now” forgoes the tropes of a straightforward museum survey in favor of a nonlinear grouping. This format has recently come into favor for midcareer retrospectives of artists reluctant to appear on such terms. To cite two recent examples, Rosemarie Trockel’s 2012 show “A Cosmos” at the New Museum in New York and Kai Althoff’s 2016 exhibition “and then leave me to the common swifts” at MoMA both eschewed a chronological presentation of work and, in the case of Althoff, contextual cues like explanatory wall texts.

Lawler’s exhibition will surely introduce her work to a broader audience, bring to light aspects of her practice that have fallen out of view, and offer an opportunity for it to resonate anew in relation to the current moment. But, of course, as artists aligned with institutional critique have long made clear, the museum is also inescapably an apparatus of historicization, individualization, and above all, legitimization—modes that Lawler has persistently tested and tampered with.

“Recognition may be, may not be useful.” This phrase appeared on the cover of the May 1990 issue of Artscribe, overlaid on a photograph of Meryl Streep smoking a cigarette. The editors had requested a portrait of Lawler to accompany a feature article on her work, and she instead proffered Streep’s visage as a surrogate. The ambivalence of her textual addition resonates in the context of the exhibition at MoMA: the forms of recognition it affords may be, or may not be, useful. Declining to appear, or refusing to appear in the way that she has been summoned, is a hallmark of Lawler’s practice.

The conceit of a solo exhibition cannot readily capture what is most specific and compelling about Lawler’s body of work. Observations that the artist shared in conversation with Douglas Crimp twenty years ago offer insight into why: “A work of art is produced by many different things,” she said. “It isn’t just the result of an unencumbered creative act. It’s always the case that what is allowed to be seen and understood is part of what produces the work. And art is always a collaboration with what came before you and what comes after you.” [No] work is really produced alone.”
emphasis on the larger field of relations that produce a work has been a shared point of focus among artists investigating the politics of art’s display and circulation in recent decades. Yet no matter how strenuously a monographic museum exhibition attempts to undo its own logic, its form isn’t adequate to the task of representing these relations in their full complexity.

Lawler’s work offers a model for thinking about artistic practices together—their positions in relation to one another, as well as to the spaces where they appear. This is represented in “Why Pictures Now” by objects Lawler produced while working with, or for, others: promotional materials from exhibitions and events she organized with Levine under the moniker A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything; production stills she took for a film by Lawrence Weiner, a business card she designed for Dan Graham, bronze wall reliefs she made with Allan McCollum. But the retrospective also hosts works by other artists. A poster stack by Felix Gonzalez-Torres features a photo by Lawler. Andrea Fraser’s May I Help You? (1991), a performance in which the artist embodies six different art-viewer archetypes ranging from an uncertain novice to a pretentious expert, was reprised amid Lawler’s show.

The exhibition also links Lawler’s work to that of a young artist with whom she has not formally collaborated. At the entrance of the exhibition stands Cameron Rowland’s New York State Unified Court System (2016), a readymade sculpture that comprises four court benches fabricated by incarcerated people at a New York State correctional facility. This captive labor pool is paid between 10 cents and $1.14 per hour to make products that are subsequently sold to government agencies in New York State. As an artist proposed in a text accompanying “91020000,” his 2016 exhibition at Artists Space where the benches were first shown, prison labor is part of an exploitative economy inseparable from the legacy of slavery. In this new context, the benches are a visual echo of Lawler’s prior solo at MoMA, “Enough. Projects: Louise Lawler” (1987). She created a tableau in which a standard museum bench stood in front of three identical photographs, each showing the same bench in front of a Miró painting—inviting a double take.

Rowland’s benches offer a different view entirely. They focus attention outward, beyond the space of the museum and into an arm of the contemporary prison-industrial complex that can be sustained only to the extent that it remains concealed from sight (or is tolerated by an informed public). Rowland’s production involves legal and bureaucratic repositioning of existing social structures. He leased the sculpture as opposed to selling it; the work is part of MoMA’s collection, but it is not owned by the museum. This technical yet important distinction departs from the standard terms of exchange that govern the circulation of contemporary art as private property. The benches are synecdoches for the broader system in which they were produced. Indeed, even as Rowland’s work is represented by objects placed within museums and galleries, it is chiefly concerned with systems of racial and economic inequality that extend far beyond their walls.

While “Why Pictures Now” may acknowledge the context beyond Lawler’s work and its ties to other artists, the exhibition will inevitably secure the artist’s place within a certain art historical canon. (And of course, essays like this one are part of the same economy.) Lawler’s response to “The Duchamp Effect” invites consideration of how, beyond “influence,” we might understand the life an artist’s work takes on as it circulates in the world, including its reception among younger artists. In the exchange between Lawler and Buskirk quoted at the outset, the artist concludes: “This discussion of Duchamp seems a good opportunity to express my discomfort with too much referencing of authority that is restrictive, rather than acknowledging the work’s ‘kindling’ effect and use.”

“Kindling.” It’s a word whose definition suggests transformative activity: n. easily combustible small sticks used for starting a fire. Material used as kindling instigates a process that will ultimately consume and overcome it. In emphasizing her work’s “kindling” effect and use, Lawler proposes a different relationship to younger artists than is normally suggested by “influence”: she emphasizes an artwork’s generative capacities, its potential for use. The term doesn’t suggest a circumscribable cause and effect, but rather captures the way an idea “catches”—with a certain degree of randomness, sparking combustion.

