06 2006

Louise Lawler's Rude Museum

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On the brink of World War II, Virginia Woolf advised women to remember, learn from, and use derision, of which they had long been objects.[1] *Three Guineas*, Woolf's classic essay of ethico-political thought, counts derision among the great "un-paid teachers" of women, educating them about the behavior and motives of human beings, about, that is, psychology, a field that Woolf, unlike many leftist critics today, did not separate from that of the political.[2] Before writing the essay, Woolf had received requests for contributions from three organizations, each promoting a different cause: women's education, the advancement of women in the professions, and the prevention of war. At least that is the book's conceit. She responded by linking the three movements, making clear that for her the goal of feminism was not just equality for women but a better, less war-like, society. Since, she argued, the professions as currently practiced encourage qualities that lead to war—grandiosity, vanity, egoism, patriotism, possessiveness, combativeness—women must not simply become educated professionals but do so differently: "How can we enter the professions and yet remain civilized human beings; human beings, that is, who wish to prevent war?"[3] Women can help, she suggested, by refusing to be deferential to the esteemed professions and instead considering it their duty to express the opinion that

professional customs and rituals are contemptible. And what better way to accomplish this task than through humor, which, as Mignon Nixon notes, following Freud, discharges psychic energy, has pleasurable effects, and "promotes the defiance of deference"? [4] Woolf's humor was of the type that Freud called "tendentious." It served the purpose of criticizing authority and, like hostile jokes, exploited "something ridiculous in our enemy."[5] Here is a sample from her observations on professional dress:

> How many, how splendid, how extremely ornate they are —the clothes worn by the educated man in his public capacity! Now you dress in violet; a jeweled crucifix swings on your breast; now your shoulders are covered with lace; now furred with ermine; now slung with many linked chains set with precious stones. Now you wear wigs on your heads; rows of graduated curls descend to your necks. Now your hats are boat-shaped, or cocked; now they mount in cones of black fur.[6]

Woolf derided men's professional trappings because of the hierarchical distinctions of rank and the will to power they signified: "Every button, rosette and stripe seems to have some symbolical meaning. Some have the right to wear plain buttons only; others rosettes; some may wear a single stripe; others three, four or five. And each curl or stripe is sewn on at precisely the right distance apart—it may be one inch for one man, one inch and a quarter for another."[7] Distinctions of dress, like adding titles before or letters after names, were designed to show superiority and to arouse competition and jealousy. Therefore the professional fashion system encouraged "a disposition towards war."[8]

Today, some critics find Woolf's hope that women, by virtue of their earlier exclusion, might change the professions outdated,

irrelevant to a historical period in which women have to a considerable extent entered public life. Yet latent in Woolf's plea—what necessitates it—is, I think, the thoroughly timely recognition that the opposite is just as likely to occur: women can identify with the masculinist position. "It would be perfectly possible for a woman to occupy the role of a representative man," as Homi Bhabha puts it, explaining why he uses the term *masculinism* not to designate the power of actual male persons but to denote a position of power authorized by the claim that one comprehends and represents the social totality.[9] Masculinism understood in this sense is a relationship that can be sustained only by declaring war on otherness, by subjugating that which cannot be fully known. Woolf believed that cultural institutions cultivate the triumphalist relationship. Alert, like her anti-fascist contemporary Walter Benjamin, to the barbarism underlying every "document of civilization,"[10] she approached such documents warily. No venerated institution was safe from her derision. She even listed the British Royal Academy of Art, the institution that safeguarded standards of professional competence in art, among the great "battlegrounds," whose members, she said, "seem to be as bloodthirsty as the profession of arms itself."[11]

Johann Zoffany, Life Class at the Royal Academy, 1772

Woolf was referring to combative behavior between the male academicians, but the Academy inflicted another kind of violence, one that can be discerned in Johann Zoffany's portrait of the academicians, *Life Class at the Royal Academy* (1772), a painting that has been an icon of feminist art history since Linda Nochlin used it to illustrate her landmark essay of 1971, "Why Have There

