

METRO PICTURES

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Reflection not gestures of authenticity – this might be the formula for conversations where a well-prepared interviewer encounters someone who is expected to deliver “pertinent” information, rather than statements of personal belief. But in the art-world, this kind of methodically organized interview often serves largely as a kind of legitimation for the critic-interviewer’s interpretative approach, as well as a way to gather material “at first hand”. But what happens when the artist refuses these attempts at art-historical knowledge production and instead puts the ball back in the interviewer’s court?

Here, the few published interviews with the American artist Louise Lawler are used to investigate her particular conversational strategy, prompting the question: to what extent can a “resistant” artist-position be inferred from this?

It is May 1994 and an art historian, Martha Buskirk, is interviewing an artist, Louise Lawler, in New York City. Buskirk is studying the reception of the work of Marcel Duchamp. Specifically she is interested to analyze the historical delay, as well as art’s intersection with the museum or other contexts that shape its reception, for Duchamp and for recent work. [1] Buskirk’s chosen format, the artist interview, and the method by which she practices it, pursuing a theoretically and historically consistent series of questions, appear plain enough – “Who were you looking at when you were first thinking about context and the way a work of art is understood?” and, “Along with the idea of the work as a collaboration, you’ve also emphasized the author name as a label that individuates a work.” The artist interview, for Buskirk, is a documentary occasion, one for the historian to test her ideas about reception and to explore whether individual works by Duchamp may be related to those by Lawler and how. Prompted by her interviewer, “You once mentioned to me rephotographing Duchamp’s *Air of Paris* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art”, Lawler concurs. This work is a “repackaging” of the readymade, “that glass vial that looks so strange to us”, she notes, now that “[its] normalcy is gone”. Still, when Buskirk presses the idea of influence, the artist seriously demurs: buskirk: In playing with shadows, of course, you’re also doing something Duchampian ... lawler: Yes. Yes, you can make suppositions 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 got them. But that also doesn’t mean that they’re not there. 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.

And this points to the reason why I resist interviews: they foreground the artist – tell too much about what wouldn’t be known when confronting the work. In rereading and trying to rework my responses, I find I am always backing up, wondering why I responded as I did, and filling in. It becomes a matter of selection. [2]

The artist interview is a different kind of ritual for Lawler than it is for Buskirk. Her restraint, the vigilance with which she conducts interviews, expressed in this telling exchange now twelve years old, reads even more urgently today. Lawler takes the artist interview as an occasion to disturb ideas of art historical status and credibility, as she explains to Douglas Crimp in their more compelling interview of 2000, “the credibility that is given to a statement because of who is speaking” [8]. The interviews by Buskirk and Crimp, along with a third by Vienna-based artist Andreas Reiter Raabe of 1997, comprise the extremely restricted corpus of Lawler’s published interviews. [9]

From the vantage of 2007, it appears the field has not made a model of the rarity of Lawler’s interviewing, nor has it made an example of her particular and resisting voice of skepticism. Lawler refuses and self-reflects and questions and selects. And we are suffering from a deluge of artist interviews. The general mood of these is affirmative rather than dissenting. The ubiquity of accessible devices for recording words and images is one reason for this, and the accessibility of dissemination offered by the purveyors of this excess of recording capacity – newspapers, magazines, Web sites, blogs – is another. 808 pages of “artists’ own words” is the latest artist interview book by Phaidon, “pressPLAY”, which records “50 personal encounters with the world’s most significant living artists” in conversation with “50 of today’s key art thinkers”. [5] Intimacy, what might be defined as our lack of restraint amidst the flows of technology of quantity and instantaneity, is the language of the book’s promotion: “together the players in pressPLAY explain in full what it means to be an artist today.” But it might also have been reproducibility, since the publisher offers 50 interviews from its Contemporary Artist Series which are in fact “repackaged” reprints of interviews the house commissioned since 1995 (indeed many are only a few years old). This rhetoric of “being an artist”, with its naturalized pretense to authenticity, echoes as “being a curator”, which also entails leaving reams of recorded artists’ words. Hans Ulrich Obrist’s opus of 66 interviews tallies at 968 pages in its first volume. [6]

