For the past forty years, Louise Lawler has raised questions about art—about the circumstances that produce it, its circulation, and the institutional frameworks in which it appears. Many of the ideas that arise out of her work relate to theories of reception, the belief that the meaning of an artwork shifts and morphs depending on who looks at it and where it is seen. The title of this publication suggests, many kinds of reception are available.

In the eight essays in Receptions, renowned cultural thinkers unpack Lawler’s witty and provocative art, while a generous plate section documents her images, installations, and films. A selection of the ephemera she has designed, ranging from gallery announcements and posters to magazine covers and matchbooks, reflects her interest in how art reaches viewers beyond the museum and gallery system. The design of the book’s jacket is a typically ingenious Lawler production: when turned inside out, it becomes what she calls an “adjusted to fit” work—one of her photographs reformatted to fill the space available.

Published in conjunction with the exhibition Louise Lawler: WHY PICTURES NOW, at The Museum of Modern Art, this volume explores the artist’s career from its beginnings to the present. In our contemporary atmosphere of political theater, shocking wealth disparity, and commodity culture, the insight, resistance, and sly commentary of Lawler’s work feels as poignant and corrective as it has ever been.
WHY PICTURES NOW
Louise Lawler *Receptions*

ROXANA MARCOCI

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
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Foreword

The Museum of Modern Art is proud to present Louise Lawler: WHY PICTURES NOW, the first New York survey of the artist’s creative output. Over the past forty years, Lawler's work has been extraordinarily porous, generative of new theories of representation, and inextricably linked to questions related to institutional framing and the life of the work within the art system. Through her witty, complex, and analytical pictures, Lawler has questioned the cultural circumstances that support art’s production and reception. Her feminist viewpoint and her exchanges and partnerships with other artists, woven into the fabric of these issues, has invited us to rethink the ways in which we value what we see, opening not only her own work but art history as a whole. Lawler first exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art thirty years ago, in the 1987 exhibition Enough: Projects: Louise Lawler, and today we are honored to bring her remarkably prescient and diverse body of works—her photographs, installations, film screenings, objects, tracings, “adjusted to fit” works, and ephemera—back to her hometown.

Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography, has engaged in a three-year collaboration with the artist to conceptualize an exhibition and a book befitting their subject. I applaud her and the talented staff who worked with her, especially Kelly Sidley, Curatorial Assistant, to realize this major project. This inspiring publication, the most comprehensive volume of Lawler’s work to date, brings together a group of exceptional essays by Roxana, Rhea Anastas, Meike Bai, Douglas Crimp, Rosalyn Deutsche, Diedrich Diederichsen, David Platzker, and Julian Stallabrass. Each of these authors has taken a unique approach in writing about Lawler’s contributions to contemporary art, providing insights that enrich our understanding of her profound and challenging legacy.

My gratitude is due to the organizations and individuals who have generously underwritten this presentation, including the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; The Modern Women’s Fund; and David Dechman and Michel Mercure. In the period leading to this exhibition, the Museum has strengthened its holdings of Lawler’s work, and we are very grateful to those who have supported these acquisitions, including Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman, Nathalie and Jean-Daniel Cohen, Charles Heilbronn, The Modern Women’s Fund, and The Contemporary Arts Council.

This exhibition and publication reflect Lawler’s creativity and its prolific effects in every detail of their design. Above all I thank Louise Lawler for the generosity of her time and thought as she met the countless demands of this ambitious project. We are grateful that she has entrusted MoMA with her work and allowed us to share her artistic vision with a broad audience that we are certain will be responsive to it.

—Glenn D. Lowry
Director
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
“Art is no longer being produced, but only watched,” mused Martin Kippenberger in an extended interview with the artist and musician Jutta Koether over 1990 and 1991. “Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it’s art is dreadful. The whole business is important!” The curator Ann Goldstein has perceptively noted that Kippenberger understood that neither work nor art was autonomous but instead functioned within an interdiscursive network that includes the role of the spectator.5 He explicitly admired the practice of several American women artists whose work explored the undoing of the myth of the artist as sui generis prody, and in the interview’s first sentence he singled out Louise Lawler as “the most important woman” and an “expert” on this phenomenon.1