Been No Great Women Artists?"[12] Nochlin treats Zoffany's conversation piece as a document of sexism, a work that shows an aspect of historical discrimination against women in the arts. Zoffany presented the academicians gathered around a nude male model at a time when women were excluded from access to the male nude and therefore from history painting, the most prestigious genre in the Academy's hierarchy. He solved the problem of including the Academy's two female founding members, Angelica Kauffmann and Mary Moser, by portraying them as painted portraits hanging on the wall. Directly facing the nude model, lit by a chandelier, stands Sir Joshua Reynolds, president of the Academy and author of the *Discourses on Art*, which he addressed as lectures to the "Gentlemen" of the Royal Academy between 1769 and 1790. But, according to the critic Naomi Schor, "Reynolds" does not just name a historical person; it is also "the proper name for the idealist aesthetics he promotes."[13] The classical busts and figures strewn around Zoffany's life class allude to this aesthetic. Schor concludes that Reynolds' classical discourse, in which genius consists of the ability to comprehend a unity—what Reynolds enthusiastically called "A WHOLE"—and in which the feminine is associated with the detail, which endangers masculine wholeness, cannot be separated from the discourse of misogyny.[14]

Idealist approaches to art are hardly limited to eighteenth-century classicism; they have remained alive for centuries in the widespread notion that the work of art is a complete, autonomous entity that elevates viewers above the contingencies of material life. Zoffany's *Academicians*, then, is not just a period piece that documents women's historical exclusion from art education. It also records the transformation of the female figure from artist to image, from viewing subject to visual object, to what feminists two hundred

years later theorized as a signifier of "to-be-looked-at-ness."[15] It documents, that is, the representational economy that Freud called fetishism, a perversion originating in the phallocentric attempt to triumph over the female body and its supposed threat to wholeness. Zoffany unwittingly shows us that the aesthetic institution is a masculinist battleground—an authoritarian rather than democratically agonistic realm—in a somewhat different sense than Woolf had in mind.

So far I have argued that Woolf's feminist challenge to cultural institutions is not gender-exclusive. Just as women can identify with masculine positions, men, who historically have occupied actual positions of power, can dis-identify with them. There can, that is, be a non-phallic masculinity. Still, it is interesting to note that when, in the 1970s and 1980s, a group of mostly female artists, including Louise Lawler, entered art institutions in order to explore them as, precisely, battlegrounds, they did so differently than the first wave of institution-critical artists.[16] For whereas Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and Michael Asher had drawn attention to the presence of economic and political power in the seemingly pure and neutral space of the museum and to the way the museum embodies dominant ideology and so exercises discursive power, and whereas works like Broodthaer's *Décor: A Conquest* (1975) and Haacke's *MoMA Poll* (1970) had, in different ways, specifically connected museums to war, the second wave—such diverse artists as Lawler, Victor Burgin, Andrea Fraser, Judith Barry, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Fred Wilson, and Mary Kelly, among others—at once extended and questioned the critique. Art historians have proposed a number of ways to distinguish between the work of the so-called first "generation" of institutional critics and the second, postmodern generation, Lawler in particular: the

second questions the authority of its own voice rather than simply challenging the authoritarian voice of museums, corporations, and governments;[17] Lawler locates institutional power in a "systematized set of presentational procedures, whereas Asher, Buren, Haacke, and Broodthears situated power in a centralized building or elite;"[18] Lawler explores not only the contextual production of meaning but, in deconstructive fashion, the boundlessness of context.[19] Still another difference is that, unlike the first generation, feminist postmodernists were influenced by psychoanalysis and recognized to varying degrees the political importance of articulating relationships between psychical and social realms. Following in Woolf's footsteps, they approached institutions of aesthetic display not only as producers of bourgeois ideology but as spaces where dangerous, masculinist fantasies are solidified.

Louise Lawler, Statue before Painting, Perseus with the Head of Medusa by Canova, 1982

