

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART EXPLORES THE PROVOCATIVE, SHAPE-SHIFTING CAREER OF LOUISE LAWLER**

***Louise Lawler: WHY PICTURES NOW*, the Artist's First Major Museum Survey in New York, Spans Her 40-Year Creative Output**

***Louise Lawler: WHY PICTURES NOW***

April 30-July 30, 2017

The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Exhibition Gallery, sixth floor

**NEW YORK, April 25, 2017**—With ***Louise Lawler: WHY PICTURES NOW***, The Museum of Modern Art presents the first major survey in New York of Louise Lawler (American, b. 1947), spanning the 40-year creative output of one of the most influential artists working in the fields of image production and institutional critique. On view from April 30 to July 30, 2017, in The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Exhibition Gallery, sixth floor—along with one sound installation, *Birdcalls* (1972–81), presented in The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden—the exhibition takes its title from one of Lawler’s most iconic works, *Why Pictures Now* (1981), a black-and-white photograph showing a matchbook propped up in an ashtray. Reminiscent of an advertising photograph or a film noir still, it asks the viewer to consider why the work takes the form of a picture, and why the artist is making pictures at this moment. Challenging the traditional museum retrospective and the linear model of artistic progression, the exhibition offers the artist’s response to the present moment. *WHY PICTURES NOW* is organized by Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, with Kelly Sidley, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Photography.

Lawler came of age as part of the Pictures Generation, a loosely knit, highly independent group of artists named for an influential exhibition, *Pictures*, organized in 1977 by art historian Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in New York. These artists used photography and appropriation-driven strategies to examine the functions and codes of representation. Lawler’s signature style was established in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when she began taking pictures of other artists’ works displayed in collectors’ homes, museums, storage spaces, and auction houses to question the value, meaning, and use of art. Underscoring the collaborative quality of Lawler’s practice, what one sees first in her pictures, both then and now, is works by other artists.

Lawler’s practice offers a sly, witty, and sustained feminist analysis of the strategies that inform art’s production and reception. In 1971, she assisted several artists who were installing work in independent curator Willoughby Sharp’s *Pier 18*, an exhibition that featured 27 male artists on an abandoned pier on the Hudson River. While walking home after leaving the pier late one evening, Lawler began to mimic birdlike sounds in order to ward off any unwanted interactions, chanting “Willoughby! Willoughby!” This parody evolved into *Birdcalls*, a seven-minute audio piece in which Lawler strains her voice to squawk, chirp, and twitter the names of

celebrated male artists, from Vito Acconci to Lawrence Weiner—a playful, astute critique of the name recognition enjoyed by her male contemporaries. *Birdcalls* thematizes Lawler’s strategy of resistance to the authoritative and patronymic “proper name.” This work will be played throughout the course of the exhibition in MoMA’s Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden.

An intriguing aspect of Lawler’s practice is her process of continuously *re-presenting*, reframing, or restaging her work in the present, a strategy through which the artist revisits her own pictures by transferring them to different formats, from photographs to paperweights, tracings, and works that she calls “adjusted to fit.” The tracings are large-format black-and-white line versions of her photographs that eliminate color and detail, functioning instead as “ghosts” of the originals. “Adjusted to fit” images are stretched or expanded to fit the location of their display, not only suggesting the idea that pictures can have more than one life, but also underpinning the intentional, relational character of Lawler’s farsighted art. Furthermore, in keeping with Lawler’s interest in each picture’s provenance and the institutional creation of values, each label in this exhibition includes the owners of the full edition of that particular work.

Social and political themes interlink throughout Lawler’s work. In 2017, at a moment when the subject of truth and fake news came to the forefront of national discourse, the artist tweaked her “adjusted to fit” images by adding a twisting effect to certain works, further distorting them as a reaction to the concept of “alternative facts.” One of these new works, *Pollyanna (adjusted to fit, distorted for the times)*, features prominently in the MoMA exhibition.

The exhibition consists of a sequence of mural-scale, “adjusted to fit” images set in dynamic relation to nonlinear groupings of photographs distinctive of Lawler’s conceptual exercises. Additionally, a deceptively empty gallery presents black-and-white “tracings” of Lawler’s photographs that have been printed on vinyl and mounted directly on the wall. A display of the artist’s ephemera from the 1970s to today highlights the feminist and performative undercurrents of her art. Lawler’s long history of artistic collaborations, with Andrea Fraser, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, Christopher D’Arcangelo, Peter Nadin, and Lawrence Weiner, among others, comes full circle in the ephemera on display.