Lawler has sabotaged the idea of artistic expertise and other forms of aurthorial authority throughout her career. Kippenberger first encountered her work in 1984, when he came to New York to show with Wiener Böttner and Albert and Markus Oehlen at Metro Pictures, where Lawler had presented her first solo exhibition two years earlier.2 That installation, Arrangements of Pictures, consisted of three types of groupings: works by the gallery’s artists—Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and James Welling—which Lawler arranged on the wall as her work, or at least as her selection (page 119); her pictures of works by Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Sherrie Levine, Jenny Holzer and Peter Nadine, and Alan McCollum, clustered in different arrangements on backgrounds of various colors (pages 102–5); and her pictures of artworks taken in the homes and offices of collectors and in art galleries and museums (pp. 112, 113). In short, Lawler made other artists work her own and, more significantly, introduced distinctive new models for collective or collabora- tive authorship. In an essay from 1986, the artist Andrea Fraser observed that Lawler’s one-person exhibition could have easily been mistaken for a group show of the Metro Pictures stable—that not everyone had grasped Lawler’s subtle “reversal of pro- positional tions.”3 Lawler had undertaken a similar reversal at Artists Space in New York in 1978: her contribution to a group exhibition constituted a logo for the catalogue—a simple square case A in a circle—that Lawler then featured on a poster (fig. 1) she produced on her own, thus shifting attention from aesthetic objects to the relational system that underlies their display, distri- bution, and reception.4 The curator Thomas Winkel has described her practice as “art-sociological comment turned image.”5 Bill Buford’s work is at once more affecting and nuanced.

Lawler has noted that “art is always a collaboration with what came before you and what comes after you.”8 In reckoning with the structures of spectatorship and other modes of address by which art seeks a rapport with its audiences, she has formed her practice around the idea that the meaning of a work is consti- tuted in the process of its reception: “The work can never be determined just by what I do or say. Its comprehension is facil- itated by the work of other artists and critics and just by what’s going on at that time.”9 This is not to say that Lawler cedes authorial agency; rather, she frees art from delimiting logics, making it more permeable and therefore opening its meaning to a wider context of cultural and political forces. Her work is frequently relational and defiantly feminist. In 1971, when the curator and publisher Willoughby Sharp invited twenty-seven male artists to produce objects or performances on a vacant section of New York City’s Hudson River waterfront for Pier 18, Lawler assisted several of the artists.10 Leaving the pier one evening with her friend Martha Kite, walking home on deserted streets and trying to avoid undesired attention, she and Kite began chanting “Willoughby! Willoughby!” a kind of birdlike signal to keep assailants away. This tactic led to Lawler’s sound piece Birdcalls (1972/1981, fig. 2), in which she sings out the first or last names of famous male artists, from Vitó Acconci to Lawrence Weiner, deflating the status of the patronymic, turning a series of them into song. It was produced as a single 45 rpm record in 1972, in a make-your-own-record booth on the top floor of the Empire State Building; its label, which the booth swiftly printed with a flything bluebird, captured the work’s playful will.11