And yet art historical publishing is as awash in artist interviews as contemporary art publishing. For just as every exhibition catalogue must have its new interview, it appears that every imprint, from the smallest independent to the most prestigious art and university presses, is historicizing and anthologizing (or merely facsimile reproducing) artists' words and writings (the less heard of critics or academics the better) from little magazines and journals of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s either in dissertations, monographs, single venue-based publications or in artists' magazines, pamphlets or books. To take one example, art historian Gwen Allen has written for *Artforum* about *Avalanche's* 61 artist interviews, apparently the 1970s downtown New York magazine's most valued contribution during a six year run: "Avalanche went even further by circumventing the critic altogether and pioneering a novel set of terms for critical discourse, based on nonhierarchical and cooperative forms of communication." [7] Allen valorizes the interviews for their "spontaneity", "frank" talk, from "think[ing] out loud" to "ramblings" between an artistic community thick with "familiarity" and two editor-publishers who "refused to profit" from the artists their magazine "revered". How does she support her critical claims? With, well, interviews. We hear *Avalanche's* cofounder Liza Béar's description of the interview style as "a kind of investigative reporting that aimed to understand rather than to expose, in which the questioning voice was clearly attuned to the artist's sensibility." [8]

Allen narrates without reflexivity toward historical contexts, describing her object as if it were an archival "product" transparently "available" to be thematized as "the milieu of the alternative art community in SoHo" (whose art historical singularity or consensus is that?). Nor does she grant that representations of history are fragmentary wishes and art worlds are social worlds whose conflicts and opposing camps must also be taken into account. "Willoughby Willoughby" was the founding call Lawler and a fellow artist issued as a sound piece later recorded as Lawler's "Birdcalls" (1972/81). Lawler recounted to Crimp: "[Birdcalls'] originated in the early 1970s when my friend Martha Kite and I were helping some artists on one of the Hudson River pier projects. The women involved were doing tons of work, but the work being shown was only by male artists [...]. Willoughby Sharp was the impresario of this project, so we'd make a 'Willoughby Willoughby' sound, trying to sound like birds. This developed into a series of bird calls based on artists' names. So, in fact, it was antagonistic, but more an instinctual response than a programmatic effort at first." [9] Underlying these questions for art history are problems about the operations of legitimation and processes of market valuation. As jpg-archival spreads from one magazine of the 1970s recirculate with monochromatic graininess and a vague appeal within a magazine of the 2000s, fragments of the past are made into fetishes in an atmosphere that might be called Left melancholia, which is to say, such actions may express a politics which merely reiterates past ideals rather than transforming them. [10]

A clearer example is that of a group of artists (and an art historian) who publish and exhibit as “Continuous Project”, and it also involves Avalanche. The approach of “Continuous Project #1” to the archive is strikingly object-like, eschewing analysis of the historical-archival retrieval altogether for a staged re-entry, as if whole and immanently present. Their edition artists’ magazine was the first issue of Avalanche xeroxed at a 1:1 facsimile scale and distributed in a clear plastic bag. Thinglike, a quality Rosalyn Deutsche attaches to Left nostalgia, these instances manifest intellectual desires as much as material phenomena. I think I can see Avalanche’s photography and audio-visual “aura” – straight from history, directly from the artist, wholly present, and fully explained – among the countercultural residues behind this season’s high production “black-and-white” aesthetic, seen most prominently in the 420-page catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition “Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years”. Its centerpiece is an interview between Serra and exhibition co-organizers Kynaston McShine and Lynne Cooke. [11]