Furthermore, on the platform outside the gallery space, two “adjusted to fit” images are shown together with Cameron Rowland’s work *New York State Unified Court System* (2016). Comprised of four oak courtroom benches, it was included in Rowland’s exhibition *91020000*, presented at Artists Space in 2016. Lawler and Rowland share an interest in examining the imbalances of exploitative economies, the use value and exchange value of art, the politics of space, and the interplay of power between human relations and larger institutional structures, including markets, museums, prisons, and governments. Additionally, Andrea Fraser will perform her work *May I Help You?* in the exhibition space. In foregrounding her work’s relationship to the economies of collaboration and exchange, Lawler shifts focus from the individual picture to the broader history of art. Her careful attention to artistic contexts, modes of presentation, and

viewers' receptions generates witty, affective situations that contribute to institutional transformation.

**SPONSORSHIP:**

Major support for the exhibition is provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and by The Modern Women's Fund.

Generous funding is provided by the Walton Family Foundation, David Dechman and Michel Mercure, Fotene Demoulas and Tom Coté, Tracy and Gary Mezzatesta, Susan and Arthur Fleischer, Patrice and Louis Friedman, Mark Diker, and by Ann and Mel Schaffer.

Additional support is provided by the Annual Exhibition Fund.

**PUBLICATION:**

*Louise Lawler: Receptions* is published in conjunction with the exhibition and is the most comprehensive catalogue of Lawler's work to date. Containing over 250 illustrations, the volume features eight essays that examine the full range of Lawler's career. The texts cover a variety of topics, including Lawler's re-presentation of her own images, the importance of her titles, a political re-examination of her 1987 Projects exhibition at MoMA, and an overarching discussion of her rich array of ephemera. The catalogue is edited by Roxana Marcoci, with essays by Marcoci, Rhea Anastas, Mieke Bal, Douglas Crimp, Rosalyn Deutsche, Diedrich Diederichsen, David Platzker, and Julian Stallabrass, as well as an exhibition history compiled by Annikka Olsen and a bibliography compiled by Lauren Rosati. 256 pages, 258 illustrations. Hardcover, \$60. ISBN: 978-1-63345-023-3. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available at MoMA stores and online at [store.moma.org](http://store.moma.org). Distributed to the trade through ARTBOOK/D.A.P. in the United States and Canada. Distributed outside the United States and Canada by Thames & Hudson.

**SPECIAL EVENT/PERFORMANCE:**

**Andrea Fraser Presents *May I Help You?***

Thursday, April 27 at 2:00, 3:00, and 4:00 p.m.

The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Exhibition Gallery, sixth floor

The artist Andrea Fraser will restage her performance *May I Help You?* (1991) in the context of Lawler's exhibition. In this key work, Fraser assumes the character of a museum docent as she leads a guided tour of the exhibition. The performances will occur on a Member Preview day; Museum members can pick up first-come, first-served tickets beginning at 9:30 a.m. at the Member Services desk in the main lobby on the day of the performances. Limited tickets will be available for each performance, onsite pick-up only.

**FILM PROGRAM:**

***A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture***

May 2 and 10, 7:00 p.m.

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2

In conjunction with the exhibition, MoMA presents two distinct screenings of Lawler's *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture*. This influential work was first staged in 1979 at the Aero Theatre in Santa Monica, California, and has been reprised only occasionally by the artist. Lawler never specifies in advance which film she has selected, only that it will be projected without its image. This altered cinematic event will feature a different film on each date.

**PUBLIC PROGRAMS:**

**7x7: Now Pictures Why**

Thursday, May 4, 6:00–7:30 p.m.

The Celeste Bartos Theater

In a twist on the traditional artist talk, Lawler has periodically presented a seven-minute slideshow related to her sound installation *Birdcalls* (1972/1981). In conjunction with the exhibition, Lawler will project her slide show, after which contemporary artists Jenny Holzer, Allan McCollum, Matt Mullican, R. H. Quaytman, Yvonne Rainer, and Cameron Rowland will each present their own seven-minute “response” to Lawler’s “call.” The program will be introduced by Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography, and will conclude with questions from the audience.

**CLASS:**

**Printed, Pulled, Stretched, and Twisted: Louise Lawler and the Art of Placement**

Evening Session: Wednesdays, May 16, 23, 30, June 13, 6:00–7:50 p.m.

After a close study of *Louise Lawler: WHY PICTURES NOW*, class participants will look at Lawler's relationship to Conceptual photography and the Pictures Generation, link her work to past and present examples of appropriation, and discuss her feminist and political bents. The class will also visit the collection galleries and the exhibitions *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends; Unfinished Conversations: New Work from the Collection*; and *Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction* to trace shared lineages and threads of thought. Nonmember \$355, Member \$325, Student/Educator/Corporate \$250. Space is limited; to register for classes, visit [moma.org/courses](http://moma.org/courses) after March 21.

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