Lawler may not have been an exponent of psychoanalytic feminism, but many of her photographs lead us into the heart of such "solid wishes." And they do so with what Birgit Pelzer aptly calls a "dose of derision."[20] Literary theorist Kenneth Gross uses the term *solid wishes* in *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, a book about relationships between figural statues and fantasy, about statues *as* fantasies. "Works of sculpture," writes Gross, are "solid wishes, or vehicles of a wish for things that *are* solid."[21] It seems fitting, then, that some of the works in which Lawler most astutely exposes the art institution's fantasy life are a group of photographs, taken in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that depict figural

sculpture, and, in particular, classical and neoclassical statues, in museum settings. *Statue before Painting,* Perseus with the Head of Medusa *by Canova* (1982) is exemplary. It served as the introductory image in Lawler's first published portfolio of the photographs she calls "arrangements of pictures." The black-and-white portfolio, itself an arrangement of pictures, appeared in the Fall 1983 issue of the journal *October*. Lawler's "arrangements" depict art objects in their contexts of display, calling attention to the presentational apparatus of specific arts institutions and, at the same time, to "art as institution," a phrase coined by Peter Bürger to refer to a more dispersed aesthetic apparatus: "The concept 'art as an institution'...refers to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works."[22] In such works as *Statue before Painting*, Lawler puts existing museological arrangements of artworks on display and makes visible the elements of the presentational apparatus, which, though authoritative, generally lie on the margins of the museum-goer's visual and cognitive field—architecture, labels, vitrines, pedestals, guards, installation shots, catalogues, security systems, and so on. Lawler appropriates the museum's arrangements and re-arranges them in a manner that recalls Freud's approach to dream interpretation, an approach that re-arranges the space of the dream, bringing its peripheral elements, its details, into focus (and *vice versa*) in order to analyze the dream-work that distorts the wish at the dream's core. While it is tempting to see Lawler's arrangements, with their fragmented objects, exaggerated details, and enigmatic juxtapositions, as dream scenarios, they might more accurately be regarded as analyses of the museum's "dreams," of the desire embodied in its arrangements.

Lawler shot *Statue before Painting,* Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, by Canova* in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, from the vantage point of the museum's Great Hall Balcony, where Antonio Canova's marble statue was then located. The statue occupied a position on the neoclassical museum building's processional axis, which begins at the steps leading to the main entrance, continues through the Great Hall and central staircase—both are overlooked by the balcony—and culminates at the arched entrance to the galleries of European paintings. *Perseus* stood across from the entrance, beneath an echoing arch on the balcony. The museum's official guidebook describes it as a second, more refined version of a sculpture that, when first executed and exhibited in Canova's studio between 1770 and 1800, "was acclaimed as the last word in the continuing purification of the Neoclassical style."[23] Like "Reynolds," "Canova," too, is a proper name for idealist aesthetics, whose patriarchal relations of sexual difference, observed in Zoffany's *Life Class*, are concretized in the roughly contemporaneous *Perseus*. Seen in Lawler's photograph from a low, oblique angle and radically cropped so that it is cut by the upper edge of the photograph, Canova's statue, its phallus, and its pedestal—architectural equivalent of the phallus—occupy the forefront of the viewer's vision. At the same time, pushed to the right edge of the image, the statue is dislodged from its central position, disrupting the Museum's symmetrical arrangement. Behind Perseus, beyond the balcony's balustrade, the staircase, flanked by colonnades of Corinthian columns, rises from the Great Hall below and leads to the double arches through which visitors, after ascending the stairs, enter the collection of paintings. Framed by the arches hangs Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's *The Triumph of Marius* (1729), the opening exhibit in the anteroom to the Museum's history of Western painting. Its upper portion is sliced by the lower edge of the sign inscribed with the word *Paintings,* a

mutilation that corresponds to that of the Perseus statue, which Lawler brings into visual alignment with the Tiepolo. In a second correspondence, the colossal painting dwarfs its spectators, who look up at it in an attitude that rhymes with our own angle of vision of statue and phallus in Lawler's photograph. Lawler accentuates this point of view, placing her viewers in a position that mimics not only that of the depicted viewers of Tiepolo but that of a small child catching sight of its parents' genitals. She thus suggests, perhaps unwittingly, that the psychic life of the museum bears a relation to infantile fantasies. The juxtaposition of the spectators' stance in front of the Tiepolo and Lawler's upward glance at Perseus literalizes both the deference with which art as institution treats works of art and the veneration with which classical antiquity regarded the phallus, defined as the figurative representation of the male organ. Drawing attention to the way the museum's arrangement includes a prescribed position for viewers, one that enforces a certain mode of spectatorship, Lawler simultaneously, as we shall see, makes Perseus the butt of derision and consequently re-positions her audience, inviting them to defy deference.

