

METRO PICTURES

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EIKON

LOUISE LAWLER



Why Louise Lawler Now

Magdalena Vuković

Business art

A simple glass door leads into the foyer of the head office of the Verbund AG, Austria's biggest electricity company. It marks the transition from the urban square Am Hof, busy with tourists and shoppers, to a totally different ambience. The practical, unexciting office building from the early 1950s stands opposite a colorful mixture of baroque sacred architecture, a neo-classic luxury hotel and, not least, circus tents. Bare of decoration, clearly laid out, with subdued colors: the architectural language of Carl Appel speaks of a place for achievement, not consumption, and this is carried on from the exterior to the interior. "People at work here!" is the unmistakable message, and indeed women and men in business suits are dashing purposefully through the brightly lit, plain hallway with their eyes glued to a smartphone or a stack of papers, not to be distracted in any way. In this site, the Vertical Gallery, the Verbund AG regularly presents its art collection—presently a solo exhibition of the American artist Louise Lawler, where all 27 works in the firm's possession are to be found distributed through seven floors.

Lawler again provokes questions that have been central to her decades of creative work and which have still lost none of their immediacy today. At once, in the reception area, she makes reference to the location of the exhibition and uses a trompe-l'œil situation to challenge the approaching visitor to reflect. Stretched across the entire wall is a commercial interior of the no longer existent New York investment bank Paine Webber. Lawler opens a window into a different era when, for a short time, there was a worldwide economic boom. The photo was taken in 1982, in the heyday of the firm, when its business rooms were covered with art, signaling prosperity and a high level of education. While the view of the New York skyline covers almost three quarters of the picture, it is rounded off on the right with a framed charcoal drawing of a man in a suit. This is part of the series *Men in the Cities*, which resulted in a meteoric rise in the artworld for the American artist Robert Longo. In particular, because they were positioned in the

nomansland between criticism and affirmation, these drawings of attractive businessmen and -women twisting in unusual poses provided their author with both commercial and institutional success.

With her work, Lawler illuminates the ambivalent relationship then and now between ideological and commercial values, art and the art market, artist and buyer. More than thirty-five years and several economic crises later, in the entrance to the Viennese head office, Louise Lawler uses *Arranged by Donald Marron, Susan Brundage, Cheryl Bishop at Paine Webber, Inc NYC (adjusted to fit)* to pose similar questions to another institution. The simple window of the photo shown in Vienna fits seamlessly into Appel's real functional space, and the man in a suit could have been modelled on someone from the busy staff of the Verbund. We are enjoined to reflect not only on the semantic context of the photographed artwork but also on Lawler's role as an artist in this constellation, and, further, on the collection policies of large commercial enterprises.

Collection strategies

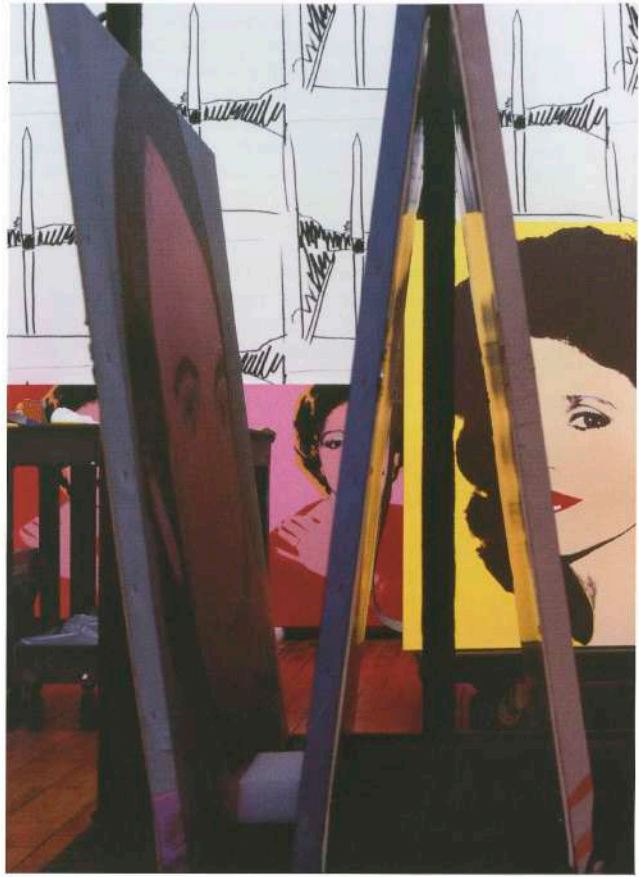
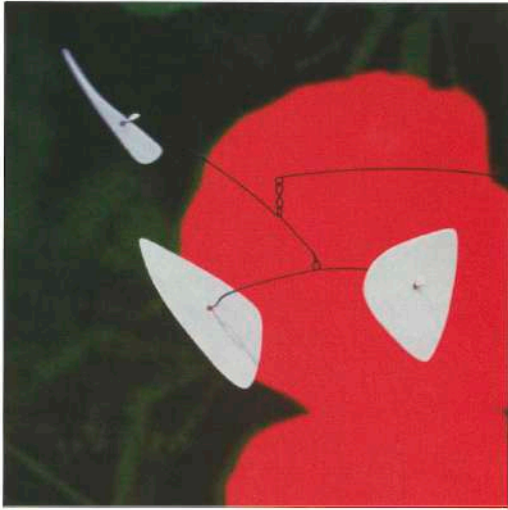
Lawler's profile matches the good reputation of the Verbund collection: with artist names like Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman and Valie Export it has built up a range of works with a feminist emphasis, whose value rises, furthermore, every year. "She's Here," announces Lawler with the exhibition title, blustering self-confidently like so many of her male colleagues. And yet she consistently turns down interview opportunities and, if possible, keeps herself in the background. For example, Gabriele Schor, the director of the collection, would have been pleased to see Lawler's name prominently on the title page of the accompanying catalog, but, at the artist's wish, the focus was placed on her concept: *Selected and Related. Werke von Louise Lawler erworben von der Sammlung Verbund, Wien & Anderen* (Selected and Related. Works by Louise Lawler acquired by the Sammlung Verbund, Vienna, and others.) The artist makes the date of purchase and the relevant seller a component in the name of each picture and she places a list at the beginning of the catalog as an overview. None of her small objects, such as paperweights, or matchboxes, find their way into the collection. The list of purchases, usually made through established galleries and auctioneers, provides a (sadly just fragmentary) insight into the purchasing strategy.











