



“Edits and Projections,” 80WSE Gallery (NYU),
New York, 2018, exhibition view

Edits and Projections

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“Edits and Projections”

An exhibition made by Rhea Anastas, Louise Lawler, and Robert Snowden

On view nightly, Wednesday – Saturday, 5–9pm

October 18–December 1, 2018

80 Washington Square East, New York,

NY 10003

To consider “Edits and Projections,” on view at NYU’s 80 Washington Square East Gallery last fall, it helps to see it in light of the bigger, much more public one that preceded it: “WHY PICTURES NOW,” Lawler’s MoMA survey in 2017. For any living, working artist, it’s not hard to imagine the MoMA coronation as running the risk of also seeming like a wake, and for an artist so known for evasion as Lawler, it’s easy to imagine the task being all the more a bugbear for her.¹ For me, in 2016, the announcement of a MoMA Louise Lawler retrospective stoked the imagination. I daydreamed of a showdown, of the implacable Lawler finally going head-to-head with the ancient White Whale of her practice: MoMA, that most staid and fossilizing of institutions, whose influence in shaping the *mise-en-scène* of Lawler’s most well-known works—her photographs of Post-War masterpieces *in situ*, installed (or in the process of being installed) in institutions, auction houses, and private collections—is unfathomably deep. What pockets of “finesse”² might Lawler slip into her anointment? And how good of a sport would MoMA be about it? That following spring, heading up to MoMA’s 6th floor galleries, I found myself wondering, as if I were watching one of the classic *Looney Tunes* cartoons that Lawler has used in her work, “how will she get out of it this time?”

You would be right to write off my deluded expectations, since the resulting MoMA show felt much more like a straightforward survey than I had hoped. My fear that MoMA would in some sense win, or that Lawler hadn’t showed up for the fight, seemed actualized: on the whole, the show predictably defanged the strategic aspects of Lawler’s practice (her abdicating, her reframing, her negotiating: her “finessing”) in order to better celebrate the objects that precipitate from those strategies: the numerous pristine, uniformly mounted cibachrome prints, relentlessly arrayed, plus the colorful, full-bleed, “adjusted to fit” vinyl wall prints, adjusted to fit onto dramatic, custom-built

¹ Her long-standing refusal of nearly all occasions for public statements makes this, admittedly, a projection on my part, and doesn’t derive from any hearsay network.

² “It is no longer a matter of trying to subvert or intrude. Those strategies are now recognized and invited. Now it is a matter of finessing, which is certainly not enough.” Martha Buskirk (et al.), “Interviews with Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson,” *October*, vol. 70 (Autumn 1994): 106.

walls. This is not to say that Lawler didn't attempt to parry the retrospective's mandates. Her inclusion of other artists' work, most prominently a work by Cameron Rowland that had recently been acquired by the museum, undercut the idea of the monographic; secondly, each cibachrome's wall label listed the current owners of each photograph's full print edition, dampening the presumption of uniqueness for what was on view. Both moves gestured at her career-spanning interest in indexing the passage of objects, and the institutions and agents which propel them—through Rowland's found objects, the subjugated labor of incarcerated workers within the American prison industrial complex; and through the wall labels, a snapshot of the wealthy collectors and institutions who are capable of possessing her commodities. They both ask questions of power, starting from opposite ends of the class pyramid—but as the Whitney Museum's recent controversy around a board chairman's profiteering off of the Mexico-US border crisis has underscored, the largess of art's power brokers and the violence of carceral capitalism are inextricably linked.³ Ever taciturn, Lawler pointed to this brutal fact without telling it outright.

It's ruminations like these that I had hoped to see provoked by this show overall, but I couldn't shake the feeling that, on the whole, it was so pretty, so safe. Most troubling about MoMA's surface-level imagism was how it made the basest understanding of Lawler's work—that it's either a self-assured indictment of the canon, or a teasing celebration of it—all too available to MoMA's broad audience, whom the institution addresses with such simplicity that it can veer into condescension. The ephemera in the show's final room did provide context, and therefore breadcrumbs toward the nuances of Lawler's motives over time, but no amount of vitrines could change the fact that seeing a massive, lurid Koons or Murakami warped across MoMA's 6th Floor walls makes it hard to stave off the accusation that the whole enterprise (whether Lawler's or art in general) is an ouroboros. And since MoMA in fact wants to eat its own tail, and absorb its critiques, this show permitted MoMA to pat itself on the back. It's OK for a Murakami to be distorted, here, since its monstrosity is what has been loved about it all along, by the very same institutions. But where does that leave Lawler?

