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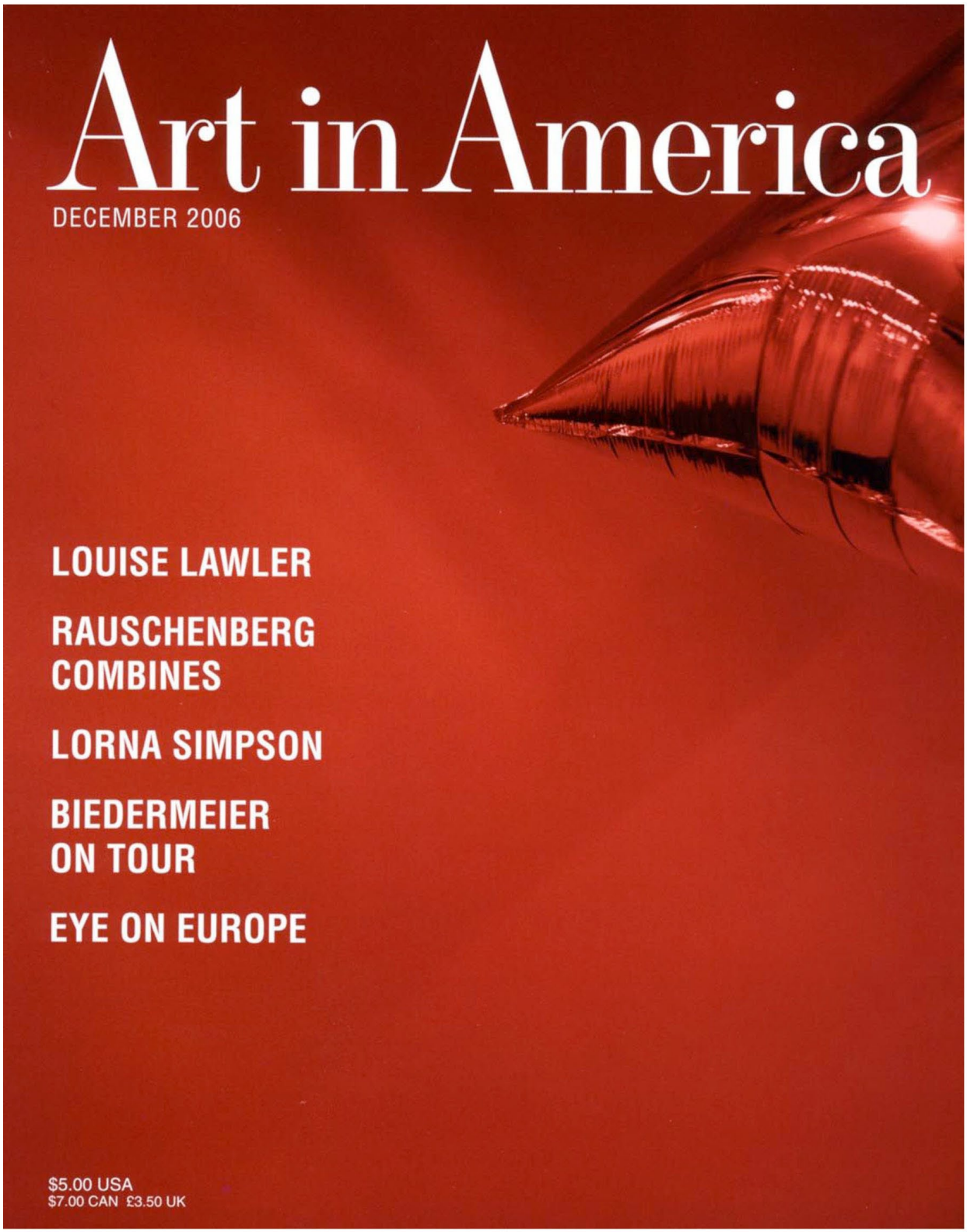


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View of Louise Lawler's Please Pay Attention, *2006, ink on vinyl, 16 by 32 feet; at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus. All installation photos this article Cory Piehowicz, courtesy Wexner Center.*

Louise Lawler Looks Back

In conceptually and visually elegant work both old and new, installed at the Wexner Center with great sensitivity to its eccentric architecture, Lawler illuminates the business of showing and owning art.