Andrea Fraser has recently read such signs of authenticity as symptomatic of an “affective turn” in contemporary art. In these pages she wrote, “At a time when art works have been reduced to objects of pure speculation, it comes as no surprise that feeling should return in force, covering over the prevailing alienation and providing artifacts of increasing economic inequality with a veneer of intimacy, urgency, authenticity and shared humanity.” [12] Most troubling is how the present tendencies toward the authentic experiences and universalizing subjectivities of artist-centered publications and narratives I cite make strangely diffuse and unavailable the transformative subjectivities postmodernist practices – especially feminist artistic practices – imagined. In a recent review of two new publications about women artists, Abigail Solomon-Godeau parses the influence of feminism, “an art of feminism [is] a widespread, constantly evolving set of practices that [...] have collectively sounded the death knell for the universal subject, the universal viewer, the universal producer and a universal art.” [13] In an essay about Mary Kelly’s “Love Songs”, Deutsche opines, “For it was postmodern feminists and, in particular feminist artists, who explored the role played by totalizing images in producing and maintaining masculinist subjects. This exploration implied that subjective, psychic transformation, like material transformation, is an essential component, rather than mere epiphenomenon, of social change.” [14]

Many of the doubts Lawler expresses so lucidly in her interviews can be applied to the assumptions governing the artist interview today. Her closing gambit in the Buskirk interview offers a veritable list of the artist interview's "authenticity" problems. According to Lawler, the interview's appeal to authority is "restrictive". (I would say phallogocentric, not only because the authoritative "who" is more often a male artist, but also because the type of authority is often egocentric and establishes professional and social rank.) The individual artist is foregrounded and separated from context, other artists and works as well as talking and writing about that work – what Lawler calls "collective enterprise" – and overemphasizes (and universalizes) "artistic activity as an autonomous aesthetic exploration". [15] Andrea Fraser observed Lawler's resistance to this separating effect in her difference of "being an artist" as early as 1985, and notably, in the course of articulating this idea, Fraser uses the verb "to escape" at least twice. [16]

It is the ahistorical movement and wish fulfillment – the bread and butter of interviews – that Lawler protests in her own talking and that by others, naming it a rewriting process of "backing up" and "filling in". These actions belong in her category of "tell[ing] too much about what wouldn't be known when confronting the work". [17] For this reason, Lawler frequently answers an interviewer's question with a description of a work: "buskirk: Along with the idea of the work as a collaboration, you've also emphasized the author name as a label that individuates a work. – lawler: It makes more sense to me to describe a work that deals with this issue, rather than talk about it." [18] "Open" (1980) is a photograph of an open book of short stories by Alberto Moravia that Lawler printed in a circle. The image's shadowy seam accentuates and crops that page's first legible sentence to read "I made my first mistake". It was exhibited with a wall label that said: "Anonymous".

Such responses can be distinguished from the disobedience (the disavowals) of the “dumb artist”, a pose Lawler’s refusals avoid. Instead she recasts with a reflexivity aimed at destabilizing artistic intentionality, on the one hand, and unmooring the securing of intention as art historical truth, on the other. Crimp’s exchange with Lawler of 2000 is remarkable in how fluidly the two are able to expose such presumed beliefs while generously expanding the limited body of documentary knowledge about important early works including Lawler’s installation at Artists Space of 1978 and “Birdcalls”: dc: Having this sort of information is very clarifying: it isn’t reductive. ll: The problem is that you say what’s easiest to say or what you can be most articulate about, which neglects other aspects of the work, because you can’t talk about everything. It’s a matter of focusing, and focusing the meaning of the work limits its reception for the viewer. It’s like the phrase I printed on one of my drinking glasses, “It’s something like putting words in your mouth.” Then again, if I were to do a book of very accurate captions giving all the pertinent information about the situation in which the work initially appeared, it would seem fetishizing. That would limit the work’s meaning in another way. Of course, there’s also what else is out there, which is part of how the work is received, too. 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. [19]

Identifying Lawler’s doubt as a “resistance [...] to forms that pretend to authenticity, whether that of the artist’s voice [...] or the careful description of initial context, which implies that it’s only the moment for which the work was originally made in which the work achieves meaning” [20], Crimp concludes, “The work will always exceed both of these things.” He sees the limitations of the art historian’s documentary drive and that it may fix that original moment like a fly caught in amber.