First, however, note one more similarity between the Tiepolo and the Canova, this one on the level of thematic content: each depicts a violent conquest in which a male protagonist establishes his authority by mastering difference—racial and sexual, respectively. Each glorifies war. In the Museum's words, *The Triumph of Marius* "shows the Roman general Gaius Marius in the victor's chariot while the conquered African king Jugurtha walks before him, bound in chains....The Latin inscription on the cartouche at the top translates, 'The Roman people behold Jugurtha laden with chains.' "[24] For his part, Canova portrays the classical hero Perseus holding aloft the head of Medusa, which he has just

severed. Medusa, of course, is the female monster of classical mythology, who had snakes instead of hair and whose look turned men to stone.

At the time, Medusa's head had considerable currency among psychoanalytic feminists working in the visual arts, largely because in 1922 Freud had written a short essay about it and because in 1973, in an equally short text, "You Don't Know What Is Happening, Do You Mr. Jones?," precursor to her famous "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey had used Freud's interpretation as the basis of a theory of phallocentric investments in looking at images.[25] Additionally, Medusa had become a symbol of feminist subversion of phallocentric mastery in such writing as Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" of 1975.[26] Freud, as is well known, analyzed Medusa's head as a fetish: an object—visual, in this case—of masculine fixation that originates in fear of the female body, which is (mis)perceived as castrated, as missing the penis and, more importantly, the phallus, signifier of the presence that makes the subject whole. For Freud, Medusa's horrifying, decapitated head, surrounded by hair, symbolizes the female genitals and therefore the horror of castration. At the same time, it serves as a "token of triumph" over castration anxiety, an object that disavows and conquers the threat of sexual difference. Visually, it contains multiple penis replacements in the form of Medusa's snake-hair, and on the narrative level, it turns men to stone, thus stiffening them and reassuring them of the presence of the penis. Mulvey argued that just as Medusa's head is an image not of a woman but, rather, of the threatened masculine subject restored to wholeness, so in a culture ordered by phallocentric categorizations of human beings, in which the feminine is equated with absence and loss, images of women have served, in various ways, as self-images of men, or, more importantly, of the

narcissistic masculine ego. The feminist discourse about fetishism was concerned with the nature of masculine subjectivity, especially as it is reinforced by vision.

When *October* published Lawler's "Arrangement of Pictures," it mis-captioned *Statue before Painting*, calling it *Statue before* a *Painting*. The editorial "correction"—the insertion of the indefinite article *a*—stemmed from a failure to get the title's joke, to understand that it is a joke. For the real title mimics the phrase *ladies before gentlemen*, which is part of and here stands for an idealizing patriarchal discourse that supposedly places women on pedestals. In conjunction with the photograph, the title links patriarchal ideals and idealist aesthetics, which the neoclassical statue represents, suggesting that there is an alignment of sexual and aesthetic hierarchies in the museum. The image reverses the order of genders in the original phrase, for here it is a male statue —a phallic figure—that stands before a painting and occupies a pedestal. But the reversal only reveals the true gender relations behind idealizing arrangements, showing that in the patriarchal visual field "the true exhibit is always the phallus," as Mulvey puts it.[27]

To an extent, Lawler retrieves the artistic practice, prevalent among certain sculptors in the mid-1950s to late 1960s, of what Mignon Nixon, in her superb study of Louise Bourgeois, calls "posing the phallus." This practice, Nixon argues, targeted the phallus with humor, which has the political effect of undermining it as a patriarchal symbol, and inverts the seriousness of fetishism. [28] Yet Lawler's work differs from that of the earlier artists since, instead of sculpting a phallus, she uses her customary techniques of appropriation and montage—of "making meaning by juxtaposition and alignment"[29]—to pose a found phallus, one of the many "readymade" phalluses that proliferate in art museums, like snakes