BY KIRSTEN SWENSON

Twenty-one years ago, artist Andrea Fraser speculated on how Louise Lawler's career might unfold, writing in these pages: "If Lawler manages to escape both marginalization and incorporation, it is because, whatever position she may occupy, she is always somewhere/something else."[1] Now, the first major U.S. survey of Lawler's work, curated by Helen Molesworth, is being held at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio. "Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back)," as the show is called, illuminates the many ways Lawler has engaged the workings of museums and the art market—institutions whose terms she deploys in acts of complicity and critique, and whose ideological impulses are often shown by Lawler to shadow grave political realities. The very agility Fraser pointed to has helped Lawler win significant validation for work that explores the mechanisms of power from within.

How do academics and curators historicize an artist who aims to expose the mythologies of history writing and of museum practices? In 2000, when Molesworth (who was curator of contemporary art at the Baltimore Museum of Art at the time) approached Lawler about doing a retrospective, the artist wasn't interested. 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," Molesworth explains. "Above all else it was an imprimatur of the legitimizing power of the institution."[2] Molesworth arrived at the Wexner as chief curator in late 2002 and proceeded to devise, with Lawler, an exhibition that "looks back" but also looks around: at the viewer, at the institution, and even at its setting on a university campus in the Ohio state capital.

"Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back)" is not a conventional museum survey. Features of the genre are certainly detectable: key moments from Lawler's 30-plus-year career are represented, as are examples of the range of mediums she has employed, from photography, exhibition-related ephemera, sound and housewares to Letraset wall text and, most recently, video. But because of the work's sensitivity to context, much of it is significantly altered by being shown at the Wexner Center, which itself becomes a primary subject. And several new works were made for the survey. The very title of the exhibition, which omits the artist's name, signals the dismantling of formalities.

Lawler's first survey-related act took place in October 2005, when she came to the Wexner to photograph the installation and opening of "Part Object Part Sculpture," Molesworth's reconsideration of the legacy of Duchamp. In color photographs from

View of the exhibition "Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back)," 2006; at the Wexner Center.

Right top, Untitled (Stella/Sotheby's), *1989, Cibachrome, crystal, felt, 2 by 3½ by 3½ inches.*

Right bottom, Untitled (Dreams), *1993, Cibachrome, crystal, felt, 2 by 3½ by 3½ inches. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Metro Pictures Gallery, New York.*

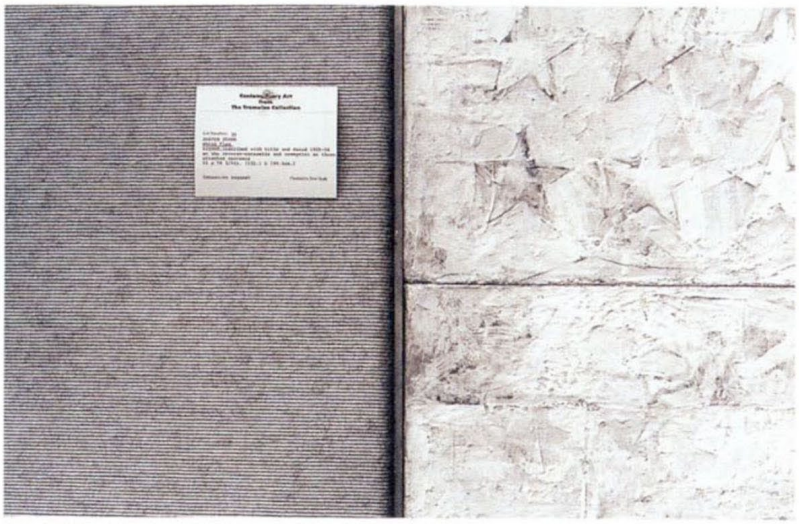
this occasion, erotically charged objects like Duchamp's *Female Fig Leaf* look eerily impassive as they await installation. Cy Twombly sculptures and Duchamp's hat rack readymade are miniaturized and seen through a half-globe paperweight in *October 29, 2005-February 26, 2006* (Lawler's double dates reflect when a photograph was taken and printed, respectively). Molesworth and Lawler chose, together, to present this and other paperweights atop unusually tall, narrow plinths in the center of a gallery, exaggerating the trappings of display and generating a sense of rarefied, jewel-like objects that contradicts the paperweight's status as cheap souvenir.