It's in the shadow of this project, and its attendant conundrums, that Lawler began planning the 80WSE exhibition in collaboration with curators Rhea Anastas and Robert Snowden.⁴ Fortunately, shadows have often worked well for Lawler. She likes to point the spotlight elsewhere, to adjust habits of looking, and treat images with suspicion. For instance, for a group show at Artists Space in 1978, she blasted light out of the gallery's windows each night,

³ Hannah Black, Ciarán Finlayson, and Tobi Haslett, "The Tear Gas Biennial," *artforum.com*, 17 July 2019, www.artforum.com/slant/a-statement-from-hannah-black-ciaran-finlayson-and-tobi-haslett-on-warren-kanders-and-the-2019-whitney-biennial-80328.

⁴ In fact, it was at the artist's insistence that both the curators and the artist would share the exhibition's byline, and be credited equally as makers of the show.

projecting silhouettes of the windowpanes and visitors onto the columns of the bank across the street, as though from Plato's cave. There are also her image-deprived film screenings, *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture*, and it is worth noting that her well-known *Birdcalls* sound piece came out of devising ways for two women to get home safely one night.⁵ Such gestures exceed the parameters of a high-profile museum retrospective, yet it's here that Lawler's skepticism works most keenly. She reroutes the pursuit of value away from the obvious places to look.

With their emphasis on visibility, MoMA's stateliness and the expectations of the survey genre concealed these aspects of Lawler's work. But then again, her actual photographs do this too. The cibachromes' mounting is so crisp and current; they feel, en masse, like freshly baked inventory, uniformly mass-produced. Even the earliest works appeared as new as the works dated 2017. By the very nature of 80WSE's program and space, to do a show there would shun such pageantry: its low profile and awkward architecture, plus the efforts of attentive collaborators Anastas and Snowden, provided the opportunity for a much-warranted counterpunch to the major survey, and all of its discontents. In its wake, the conditions arose for a more suiting laboratory for Lawler's evasions, and an opportunity to re-center her penchant for tactics of de-centering—for making herself unknown.

First maneuver: if you attempted to visit the exhibition as part of making gallery rounds, you would have learned that this show was only accessible at night. I imagine that this led to grumbles from some, particularly those who didn't get the memo before showing up. But as a gallery worker I appreciated it. My job usually prevents me from seeing shows at spaces that share hours with us—one could assume this holds true for anyone that works on a gallery schedule, where weekends aren't quite weekends. And when I can escape to see a show, the feeling is anxious. For any first-world information worker, "normal business hours" are ambiently alert, typically over-caffeinated. And if you traffic in art, to go view art can be awfully transactional: a checking-off of another pin on See-Saw, maybe on your lunch break (if you get one), chopped up by the intermittent pocket-buzz of texts from colleagues and the trickle of emails. Not to mention the social exertion of gallery going—the banter, signing the guest-book, generally tending to one's network. These stresses only heighten during what are traditionally a show's only evening hours: the opening reception.

Regular evening hours, and all these atmospheric effects, may have stemmed from a very practical need: the show had large digital projections in it, plus some very large windows to contend with, and so it needed darkness. But this necessity led to a more placid, considerate atmosphere of looking, as it

⁵ Louise Lawler, "Prominence Given, Authority Taken," interview by Douglas Crimp, *Grey Room*, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 80.

severed the visit from any given frenetic circuit of daytime productivity. A visit was a more intentional, opted-into occasion—more like a night at the movies than an exhibition opening. Each time I visited, only a couple other people ever showed up at the same time, often on their way from work or on their way to dinner. Typically at least one of the curators was on-hand, and their focus, too, was on hosting and looking, as though their administrative drudgery also went to bed with the sun. We would talk in hushed tones, as if someone were asleep in the gallery. Most notably, people lingered and looked longer.

The projections are a new format for Lawler. They stem from her “adjusted to fit” vinyl works, like the MoMA Murakami previously mentioned, but here they became static transmissions of light. To maximize their effect, all overhead lights were left off, making the projections, plus the ancillary red lights of EXIT signs and the chaos passing through 80WSE’s street-level windows, the show’s only light sources. This pressed a bit harder on the ambivalence of the “adjusted” works toward their own susceptibility to commodity logic: the picture hums on the wall, until it gets turned off. The light was the work.

In the first and last of five galleries, two large-scale projections bookended the intestinal floor plan of 80WSE, with a modest selection of cibachromes dispersed between them. The first room contended with the windows, and answered the dramas of park and street with its own contingency: the projection alternated each night, between four different “adjusted” Lawler images, each peering outside. When seen from inside, they reflected murkily out into the scene past the window. This projection ran every night until sunrise, including on days without gallery hours, giving part of the show a consistent nocturnal presence over Washington Square Park’s east side, and over whomever might stumble by, as the projected image poked out, slightly, from art’s sanctifying frame.