The illustrations of the works in the Sammlung Verbund complement comparable or almost indistinguishable variants from Lawler's total oeuvre. The layout of the exhibition catalog illustrates a problematic relationship between photography and knowledge production, already indicated by Douglas Crimp in his pathbreaking essay *On the Museum's Ruins* (1981), specifically in relation to art history. Photographic reproductions continue to shape our understanding of art but even today we still inquire far too seldom into who photographed them for what purpose, in what location and on whose request.

Lawler's photographs mostly show highly priced artworks in their "habitat," i.e. in auction houses, galleries, museums and their storage rooms as well as in the private lounges of collectors. In their style the photos remind one at first of installation views of the kind institutions themselves have produced for marketing purposes. But Lawler focuses on apparently unimportant details, and thus reveals topoi and inconsistencies. The slogan "institutional critique," which was *en vogue* in the 1980s, is inseparably associated with her. The seriousness of the debate led by such art theorists as Douglas Crimp or Benjamin Buchloh was supplemented by Lawler with surprisingly intuitive, witty comments. With a fine, sharp blade, even today she still slits open the normally impenetrable exterior of institutional representation, without cutting it up, thus opening new fields of thought.

Who makes us cry?

In 2017 the Museum of Modern Art in New York, organized a Lawler solo exhibition entitled *Why Pictures Now*, representing a constantly recurring, thematically flexible recycled object in her oeuvre. The catchy slogan—deliberately not formulated as a question—is a play on the need for an intensive debate about the perception of images, which Lawler repeatedly insists on as timelessly relevant. The photo of an Andy Warhol tondo of Marilyn Monroe, for example, shown at a New York auction in 1988 could be seen double in the MoMA show, but with a different title in each case: *Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?* or *Does Marilyn Monroe Make You Cry?* as Lawler asked. So, who makes us cry? The artist whose paintings achieve record prices, the famous actress as an involuntary object of desire or ultimately neither of them, since, after the

"postmodern enlightenment," we should long have seen through the media and their manipulative power?

Andy Warhol appears again and again in her work as a mythical figure and not least as a textbook example of the male artistic genius, again, for example in *Bird Calls*, an audio installation, for which the idea already existed in 1972. In it Lawler tweets and trills the names of famous male artists, such as John Baldessari, Julian Schnabel, Ed Ruscha and Gerhard Richter, stars of that time who are still fixed components in the canon. With irony and wit Lawler takes them down from the pedestal erected over decades by art institutions and the artists themselves. That the presentation of such a list with topical candidates can create fiendish pleasure underlines Lawler's importance for institutional critique today.

On the relationship between picture and title

By consistently recycling her own subjects, which she not only binds into different contexts but often also slightly alters, Lawler gets down to the bottom of the constitution of meaning. Her work *It Could Be Elvis* shows the view into a bedroom panelled in wood. On the wall is a screen print portrait of Andy Warhol, only half constructed and barely identifiable. Of course true aficionados know what they are seeing, and indeed the cynical picture title is aimed at them. In fact it is a portrait by Joseph Beuys, and Lawler makes it clear that the stars of the artworld have their effect in a clearly delimited terrain. With a slight change in perspective the German artist's characteristic hat comes into view and robs the title of its point. Now it runs *It Could Be Black and White* and reads like a metaphor for "black-and-white vision," and thus the reduction of complex constructs to easily understood dualisms.

Gabriele Schor describes Lawler's working manner as a "practice of the plurality of the factual." That sounds suspiciously like the unworthy phrase of 2017 the so-called "alternative facts." While this neologism serves to disguise deliberately fake news, Lawler, in contrast to that, provides us with an analytical examination of information and especially images. Confronted with a flood of data that can no longer be tested, the knowledge that they can be manipulated turns out to be a valuable tool. ♦