These new works form the conceptual, self-referential core of "Twice Untitled" and also contribute to the Wexner's internal archive. As Molesworth puts it, "We're a kunsthalle, we have no permanent collection, so our institutional memory functions differently."[3] *Artichoke* (2005/2006) captures a stylish table arrangement from the opening reception for "Part Object Part Sculpture," foregrounding pomp and circumstance against a blurry backdrop of explanatory wall text that contains phrases like "the pleasures and problems of the body." Eros-themed photographs from "Part Object Part Sculpture" provide a fresh context for earlier works by Lawler that focus on gender and sexual identity. Lawler has long trained her gaze at the juncture where the artifice of display comes up against the pleasures and problems of the body, as in sensuous images of ancient marble nudes tucked away in storage. One example at the Wexner is *Nipple* (1991/1993), in which photographs of sculptures of nude males are paired with a wall text query to the viewer, "Does He Get Enough Attention?," drawing on voyeuristic pleasure to thaw the cold academic gaze.

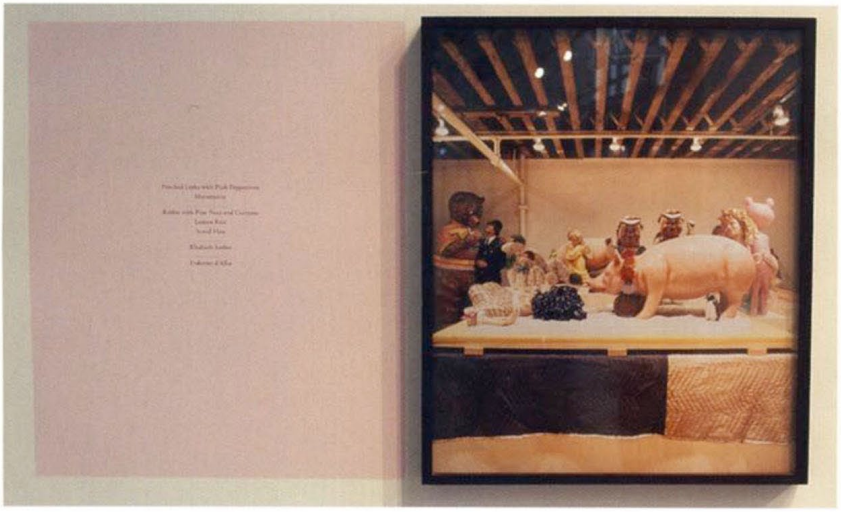
Just as Lawler's concern with the museum's own history and future extends the temporal

The Christie's series comes off as a coolly detached exposé of the social life of art. But these images are also meant to enact the same formalist terms as the works they reframe.

dimensions of her show, her spatial engagement with the institution is open-ended. Physical boundaries, such as they are in this famously fluid exhibition space, are ignored. In addition to its connection to "Part Object Part Sculpture," Lawler's survey is entwined with two shows at the Wexner contemporaneous with her own, and specifically chosen by Molesworth to expand and reflect Lawler's strategies. "Shiny" is a selection by Molesworth of lustrous objects addressed to the erotic and



Board of Directors ***(detail), 1989, mat with text, black-and-white photograph, 16 by 22¼ inches.***



