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SUBVERSIVE SIGNS

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*A writer—by which I mean not the possessor of a function or the servant of an art, but the subject of a praxis—must have the persistence of the watcher who stands at the crossroads of all other discourses (trivialis is the etymological attribute of the prostitute who waits at the intersection of three roads).
— Roland Barthes, “Lecon”*



Louise Lawler: Sappho and Patriarch (“Is it the work, the location or the stereotype that is the institution?”), 1984.

The most provocative American art of the present is situated at such a crossing—of institutions of art and political economy, of representations of sexual identity and social life. More, it assumes its purpose to be so sited, to lay in wait for these discourses so as to riddle and expose them or to seduce and lead them astray. Its primary concern is not with the traditional or modernist proprieties of art—with refinement of style or innovation of form, aesthetic sublimity or ontological reflection on art as such. And though it is aligned with the critique of the institution of art based on the presentational strategies of the Duchampian readymade, it is not involved, as its minimalist antecedents were, with an epistemological investigation of the object or a phenomenological inquiry into subjective response. In short, this work does not bracket art for formal or perceptual experiment but rather seeks out its affiliations with other practices (in the culture industry and elsewhere); it also tends to conceive of its subject differently.

The artists active in this work (Martha Rosler, Sherrie Levine, Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Allan McCollum, Jenny Holzer, Krzysztof Wodiczko...) use many different forms of production and modes of address (photo-text collage, constructed or projected photographs, videotapes, critical texts, appropriated, arranged or surrogate art works, etc.), and yet they are alike

in this: each treats the public space, social representation or artistic language in which he or she intervenes as both a target and a weapon. This shift in practice entails a shift in position: the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular. This shift is not new—indeed, the recapitulation in this work of the “allegorical procedures”[1] of the readymade, (dadaist) photomontage and (pop) appropriation is significant—yet it remains strategic if only because even today few are able to accept the status of art as a social sign entangled with other signs in systems productive of value, power and prestige.



Marcel Broodthaers. Department des Aigles..., 1968

The situational aesthetics of this art—its special attention to site, address and audience—is prepared by the varied institutional critique of such artists as Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Lawrence Weiner, John Baldessari and Joseph Kosuth. Yet if Kruger, Holzer et al. inherit the conceptual critique of the given parameters of art production and reception, they do so not uncritically. For just as the conceptual artists extended the minimalist analysis of the art object, so too these later artists have opened up the conceptual critique of the art institution in order to intervene in ideological representations and languages of everyday life. It is important to trace

this genealogy (which is *not* intended as a conscription of these mostly feminist artists into a paternal tradition), especially in the face of the contemporary rejection of *all* institutional critique, indeed *all* avant-garde practice, under the cynical pretense that it is now “exhausted” or “academic”—a pretense that abets the forced resurrection of a traditionalist art largely given over to the manipulated demands of the market and the myths of the museum.

As is well known (in part because of a countermemory afforded by later artists and critics), the investigation of Buren, Asher, Haacke and Broodthaers focuses primarily on the institutional frame, and secondarily on the economic logic, of the modern art object. In critical writings and works in situ, these four artists (among others) have sought to reveal the ways in which the production and reception of art are institutionally predetermined, recuperated, used. Thus since 1965 Buren, with his banners and flags of alternately colored and white (or transparent) stripes set in specific art and nonart spaces for specific periods of time, has stressed the *spatiotemporal* predisposition of the work of art by its institutional frame. And since 1969 Asher, with his (dis)placements of different gallery/museum objects, services and spaces, has foregrounded the *functional* delimitation of all artistic activity sited there. Before his death in 1975, Broodthaers, with his fictitious museums (in which the roles of artist and curator are reversed), allegorically doubled the ways in which the museum *acculturates* heterogeneous objects and activities as art. And finally, since 1970 Haacke, with his detailed exposés of different museums, corporate benefactors and art collectors, has probed the *material* bases of the fine-art apparatus which, repressed, allows for its pretenses of social neutrality and cultural autonomy.



Hans Haacke. MetroMobiltan, 1985

It was the need to expose this false idealism of art that initially led these artists to its “mystical body,” the modern museum, for it became clear that its supposedly supplemental role of “preservation, enclosure and refuge” (Buren) actually preconditioned art production, predisposed it to an ideology of transcendence and self-sufficiency.[2] As opposed to the argument that avant-garde practice had attempted to *destroy* the institution of art,[3] these practitioners held that modern artists had not *comprehended* it—its conditions of production, exhibition and exchange; thus Buren in 1970: “20th-century art is still so dependent on 19th-century art since it has accepted, without a break, its system, its mechanism and its function (including Cezanne and Duchamp)

without revealing one of its main alibis, and furthermore accepting the exhibition framework as self-evident.”[4] To these artists transformation of this apparatus is contingent upon an exposing of its “alibis,” to which the work of Broodthaers and Haacke in particular is committed, and upon a foregrounding of its “framework,” in which Asher and Buren are engaged.