LAWLER’S FINESSING of visibility has been particularly generative in this way. Upending expectations about how and where artists appear, for example, has become central to Trisha Donnelly’s work. Her brief, storied appearance on horseback and in Napoleonic garb at the opening of her 2002 exhibition at Casey Kaplan gallery in New York inaugurated a myth that she would later manipulate as material. At a subsequent opening, at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Germany in 2005, another such demonstration (as she terms her actions) was rumored, but

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**Lawler:**

Business card designed by Dan Graham, 1979, offset card, 2 by 3½ inches. Museum of Modern Art.
never occurred. The artist excuses herself from dinner several times, stoking speculation; then word spread that the performance had already taken place. In the end, the circulation of misinformation constituted the event. At the opening dinner for the 54th Carnegie International in 2004, Donnelly embeded herself among the waitstaff rather than taking a seat at the table. Through these actions, the artist responds to art world recognition by seeding it with rumor and misrecognition.

In 2013, Donnelly organized an exhibition as part of the Artist’s Choice program at MoMA—a series whose very premise, of an artist selecting and arranging works by others, is consonant with Lawler’s practice. Like Lawler in “Home/Museum,” Donnelly assembled an array of objects from the museum’s collection in galleries usually reserved for chronological displays of twentieth-century art. Among the selections were asin photographs by artist-scientist Eliot Porter; computer-generated plot drawings of parts manufactured by IBM and Hewlett-Packard in the 1980s, some attributed to the corporations and others to industrial designer Sam Lucente; and a convertible Italian couch configured as a bed, designed by Alessandro Becchi. Through this installation, Donnelly undercut the conventions that quarantine different parts of the museum’s collection to their respective departments and attendant modes of viewing. She rendered palpable the codes that subtly guide the way we read objects in a museum—making distinctions between furniture and sculpture, for example—and offered a vision of how things could be otherwise.

If Donnelly rewrites staid viewing habits, Carissa Rodriguez examines the value attached to (and generated by) different forms of labor within the art world. The conceit of “La Collectionneuse,” the artist’s 2013 exhibition in New York, is inseparable from its site: Front Desk Apparatus, a midtown art advisory service and branding consultancy that doubles as an exhibition space. Its tandem identities are enabled by discretion—appearing and disappearing as needed—and Rodriguez made this tension the centerpiece of her work. To the office showrooms’ nineteenth-century moldings, parquet floors, marble hearths, and fluorescent lights, Rodriguez added a claustrophobic set of walls painted “super white,” creating an antiseptic room within a room. Near the entrance, a rack offered a series of postcards resembling exhibition announcements. Some depicted the artist’s earlier work hanging in homes (belonging to collectors as well as the advisory service’s founder) while others showed an image of the cold white fluorescent lights overhead. Here, Rodriguez plays multiple roles: host, documentarian, publicist, and producer of objects; a split identity not unfamiliar to the artist, given her erstwhile role as director of the downtown gallery Reena Spaulings. Her focus is not just the immediate site, but the entire network in which it traffics.

Artists are frequently expected to code-switch depending on context: propriety dictates that the roles they occupy (beyond artist) to subsist and “make work”—as art handlers, fabricators, assistants, techs, and so on—remain largely unacknowledged in moments when they self-present as artists. The sculptor and dancer Yve Laris Cohen deliberately collapsed this division of labor in his 2016 exhibition “Embattled Garden,” at Company Gallery in New York. For the five-week run of the show, Laris Cohen was contracted for the hourly wage he normally received as a production assistant for the Martha Graham Company (he had held the part-time job since 2015) while he reconstructed an Isamu Noguchi–designed set that had been damaged in basement storage during Hurricane Sandy. Using the commercial gallery as a workshop, and keeping a schedule that corresponded to the gallery’s hours of operation,
Laris Cohen worked to painstakingly replicate the set, which was to become the property of the Martha Graham Company for future use upon completion. (The question “What do we own? What is the same?” echoes here.) Laris Cohen, who briefly worked as a set and prop builder while pursuing his MFA at Columbia University, and who had studied the Graham technique while a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, was uniquely well-positioned to meld the roles of wage laborer and artist in this context; the result reflected both their consonance and their dissonance. Lawler emphasizes that “what is allowed to be seen and understood is part of what produces the work.” This principle is not just implicit in the practices of Rowland, Donnelly, Rodriguez, and Laris Cohen. Rather, it becomes a prime mover in the production of their work. It is in this sense that Lawler’s practice has “kindled” an approach that has led to a fundamental reorientation in how the bounds of art production are understood.

The art world, even the very idea of art, has long been structured by the boundary between what can be seen and what should be hidden from view. This division is overwritten with codes, hierarchies, taboos, and expectations that most readily support prevailing approaches to producing, displaying, and circulating work. Art institutions are duly equipped to register the individual artist and the named collective (though the myths surrounding the former category have become tarnished of late, and membership in the latter is rarely settled without strife). But other forms of being and working together are less easily captured by their prevailing economies of visibility. To make work that takes a different approach requires sustained resistance.

Lawler’s efforts of the past four decades provide a case study in such resolve. Her practice at once resists familiar codes of display and modes of historicization, and takes an intimate knowledge of them as its precondition. To simply place Lawler’s work within an art-historical genealogy would be to miss its most distinctive qualities; her work offers a way of thinking about relationships between artistic practices that acknowledges the deep interdependence between any act of production and its discursive and material surroundings, whether or not they’re cited by the maker. “I think art is part and parcel of a cumulative and collective enterprise, viewed as seen by the prevailing culture,” the artist has observed. “Other work, outside work, makes up a part of this.” In this sense, Lawler’s work presents what would seem to be a paradox: it is singular for the extent to which it insists that nothing ever stands alone.

2. Sherrie Levine in Buskirk, p. 98.
12. Lawler in Buskirk, p. 108.