on Medusa's head. Posing the phallus in the context of an institution-critical work, in which Perseus takes up a position as guardian of the Museum's painting collection, *Statue before Painting* exhibits the role played by art as institution in reproducing sexual norms and maintaining the patriarchal overvaluation of the phallus.[30] For one thing, the photograph comments on the historical exclusion of female artists from the museum and, for another, it alludes to the male-dominated revival of traditional painting that was legitimated by art institutions in the 1970s and 1980s. But Lawler's photograph plays a bigger joke on the Metropolitan. It hints that what underlies, what precedes or comes before the museum's aesthetic arrangements is the desire solidified in both the form and subject matter of Canova's statue of Perseus. The idealized, neoclassical sculpture, substitute for an ideal body, materializes the phallocentric fantasy of the self, a self that in its dream of autonomy disavows its constitutive exclusion of and relation to others. In fact, Jacques Lacan, writing about the mirror stage as the matrix of narcissistic ego-formation, described the mirror image—external reflection of an idealized self—as "the *statue* in which man projects himself."[31] And the iconography of Perseus and Medusa foregrounds, as does the story told in Tiepolo's painting, the subordination and conquest of otherness—the warlike disposition—necessary to maintain the narcissistic fiction. The phallic statue metonymically alludes to the triumphalist subject positioned by the museum's idealist aesthetic.

Statue before Painting deprives Perseus of his token of triumph; Medusa's head is pushed outside the frame, Perseus is decapitated, and it would seem that Medusa, herself a kind of sculptor, has turned him to stone. Of course this also fulfills his wish, soothing as well as testifying to his castration anxiety. Still, the most striking feature of the photograph is its attack on the integrity of the male

body. The photographic cut challenges the sculpture's closure, exposing it to its outside. According to Christian Metz, the cut, which produces "the off-frame effect in photography," is a figure of castration because "it marks the place of an irreversible absence, a place from which the look has been diverted forever,"[32] Lawler's cut directs the diverted look to three objects that remain in the frame and that, as fetishes, represent attempts to establish integrity and disavow vulnerability—pedestal, phallus, and museum label, an element that visually echoes the phallus and no doubt bears the artist's proper name, the "Name-of-the-Father," Lacan's name for the patriarchal order of sexual difference.[33] Precisely by giving prominence to these elements, Lawler takes away their authority, [34] as she does that of the grand staircase, itself an elevating structure that symbolically lifts visitors, just as the pedestal lifts the work of art, above the contingencies of everyday social life, encouraging them to take up the self-regarding position that Georges Bataille described in his definition of the museum as, precisely, a mirror:

> It is not just that the museums of the world as a whole today represent a colossal accumulation of riches but, more important, that all those who visit these museums represent without a doubt the most grandiose spectacle of a humanity liberated from material concerns and devoted to contemplation. We need to recognize that the galleries and the objects of art form only the container, the content of which is constituted by the visitors....The museum is the colossal mirror in which man finally contemplates himself in every respect, finds himself literally admirable, and abandons himself to the ecstasy expressed in all the art magazines.[35]

Louise Lawler, The Rude Museum, 1987

Statue before Painting reveals and refuses the museum's positioning of the spectator, and it does so with supreme economy. Like a really good tendentious joke that, according to Freud, allows the teller and the recipient or, in our case, artist and viewer, to enjoy the pleasure of being impolite to "the great, the dignified and the mighty."[36] Indeed, Lawler calls one of her later arrangements of pictures, really an arrangement of statues, *The Rude Museum* (1987). "Rude" refers to the photograph's subject matter—a museum devoted to the work of nineteenth-century French sculptor François Rude—but it can also be read as a pun that alludes to the barbaric fantasies fostered in art institutions and, more, to the acts of impropriety with which Lawler herself, in this and other photographs, re-arranges museums and, as I have argued, exposes their fantasies. It alludes, that is, to Lawler's own rude museums.

The actual Rude Museum, located in the transept of St. Etienne church in Dijon, consists of casts of works by Rude, a great patriot and admirer of the antique, though given in his sculpture to romantic gestures. Dominating the upper portion of Lawler's photograph is a plaster cast of Rude's most famous work, the high stone relief on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, *Departure of the Volunteers in 1792*, popularly known as *La Marseillaise* (1833-36). Near the center of the relief, which is severed by the frame of Lawler's picture so that the enormous figure of an especially militaristic Liberty hovering above cannot be seen, is a classically inspired male nude marching off to war. Like Canova's *Perseus,* Rude's soldier is beheaded by Lawler's cropping of the photograph, a cut that foreshadows the fate of later victims of the French Revolution. In the foreground, its foreshortened backside turned

to the viewer, crouches a large hippopotamus sculpted by François Pompon (1855-1933). Stretching up its head and opening its mouth, it gawks at the hero's exposed phallus. The hippo could be regarded as yet another target of Lawler's humor, but I prefer to think of it as her ally, a *repoussoir* element that not only pushes back the principle scene but functions, by virtue of its comical deference (and open jaws), as a formidable threat to the phallic figure—as a rude viewer in the Rude Museum, like Lawler and those willing to listen to her tendentious joke.