In contrast, the projection in the final gallery was the same each night, and it slept whenever the gallery did. In bright, grainy grayscale it depicted a book’s binding in soft focus, its blurry dust jacket giving just enough of a face to denote Marilyn Monroe. The book, I was told in the dark, is Norman Mailer’s controversial posthumous biography of Monroe, which supported the persistent theory that the star’s death was facilitated by the CIA following her tryst with JFK. The front projections were in rotation, but Marilyn was constant. So here’s Marilyn, who didn’t own the rights to her own image, who knew a thing or two about her image being adjusted and distorted. Her death only gave more license to others, like Mailer, to manipulate her story and image further, for their own gain over hers. At this moment, I thought how heady it must be for Lawler to have finally gone through MoMA’s coronation, to have ascended, and then kept on living and making.

The discrepancies between the projections’ arrangements seem to have also been a matter of functionality, with an eye toward striking a balance of light levels throughout the winding galleries. The front gallery had more



light pollution, and so its images were darker, murkier, and didn’t need to give as much light as the back gallery’s projection, which was brighter, crisper, and emanating a steady white light which bounced deeper through the space, where it encountered the red of the EXIT signs. In the middle galleries, the echoing signals intermingled amongst the shows’ pictures at a dim, even pitch. The effect was haunting, and the dim, cross-polluting light blended the whole gestalt together in a way that conventional lighting’s discretizing tendency tends to stamp out.

The show’s soft emphasis on the passage of light—its bounce, its reflection—was furthered by the projections’ effects on the cibachromes. When shown under the conventional halogen assault, as at MoMA, each photograph seems to transmit its image directly; its glass disappears, and the work, as convention holds, becomes a window onto something or someplace else. In the dark, however, their surfaces became black mirrors: the image receded beneath its protective glass, EXIT signs occluded the panels, and the gallery architecture was more starkly reflected. Your own body got in the way, too—to

Blurry Koons (Bubbles),
1986/2010
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get a clear view of a picture was difficult, if not in some cases impossible, and required perceiving the work in snippets, from multiple, indirect angles. All this undercut the candy quality of the prints. The requisite inventory units from Metro Pictures had shown up, but their pictorial operations were to some extent withheld, or forestalled; by the same gesture, the fact of their thing-ness was all the clearer for it.

Art's disjunctive interrelatedness with its environments is what Lawler's photographs often show, and 80WSE's shadowy environment underscored this with the awkward impossibility of securing an idealized viewpoint. But what to say about the pictures themselves? To some extent they felt secondary to the moody atmosphere—in my memory, the panels were practically murky clouds, as though I were viewing one of Lawler's glass paperweights from a non-optimal angle.⁶ After the barrage of pictures at MoMA, this occlusion felt welcome to me. Nevertheless, the images at 80WSE were of a particular vein, preoccupied with vacancy and violence, and the loneliness of a white wall. One work that I do recall clearly is *Breathless* (2011/2012), a raking shot of Gerhard Richter's three iterative paintings of a photo of Ulrike Meinhof's lying corpse, arrayed on an otherwise featureless white space (maybe at MoMA, which owns them?), her neck noosed three times. (Like Mailer with Marilyn, another man taking liberties with a dead woman's image, prodding at her corpse.) This was awash in the red of the EXIT light, along with the image across the room of a framed, evidently minimalist work on paper, the details of which were inscrutable in the dark. And if you could pass straight through this image, this object, and the wall supporting it, you would find an identically placed work in the first room, with a blood-red Cindy Sherman, all *Court of the Crimson King* grotesque, gaping in horror toward a polite arrangement of lilies, and away from the projected image bouncing off of her face.

These minor-key moments of sensory overwhelm—the trippy *mise-en-abyme* of viewership, as signifiers and materials fade in and out as they reconfigure—are less frequently remarked upon than the expository dimension of Lawler's work, which seem to dominate her work's reception. You can see Lawler like a documentarian, or paparazzo, catching the artwork when the barricades around its aura crack, and the object appears exposed to the contingencies and banalities of earthly existence. This 'gotcha' aspect is undoubtedly there, and given her historical positioning, as well as that of her *October*-affiliated champions, it makes sense that this is what has been solidified in her literature. But what's harder to eke out, less remarked upon, and what the 80WSE show so deftly facilitated, is the after hours of Lawler's critical project: Lawler the intuitive, the dreamer. Dreams, after all, are the brain's way of processing the day's rational activities, and they often function like Lawler's

⁶ Despite seeing the show multiple times, documentation has had to fill in major gaps for me while writing this.

photographs, colliding signifiers uncannily, yet straining toward something like realism. Above and beyond the dry schematics that so often befalls institutional critique, there's something more human, full of flesh and blood and feeling at work in Lawler, and a more visceral mode of dissent than what the analytic model of critique presents by default. One act of "finesse" would be to reclaim sensation—pain as well as pleasure—within the confines of seemingly rationalist critical practices. Beneath the veneer of Lawler's pictures, there's deep feeling, too.