Between Reagan and Bush, ***1989, Cibachrome, 22 by 20 inches, painted wall with type, 22 by 20 inches. Collection Metro Pictures Gallery. Courtesy Wexner Center.***

Right, **Artichoke,** ***2005/2006, Cibachrome, 39⅝ by 34 inches. Double dates indicate when the photo was taken and when printed.***

playful desires that drive consumerism; Jeff Koons's gigantic *Balloon Dog* is featured, as is Lawler's photograph of his *Balloon Flower* (in which the lurid sculpture is seen through yellow safety railing). Andy Warhol's *Silver Pillows* are also part of "Shiny," and appear in Lawler's survey in photographs that dangle at various angles from the ceiling. The exhibition "Frank Stella 1958," which originated earlier this year at Harvard's Arthur M. Sackler Museum [see *A.i.A.*, June-July '06], cohabitates with Lawler's show as well. Its presence is a curatorial nod to the many photographs that Lawler has taken of Stella's work *in situ*; as an exposition of a relatively obscure moment in Stella's career, the show also serves as an example of the sort of monumentalizing historiography that Lawler eschews.

While many of Lawler's gestures at the Wexner Center are subtle, a site-specific mural-size photograph of a pair of framed paintings turned to face the wall dominates the lobby, café and entranceway to the galleries. Instead of paintings, we see picture wires, the logo of the framing company, the storage pads upon which the paintings rest—in short, the apparatus of art's invisible support system, a cottage industry of art handlers, framers, insurers and gallery workers. And, of course, we see the floor and walls of a gallery space. Since, in Lawler's eyes, artworks are constituted by the rituals of display, it is a favorite tactic of hers to capture art before or after its formal presentation—to sneak an unceremonious glimpse backstage. The sight of framed paintings awaiting hanging is familiar to anyone who has seen an exhibition being installed. But when this sight is photographed and displayed, the procedural becomes symbolic, and the banal becomes politically charged. What at

The live-feed video estheticizes the surveillance cameras that now monitor most public spaces. And like their counterparts, Lawler's monitors have no official acknowledgment.

first seems neutral takes on an anti-expressive stance: Lawler stages a refusal of participation that signals protest and withdrawal.

A wall label for this massive image reads, *Please Pay Attention* (2006). Tear-off tabs dispense a Web address (www.truthout.org/docs_2006/083106Z.shtml) of a site that hosts an editorial by MSNBC's Keith Olbermann about a recent speech by Donald Rumsfeld in which the secretary of defense invoked Hitler to justify the war in Iraq. "There Is Fascism, Indeed," Olbermann argues in reference to Rumsfeld's absolutism and disdain for dissent. Since Lawler's work is predicated on awareness of place and audience, it matters to her that Ohio's political landscape is toxic. Her survey opened in the state capital amid a heated governor's race involving the Republican secretary of state, Ken Blackwell, who certifies Ohio's elections. The specter of the 2004 presidential race, tainted by allegations of vote-counting fraud and disenfranchisement, looms large in Ohio politics. The week before Lawler's show opened in September, Representative Bob Ney of the adjacent congressional district pleaded guilty to accepting illegal gifts from lobbyist Jack Abramoff, but refused to resign his seat.

Please Pay Attention, while hardly radical on a university campus, is provocative in a local way. The primary target of Lawler's plea for attention would seem to be Ohio State University students. Urgent but bureaucratic in tone, the wall label mirrors administrative language on a campus that processes tens of thousands of educations each year. But it also invites engagement with the artist's political views in the more intimate space of the Web. As the survey's introductory work, *Please Pay Attention* emphasizes that art is always experienced

Left to right, **Kusama,** *2005/2006;* **Unsentimental,** *1999/2000; one of five "Fixed Intervals" (with Allan McCollum), 1988/1992; at the Wexner Center.*

Bulbs, *2006, Fujiflex print on museum box, 39¾ inches square; at the Wexner Center.*

Right (left to right), one of two monitors linked with two security cameras for an untitled closed-circuit surveillance piece, 2006, and **Nude,** *2002/2003, Cibachrome on museum box, 60 by 40 by 2 inches; at the Wexner Center.*

through the lens of the present. It encourages reading Lawler's work from the 1970s forward against live events.