Louise Lawler, Birdcalls (1972/1981)

For derisive impropriety, also made possible with the help of wild animals, nothing surpasses *Birdcalls* (1972/1981), an audiotape on which Lawler squeals, squawks, chirps, twitters, croaks, squeaks, and occasionally warbles the names—primarily the surnames—of twenty-eight contemporary male artists, from Vito Acconci to Lawrence Weiner.[37] Recorded by Terry Wilson, the tape sounds as though different species of birds are calling out to one another in some natural setting, say, a forest or garden. In 1984, Andrea Miller-Keller, a curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum, one venue where the work has been played, nicknamed it *Patriarchal Roll Call*.[38]

When Lawler made the tape she was unaware of the precise difference between the two types of sound signals made by birds: calls and songs. For the title, she selected *calls* because she thought that *song* connoted pleasure for the bird whereas *call* seemed more strident.[39] Her choice turned out to be highly accurate, in keeping with the intention and execution of the work, since it is

typically male birds that burst into songs, which are complex patterns of notes used to attract mates or establish territory. Calls, by contrast, consist of one or more short, repeated notes that convey messages about specific situations. If, for instance, a predator enters the immediate environment, birds give distress, alarm, and rally calls to signal the presence of a threat and to coordinate group activity against it.[40] Similarly, Lawler's *Birdcalls* originated in an act of self-defense. "In the early 1970s," she tells Douglas Crimp,

> 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. Walking home at night in New York, one way to feel safe is to pretend you're crazy or at least be really loud. Martha and I called ourselves the "due chanteusies," and we'd sing off-key and make other noises. Willoughby Sharp was the impresario of the 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....[41]

The birdcalls started out as a humorous anti-predator response to the presence of two dangers in Kite and Lawler's habitat: physical attack in the streets of the city and discrimination in the alternative art world. Drawing a perhaps inadvertent parallel with real birds, Lawler describes the first birdcalls as "instinctual."[42] Interestingly, however, bird calls, including alarm calls, are not just involuntary, impulsive emotional displays but systems of communication that can be controlled. [43] Their frequency is affected by the presence or absence of companions, a phenomenon that ornithologists call the "audience effect." Some bird sounds are

learned;[44] some sentinel birds even give "false alarms." The birds' capacity for control and subversion accords with Lawler's tactics in *Birdcalls*, for while she situates herself in nature, which patriarchal systems of representation and sexual difference have traditionally opposed to culture and associated with the feminine, she treats it not as a place of confinement but, rather, of retreat and concealment, a refuge where she can escape Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness" and what Michel Foucault called the "trap" or "cage" of visibility.[45] Occupying the place prescribed for women (and in this regard it should be noted that *bird* is slang for a young woman), but only in jest—literally *playing* nature—she appropriates it as a base from which to make forays, using sound as ammunition, into the territory of culture and to introduce tension into its hierarchical, gendered dichotomies, destroying their seeming naturalness. Heard but not seen, she challenges the proper name, the narcissistic ego, the Name-of-the-Father, and therefore the art world's relations of sexual difference, commenting on the fact that at the time she made *Birdcalls* "artists with name recognition were predominantly male."[46]

Lawler produced the first publicly presented tape of *Birdcalls* in 1981, when, as Crimp has pointed out, the upcoming *Documenta 7* (1982) was an object of much art-world discussion.[47] Rudi Fuchs, the international exhibition's director, planned to reaffirm the phallocentric, aestheticist notion of the work of art as a complete totality transcending its conditions of existence, and he therefore gave pride of place to neo-expressionism, a male-dominated trend of the 1970s and 1980s, which to a considerable extent represented a regression to aestheticism.[48] In preparatory versions of *Birdcalls*, Lawler had included only minimalist, post-minimalist, conceptual, and pop artists. Now, she added neo-expressionist painters Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo

Cucchi, Anselm Kiefer, and Julian Schnabel, targeting the new upsurge in masculine name-recognition with feminist name-calling.