Louise Lawler and Allan McCollum: Ideal Settings: For Presentation and Display, 1984

Clearly this is an important intervention, but it is a necessarily (de)limited one. It is limited, first of all, by its very attention to the institutional frame, which determines its production no less for being exposed in doing so; by its deconstructive posture, this work diminishes its own transformative potential. Secondly, posed within the gallery/museum, it is often referenced to the given forms of art (thus Buren’s banners tend to be read in relation to easel painting and Asher’s (dis)placements in relation to sculpture);[5] however residual, these categories are sustained even as they are

demonstrated to be logically arbitrary, ideologically laden and/or historically obsolete. On a different score, the “scientificity” of this practice tends to present the exhibitional limits of art as socially indiscriminate and sexually indifferent (this is perhaps the most obvious point of critical revision by feminist artists); it also cannot fully account for the systems of circulation in which the art work is involved *after* exhibition—the processes by which it becomes a discriminatory sign. (Of the four only Haacke *thematizes* the intertextuality of art and power, which allows him actually to use the limits of the gallery/museum as a screen for his political attacks.) Finally and familiarly, this practice runs the risk of reduction in the gallery/museum from an act of subversion to a form of exposition, with the work less an attack on the separation of cultural and social practice than another example of it and the artist less a deconstructive delineator of the institution than its “expert.”

Such criticisms come after the fact, however, and are less failings of this practice than insights developed from it by later artists. Such legatees of conceptual art as Louise Lawler and Allan McCollum work to literalize more than to abolish the rules of art.[6] Though this may seem its own negation of institutional critique, it is instead its adaption to a code of art that now extends beyond conditions of production and exhibition. (As the “title” of a recent work by Lawler - a photograph of a statue of Sappho and a bust of a patriarch—asks: “Is it the work, the location or the stereotype that is the institution?”) These later artists stress the economic manipulation of the art object—its circulation and consumption as a commodity-sign—more than its physical determination by its frame. And yet no less than the conceptual artists they too seek to reveal the definitional character of the supplements of art, only they tend to foreground the institutionally insignificant (the overlooked) rather than the transparent (the unseen)—functions like the arrangement of pictures in galleries, museums, offices, homes, and forms like press releases and exhibition invitations which, thought to be trivial to the matter of art, in fact do much to position it, to determine its place, reception, meaning.

For Walter Benjamin the “artistic function” as we still know it today—the isolated maker of art objects for the market—is incidental” to the determination of art by its exhibition (or exchange) value.”[7] It is this function, this determination that artists like Buren and Asher, Lawler and McCollum explore. But there is another “function” that emerges when art passes from courtly patronage to the marketplace: the collector; and Lawler and McCollum are no less interested in this beast. In her “Arrangements of Pictures” Lawler reframes in photographs the various ways in which different collectors—museums, corporations, the old

and new rich—invest art with value by “sumptuary expenditure,” guarantee this value by reference to an institutional code of proper names and affiliations (a lineage of artists and works, a pedigree of owners and experts) and display it as a marker of taste, hierarchy, prestige or simply investment.[8] For his part McCollum is obsessed by the contractually adversarial rapport between artist and collector; this convention has “inspired” him to produce thousands of surrogate paintings—objects which consist solely of a frame, mat and, for an image, a blank, with but minor differences in size and proportion.[9] With these decoys McCollum feeds the hunger for pictures felt by a social group dedicated to the mastery of both accumulation and signification but in such a way as to famish it. For he beckons the desire to spectate and buy—the desire for spectacle, for control through consumption—only to re-present the very emptiness which the picture-fetish is supposed to fill, only to turn the ritual of mutual confirmation into a charade of (mis)recognition:

You see yourself insofar as you see me see myself, yet I see myself only as I see that I am seen. Our reciprocal surveillance is sustained through my artwork, which thrives. Our misplaced assignments of authority and our fraudulent identifications are thus mediated into a dislocated ritual of self-congratulation, strange looks, and the exchange of money for false tokens.[10]