Her dissident melodic voice was timely. Michel Foucault had delivered his “What Is an Author?” lecture in the United States in 1970, in a response to Roland Barthes’s 1967 manifesto “La Mort de l’auteur” (“The Death of the Author”).12 Foucault tapped the potential of Barthes’s idea that any text or image, rather than emitting a fixed meaning from a single voice, was but a tissue of quotations; meaning, Foucault contended, was restricted by the very idea of modernist authorship. “The author,” he wrote, “is the ideological figure by which one recognizes the manner in which we make the proliferation of meaning, and by which authorship is placed at the center of a system of individual property.”13 Linda Nochlin’s groundbreaking essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” published shortly afterward in Art in America, questioned the veracity of the greatness or genius associated with the male artists who had shaped the Western art historical canon; instead of countering this by elevating the status of women artists, Nochlin identified a coded gender inequities embedded in the production and reception of art, in art academies, systems of patronage, own- ership, and museums, and in the cliché myst of the master.14...
“our experience is governed by pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema.” The penetration of images into mass communication in the late twentieth century was changing the fabric of reality to the point where reality itself was widely consisted of images—something we take for granted now, but the sense of rupture at the time was startling. The theorist Vilém Flusser claimed in 1983 that human civilization has witnessed two revolutionary moments: one marked by the invention of linear writing in the second half of the second millennium BCE, and the other by the advent of technical images—photography, film, television, video, digital recording and transmission—in the modern era. Technical images, Flusser argued, inform the experience of looking, and with the transition from a textual to a visual culture, the changes in our perception and interpretation of the world cannot be disassociated from changes in photographic formats and image flux. Why Pictures Now suggests that because we see the world photographically, our critique of it can also take the form of a picture. Rather than pretending to mirror reality, as pictures are largely supposed to do, Lawler used the tactics of advertising, turning the title into a direct address to, or a question for, the viewer in order to elicit the viewer’s participation in a critique of the artwork’s promotional value and display. In Lawler’s collaborative work the spectator is engaged in the production of meaning through social and affective viewing experiences. A case in point is A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture, first presented in 1979 at the Aero Theatre in Santa Monica, California. The poster, announcement, and marquee (fig. 6) did not specify which movie Lawler had selected, only that it would be shown without its image. The film not screened was The Misfits—a 1961 drama written by Arthur Miller and directed by John Huston—whose full-length soundtrack was accompanied by the blank silver screen. As she had done with Birdcalls, Lawler harnessed the potential of communicative speech, creating a space where film was sound and sound was part of the altered cinematic event that was critical of the image. This tactic of distanciation diverted viewers of the visual pleasure of Hollywood spectacle—as well as, in this case, watching the last screen appearances of Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable—and enlisted them as active coproducers of the experience, one that involved the amplified potential of sound and social setting. A Movie Will Be Shown has roots in the subversive tactics of the Situationist International, the postwar avant-garde movement led by the Marxist theorist and filmmaker Guy Debord. Debord was highly critical of the conformity boreal to us by modern capitalist society; he denounced the hegemony of eye-catching marketing, mainstream media, and mass-culture commodities. In 1952 he debuted Huit-leurons en faveur de Sade (Hooles for Sade), a radical imageless antithesis that alternated between white screens for spoken dialogue or text fragments on the soundtrack (sapped from law passages, novellas, modern literature, and newspaper notices) and black screens for quiet, ending in twenty-four minutes of black silence. In a Movie Will Be Shown Lawler made a similar break with filmic illusion, inviting viewers to adjust their process of reception. Spectatorship and spectatorship comes up again in a photograph of Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, of an alienated-staring crowd of people all facing a Jumbotron (fig. 7). The image was published in “The Spectacle” issue of Wedge magazine (1982, fig. 8) to illustrate an excerpt from La Société du spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle), Debord’s leftist treatise, of 1967, in which he defines spectacle as “a social relation among people, mediated by images.” Lawler reprinted the antipsychological A Movie Will Be Shown on several occasions. In 1983, at Bleecker Street Cinema in New York, she “showed” The Hustler of 1961, and What’s Opera, Doc?, a 1957 Bugs Bunny cartoon, and produced for the event a new poster (fig. 9), in which visual and textual citations from films by Alfred Hitchcock and Jean-Luc Godard collided within a single frame. In subsequent iterations she continued to reverse cinematic conventions, rejecting the traditional one-way relationship of viewer to screen and creating participatory roles for spectators. Lawler’s repertoire of motifs is built on montage, performativity, and self-appropriation: in producing one body of work, she often generates several. The process of continuous re-presentation of reframing or restaging in the present is an intriguing aspect of her practice. She often revisits her images, transferring them from one format to another—from photograph to paperweight, tracing, slide projection, and works she calls “adjusted to fit,” that is, stretched or expanded to fit the location of their display. The art historian David Josellit, in Art After (2013), has convincingly argued that what previously was defined “as a private creative pursuit leading to significant and profitable discoveries of how images may carry new content has given way to the for- matting and reformatting of existing content”—to an Epistemology of Search. Lawler’s strategy of reformatting existing content underpins the intentionally relational character of her art. Her first tracings (pages 2–12)—large-scale black-and-white line versions of her photographs printed on vinyl and mounted directly to the wall—were made for Louise Lawler: Adjusted at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, in 2013, in collaboration with the artist and illustrator Jon Buller. They reveal, in their likeliness and utiliteness,