Louise Lawler, Parrot

Birdcalls is an anomaly in Lawler's production, her only sound piece, unless one counts the two versions of *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* (1979 and 1983). Yet its derisive tactics are quintessential Lawler. When she plays *Birdcalls* during presentations of her work, Lawler simultaneously projects an arrangement of slides. Some bear the names of the artists who are being called. These are interspersed with slides of both her own and the male artists' works. Following the title slide, the first, introductory image is always *Statue before Painting,* Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, by Canova*, and this arrangement indicates that there is a commonality between tape and photograph. Both, for example, use mimicry. In 1982, Lawler wanted to produce a record of *Birdcalls* and planned to decorate the jacket with a photograph of a parrot—that excellent mimic—looking suspiciously over its shoulder and set against a brilliant red background.[49] The record was never made, but, subsequently, Lawler used the parrot photograph in other contexts, titling it *Portrait* (1982). Given its initial connection to *Birdcalls*, it might be regarded as a self-portrait, in camouflage. Except that Lawler's mimicry is far from mechanical. It is, rather, one of the skills she has honed to warn audiences away from the danger of "a position of passive agreement"[50] with the art institution's grandiose fantasies, whose war-like effects, as Virginia Woolf knew, are no laughing matter.[51]

Published in Louise Lawler, Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back)*, Wexner Center for the Arts and MIT Press, 2006.*

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[1] Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, Harcourt, Inc., 1938, 6.

[2] As Silvia Kolbowski asks about the rejection of psychoanalysis in current criticism: "Is psychoanalysis too feminine? i.e. too 'weak' to serve political analysis?" Kolbowski, "Diary of a Buren Spectator," *Texte zur Kunst* 15, no. 59, September 2005, 138.

[3] Woolf, 75.

[4] Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern* Art, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2005, 67.

[5] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company, 1960, 123-25.

[6] Woolf, 19.

[7] Ibid., 19.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Homi K. Bhabha, "A Good Judge of Character: Men, Metaphors, and the Common Culture," in Toni Morrison, ed., *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1992, 242. Bhabha writes: "...'masculinism' as a position of social authority is not simply about the power invested in the

recognizable 'persons' of men. It is about the subsumption or sublation of social antagonism; it is about the repression of social divisions; it is about the power to authorize an 'impersonal' holistic or universal discourse on the representation of the social that naturalizes cultural difference and turns it into a 'second'-nature argument."

[10] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, 256.

[11] Woolf, 63.

[12] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Art News*, January 1971. Zoffany's painting is alternatively titled *Academicians of the Royal Academy*.

[13] Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, New York and London, Methuen, 1987, 17.

[14] Ibid., 5.

[15] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in Visual and Other Pleasures, 14-26.

[16] It could also be argued that Lawler entered the artistic profession differently insofar as she has been reticent "about taking on the conventional role of the artist." See ("Prominence Given, Authority Taken: An Interview with Louise Lawler by Douglas Crimp," in Lawler, *An Arrangement of Pictures*, New York, Assouline, 2000.

[17] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, and Yves-Alain Bois, *Art since 1900: Modernism Antimodernism;*

Postmodernism, Volume 2, New York, Thames & Hudson, 2004, 624.

[18] Andrea Fraser, "In and Out of Place," *Art in America*, June 1985, 123

[19] Kate Linker, "Rites of Exchange," *Artforum*, November 1986, 99.

[20] Birgit Pelzer, "Interpositions: The Work of Louise Lawler," in *Louise Lawler and Others*, Kunstmuseum Basel, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, May 15 – August 29, 2004, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2004, 32. Pelzer is referring specifically to the portfolios of photographs that Lawler has published in books and magazines.

[21] Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1992, 198.

[22] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* Minneapolis, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984, 22. emphasis added.

[23] Kathleen Howard, ed., *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983, 1994, 265. A photograph in the *Guide* documents the museum's arrangement of *Perseus*.

[24] *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide*, 186.

[25] Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head" (1922), in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love,* NY, Collier Books, 1968, 212-219; Laura Mulvey, "Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious *or* 'You Don't Know What Is Happening, Do You Mr. Jones?'" (1973) and "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinerma" (1975), in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Indiana Univ. Press, 1989, 6-13 and 14-26.