Still I must admit that one of Crimp’s digressions leaves me confused: dc: In fact, the person to whom we grant the greatest credibility regarding a work of art is the artist who made it. In your case, though, a reticence about taking on the conventional role of artist, your oblique approach to making works, is, in a sense, the very content of your work. You could say with regard to your work that a doubt about, or lack of confidence in, what you’re doing – what one would normally think of as working against productivity – these things are actually what make your work possible, make you produce in the first place. [21]

Lawler agrees: "I try sometimes to show that in the work", and responds with an example, "Hand on Her Back and Other Pictures", an exhibition at the Monika Sprüth Galerie in Cologne of 1999. Her phrase sets in motion a turnstile of meaning between the title of a single photograph and the title of an exhibition that presents more than one image, which is to say, her expression rests, poised, between the hand applied to care and the hand that may push. I can't help but feel that the doubt of feminist postmodernist subjectivity is not quite aligned with Crimp's "lack of confidence". Though I tell myself a friend and peer could expect his inchoate meaning would be understood by a friend, I can't help myself from wondering whether Crimp would have phrased his ideas exactly this way if he were interviewing, for example, Richard Serra.

Last fall Lawler's work was presented for the first time in a major US exhibition, "Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back)", organized by Helen Molesworth at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio. [22] One event of the exhibition's reception was the presentation of Lawler's work on the cover of *Art in America* (it was made the subject of a feature-length review by art historian Kirsten Swenson). That this review appeared in the same art magazine as Fraser's article of 1985 about Lawler's work (Fraser's was the first feature article on the artist to appear in an art magazine), was not lost on Swenson, who opened with a quotation from Fraser - "If Lawler manages to escape both marginalization and incorporation, it is because, whatever position she may occupy, she is always somewhere/something else." Still Swenson's article expresses ambivalence about Lawler's work having achieved such a level of institutional legitimation. She troubles over "how" such an artist could be historicized (the exhibition didn't do so conventionally), as if Lawler's work risked "neutralization" or cooptation in such a presentation, writing: "The very agility Fraser pointed to has helped Lawler win significant validation for work that explores the mechanisms of power from within." [23] Swenson interviewed Molesworth who voiced the reservations Lawler shared about how retrospective exhibitions present and shape their subjects: "To Lawler, the concept of a retrospective was an art world convention designed to shore up and further reify the proper name of the artist", and "an imprimatur of the legitimizing power of the institution". [24] Similar charges were put to Barbara Kruger, back in 1987, when she changed galleries for representation at New York's Mary Boone. Kruger, interviewed by Monika Sprüth, had very clear reasons for her decisions: "I frequently have said that I think it has been important to me to enter what I call the 'symbolic space of Mary Boone's Gallery'. It has been an important site for the discourses of contemporary art making. And I think that is it central to the distribution of my work and meaning, that it be in a place like that [...] because the exhibition structure for objects d'art is very vertical, in order to further my work, and to make it more possible for me to do these other activities, it is with great pleasure that I take my position within the verticality of that system also, and use that position to make changes." [25] At the very least, this criticism leveled by the critic or art historian to

the artist assumes a division of labor that disadvantages the artist.

I, for one, never worry that Lawler doesn't treat every situation as an occasion for transformation, which is to say that she has an ethics- that compels her to speak critically. As Ann Goldstein observes in her Wexner catalogue essay, "a sense of time, of timeliness, underscores all of her work" [26], including the moment of the retrospective (which this exhibition was, with a difference). Goldstein concurs with critic Kate Linker, writing at an earlier moment in Lawler's reception, about the flexibility of Lawler's practice within the institution: "framed by institutions whose boundaries it permeates [...] that only provisionally arrest its play". [27] For art history, and art criticism, the distinction between institutional critique's first phase and its second, which Deutsche argues in a new essay about Lawler, "questions the authority of its own voice rather than simply challenging the authoritarian voice of museums, corporations and governments" [28], is still an unexamined one. I provisionally conclude that among the timeliness of Lawler's practices is her feminist critique of the authority of artistic subjectivity. This idea is evidenced in her dissenting interviews, in her own words. And still I have not written a single word about what her work does rather than says to disturb.