By today's standards, Lawler's portrayals of the Reagan administration's militarism and concomitant taste for old Hollywood elegance seem quaint: six wineglasses placed on a small shelf are embossed in gold with the phrase *It costs $590,000 a day to operate an aircraft carrier* (1986). In a similar vein, *Between Reagan and Bush* (1989) combines a photograph of a menagerie of Koons's porcelain figurines in storage (a buxom blonde embracing the Pink Panther and a host of Disneyesque characters) with a Letraset menu featuring dishes like an appetizer of "Poached Leeks with Pink Peppercorn Mayonnaise," applied to a pink-painted section of wall. Lawler's politicization of decadence invokes the cultural criticism of figures like Fredric Jameson, who famously indicted postmodernism as "the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world. . . ."[4] Lodged in the seemingly inconsequential details of civility—a toast with wine, a poached leek to start—is the brutal reality of a superpower nation.

The Wexner Center, architect Peter Eisenman's "deconstructivist" 1989 icon, is a notoriously bewildering implosion of the white cube, an exhibition space with scarcely a 90-degree angle but with plenty of fabulously irrational touches, such as a staircase to nowhere. The effects of these dislocating coordinates are redoubled by Lawler. *Kusama* (2005/2006), a photograph of a polka-dotted, upholstered relief by Yayoi Kusama awaiting installation in "Part Object Part Sculpture," is hung at the very edge of a temporary exhibition wall bisecting a trapezoidal gallery. A white column blocks the view to *Kusama*. Does the institution frame the work, or is the work framing the institution?

Some of Lawler's best-known images are from the 1980s and reflect the same cultural condition that Eisenman's disorienting architecture has come to represent: late capitalism and an attendant theorizing of the postmodern. Lawler knows that art in private hands—a Mondrian for the bedroom, or a Pollock for the parlor—has a hard time sustaining radicality. As the art market boomed in the late 1980s, flush with leveraged capital, she took photographs inside Christie's auction house. *Board of Directors* (1989) captures a section of Jasper Johns's *White Flag*—a painting from the late 1950s, when jingoist Cold War intolerance was at its height—against the textured pattern of an auction house display wall. Such photographs of artwork, framed with hermetic tightness, draw attention precisely to the complex systems

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View of the two 1998 series "Something About Time and Space But I'm Not Sure What It Is (One)" and "Something About Time and Space But I'm Not Sure What It Is (More)"; at the Wexner Center.

Lawler

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of valuation outside the frame. The Christie's series comes off as a coolly detached exposé of the social life of art. But these images are meant to enact the same formalist terms as the works they reframe, borrowing their prestige, esthetic appeal and social valences and circulating as commodities in the same art market. It is an example of the kind of complicity that makes Lawler's work so difficult, and sustaining.

It costs $590,000 a day to operate an aircraft carrier, *1986, six embossed glasses (gold or silver), each 7¾ inches high.*

Lawler's focus on "the apparatus the artist is threaded through,"[5] to use Robert Smithson's formulation from 1972, dates to at least that year, when she first conceived *Birdcalls*, a sound and wall text installation expanded in 1981. The earliest work at the Wexner, *Birdcalls* has a stealth presence. Coos, chirps and squawks intermittently echo through the gallery and, with the visitor's concentration, resolve into familiar names: Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, Vito Acconci and those of 25 other male artists. *Birdcalls* was conceived and expanded at times when "artists with name recognition seemed to be dominantly male."[6] Lawler's *Birdcalls* rings through the galleries with the inevitability of nature; they are, in some sense, a mocking indictment of a collective judgment in which both the spectator and the institution are implicated.