[26] Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, New York, Schocken Books, 1981, 245-264.

[27] Mulvey, 13.

[28] Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 66, 236. Nixon’s thesis differs from mine insofar as, using Melanie Klein, she argues that Bourgeois, Jasper Johns, Yayoi Kusama, and Eva Hesse posed the phallus as, specifically, a part-object—a literal body part.

[29] “Prominence Given, Authority Taken: An Interview with Louise Lawler by Douglas Crimp.”

[30] Nixon suggests that Bourgeois did something similar when, in 1982, she posed with her sculpture *Fillette* (1968) for a portrait produced by Robert Mapplethorpe for her retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Ibid., 71.

[31] Jacques Lacan, “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I, as revealed in psychoanalysis” (1949), in *Écrits*, translated by Alan Sheridan, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1977, 1-7, emphasis mine.

[32] Christian Metz, “Photography and Fetish,” in Carol Squiers, ed., *Overexposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, New York, The New Press, 1999, 217.

[33] To the list of fetishes that Lawler highlights, we could add Perseus’s feet in the winged sandals that Athena and Hermes lent him to aid in the conquest of Medusa. Recall that Freud speculated that the foot fetish originates in the fact that the woman’s feet are the last thing the child sees before he catches sight of her genitals.

The foot fetish represents the male subject's denial of the traumatic sight.

[34] Lawler has used the phrase "Prominence given, authority taken," which is the title of an important interview she did with Douglas Crimp. ("Prominence Given, Authority Taken: An Interview with Louise Lawler by Douglas Crimp," in Lawler, *An Arrangement of Pictures*.) The phrase can be read as a description of the way the museum positions the artists, or, conversely, of Lawler's resistance to that positioning.

[35] Georges Bataille, "Musée," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, 12 vols., Paris, Gallimard, 1971-88), 1: 239.

[36] Freud, *Jokes*, 125.

[37] The twenty-artists are Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Richard Artschwager, John Baldessari, Robert Barry, Joseph Beuys, Daniel Buren, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Gilbert & George, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Neil Jenney, Donald Judd, Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, Richard Long, Gordon Matta-Clark, Mario Merz, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Ed Ruscha, Julian Schnable, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, and Lawrence Weiner.

[38] E-mail correspondence with the artist, April 22, 2005.

[39] Lawler, in conversation with the author, February 26, 2005.

[40] Stephen W. Kress, *Bird Life*: *A Guide to the Behavior and Biology of Birds*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1991, Golden Guides, 80.

[41] “Prominence Given, Authority Taken: An Interview with Louise Lawler by Douglas Crimp.”

[42] Ibid.

[43] Peter Marler and Christopher Evans, “Birdcalls: Just Emotional Displays or Something More?” *Ibis*, 1995, 138, 26-33.

[44] Nottebohn, Fernando, “Hitting the Right Note,” review of *Nature’s Music: The Science of Birdsong*, ed. Peter Marler and Hans Slabbekoorn, *Nature*, vol. 435, May 12, 2005, 146.

[45] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Random House, 1979, 200.

[46] “Prominence Given, Authority Taken.”

[47] Douglas Crimp, “The Art of Exhibition,” in *On the Museum’s Ruins* (with photographs by Louise Lawler), Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press, 1993, 238.

[48] Lawler was not invited to participate in *Documenta 7*, but Jenny Holzer and the alternative gallery Fashion Moda asked her to contribute to their collaborative work: a trailer stationed at the entrance to the show, which would sell objects and souvenirs. For an account of the stationary that Lawler ended up selling at Fashion Moda’s installation, see Crimp, “The Art of Exhibition.”

[49] Lawler wanted to sell the record at Jenny Holzer and Fashion Moda’s trailer, which was installed at the entrance to *Documenta 7*. See note 43.

[50] Artist’s brochure distributed at “Projects: Louise Lawler,” *Enough*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, September 19-November 10, 1987.

[51] A recent photographic work by Lawler repeats the warning, which has become especially urgent at a time when the Bush administration has banned media images of coffins returning from the Iraq War and has treated certain, particularly Arab, deaths as un-grievable. Lawler's image, depicting the detached wings of a classical statue of Nike, goddess of victory, is titled *Grieving Mothers*.