Birdcalls is installed near two video monitors that hang on a gallery wall like animated paintings, playing live video feed of spectators. Birdcalls and ambient noise form a soundtrack. Video is a new medium for Lawler, but it sustains a characteristic strategy: a seemingly autonomous closed system, which has the "what you see is what you see" literality that much of her work initially proclaims, in fact concentrates the logic of a broad and consequential social phenomenon. Beyond the integration of spectatorial involvement into the exhibition, the live-feed video installation estheticizes the recent proliferation of governmental and private surveillance cameras, which now monitor nearly all public spaces. Lawler's monitors draw further parallels with their policing counterparts by the absence of official acknowledgement: they have no title or wall label, and are not listed in the exhibition checklist or in any other documentation. With the exception of viewer accounts (such as this one), their presence in Lawler's survey is off the record.

Gestures like the introduction of undocumented cameras and monitors blur the lines between artistic act and museum administration, raise questions about intentionality and make reception an especially complicated affair. In a rare disclosure of her aims, Lawler has said, on the topic of the artist's interview, "My reservations are about wanting to foreground the work and not the artist. The work works in the process of its reception. I don't want the work to be accompanied by anything that doesn't accompany it in the real world."[7] Reception is always a highly individual process and hard to specify, but Lawler's work usually says more about the viewer than the artist.

Often, Lawler's overt subject matter effectively separates viewers with privileged information—those who can identify a particular storeroom, sculpture or exhibition in one of her photographs—from laypeople. Lawler considers the collective response to her work, rather than her own artistic objectives, its ultimate arbiter: "I think art is part and parcel of a cumulative and collective enterprise," she has said, "viewed as seen fit by the prevailing culture."[8] But her art is an insider's game. One needs to be told that the shiny brass reliefs that activate the interstices of the Wexner installation, *Fixed Intervals* (1988/1992, a collaboration with Allan McCollum), are "dingbats"—resurrected whimsical typographic spaceholders. Only a Pollock scholar will glance at the 1984 photograph *Pollock and Tureen Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Connecticut, 1984* and respond, as one recently did, "It's *Frieze* (1953-55): JPCR 379. I guess it could be considered his last work."[9] These arcane facts generate an adjunct body of information—stories, criticism, truths and rumors that all become part of the work, constituting the "cumulative and collective enterprise" Lawler seeks.

In a photograph of the backs of two paintings awaiting hanging, Lawler stages a refusal of participation that signals protest and withdrawal.

"Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back)" is site-specific to the Wexner Center and will not travel. But it fulfills the prediction Fraser made two decades ago: Lawler's first U.S. museum survey is neither marginal nor incorporated, and it is vital because it is not about the past but about the present. A new version of Fraser's audience-engaging 1991 monologue *May I Help You?,* to be performed within Lawler's exhibition the day after the November 2006 midterm elections, is likely to again address the politics of display, and place further emphasis on "the connection between prior moments of critique and politicization in the art world and its contemporary conditions."[10] For Lawler, "looking back" is a process of evaluating contemporary circumstances in light of the past, and of presenting a historical narrative that is specifically informed by the concerns of the present. □

1. Andrea Fraser, "In and Out of Place," *Art in America*, June 1985, p. 128.
2. Helen Molesworth in telephone conversation with the author, Sept. 30, 2006.
3. Ibid.
4. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991, p. 5.
5. Bruce Kurtz, "Conversation with Robert Smithson on April 22nd 1972," in Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 200.
6. "Prominence Given, Authority Taken: An Interview with Louise Lawler and Douglas Crimp," in Louise Lawler, *An Arrangement of Pictures*, New York, Assouline, 2000, n.p.
7. Ibid.
8. Martha Buskirk, "Interview with Louise Lawler," *October 70*, Fall 1994, p. 106.
9. Ellen Landau, e-mail to the author dated Oct. 1, 2006.
10. Andrea Fraser's performance *May I Help You?* is described on the Orchard Web site: http://orchard47.org/testshow.php?name=Part%20One.

"Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back)" is currently on view at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio [Sept. 16-Dec. 31]. It is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Helen Molesworth, Rosalyn Deutsche and Ann Goldstein, published by MIT Press.

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