Allan McCollum. Surrogate Paintings. 1979/82

This is not to suggest that these artists neglect the exhibition framework. In a 1978 show at Artists Space in New York, Lawler installed an 1824 painting of a racehorse (borrowed from the New York Racing Association) with two stagelights, one set above the picture and aimed at the viewer, the other directed outside through a gallery window. Here Lawler did indeed make “the element of an exhibition the subject of her production,”[11] but she also posed a funny, provocative conflation of exhibited painting and displayed thoroughbred that exposed them both as tokens in the sumptuary production of value and prestige. (Are not art world and racetrack alike based on a closed system of training and grooming, of handicapping and betting, of investment, competition and auction? After all we do call galleries “stables.”) More recently, Lawler and McCollum collaborated on an installation that foregrounded in a different way the status of art as display: 100 hydrocal sculpture pedestals set on bases and bathed in spectacular light, titled *For Presentation and Display: Ideal Settings* (1984). Here the abstraction of modern sculpture, its passage from sited, figurative monument to siteless, autonomous sign,[12] was decoded as its “abstraction” by the commodity-form—as if sculpture had not absorbed its base in the pursuit of aesthetic purity so much as spectacle had swallowed art in the pure display of the commodity. Exhibition value, once productive of an autonomous “artistic function,” here consumed it entirely.

This displacement of art by its own support, by its own spectacle, is both a characteristic strategy and a historical demonstration of Lawler and McCollum. The functional indifference of art objects produced in the studio/gallery/museum nexus, remarked by Buren, is shown by McCollum to be no less determined by the market. His “empty” surrogates make explicit the reduction of content to form in the exchange of like for like as well as the general equivalence of objects in a serial mode of production. For her part Lawler makes clear the division of labor that produces the hierarchical functions and generic forms of art (i.e., who creates what for whom in what order of privilege and value). This institutional order of names, services and forms is then confused by the (relative) anonymity of her interventions, by her assumption of different guises (arranger, publicist, etc.), by her production as art of such giveaways as gallery matchbooks

(supplements which again seem superfluous but are crucial to the spectacle of art). Yet just as it may be unclear whether the McCollum surrogates “dislocate” the ritual of exchange or replicate the status of the object become sign (delivered up in all its minor difference for our consumption), so too it may be unclear whether the Lawler gambits subvert the mechanisms of art exhibition, circulation and consumption or play them to the hilt. (Do her giveaways update the Duchamp ready-made, substitute use value for exchange value, or aestheticize use one more time?) Like a dye in the bloodstream, the work of these artists does delineate the circulation system of art, but it also operates within its terms. If artists like Buren and Asher may become guardians of the demystified myths of the art museum, then artists like Lawler and McCollum may indeed serve as “ironic collaborators”[13] of its market apparatus. [. . .]

Notes:

- [1.] See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* (September 1982): 43-56.
- [2.] See in particular Daniel Buren, “Function of the Museum,” *Artforum* (September 1973).
- [3.] See Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). First published in 1974, this important essay takes no account of the artists mentioned here who are involved in institutional critique.
- [4.] Buren, “Function of the Museum.” Duchamp may have “accepted” this system, but he was certainly aware of its function. In *La Boite en Valise* (1936-41), a collection of miniature reproductions of his works, he in effect acculturated his own art in his own museum allegorically and before the fact.
- [5.] See Douglas Crimp, “The End of Painting,” *October 16* (Spring 1981): 69-86; and Buchloh, “Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modernist Sculpture,” in *Performance, Text(e)s & Documents*, ed. Chantal Pontbriand (Montreal: les editions Parachute, 1981), 55-65.
- [6.] Yet this remains the measure of art devoted to institutional critique: “the ambition, not of fitting in more or less adequately with the game, nor even of contradicting it, but of abolishing its rules by playing with them, and playing another game, on another or the same ground, as a dissident” (Buren, *Reboundings*, trans. Philippe Hunt [Brussels: Daled & Gevaert, 1977], 73).
- [7.] Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 225.
- [8.] See Andrea Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” *Art in America* (June 1985); the notion “sumptuary expenditure” is derived from Jean Baudrillard (“Art Auction: Sign Exchange and Sumptuary value,” in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin [St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981], 112-22). In her work Lawler seems to catch out a new motivation or emphasis in art patronage - beyond noble social obligation or subtle cultural legitimation to outright economic manipulation.
- [9.] See Craig Owens, “Allan McCollum: Repetition and Difference,” *Art in America* (September 1983): 130-32.
- [10.] Allan McCollum quoted in press release for 1985 Cash/Newhouse Gallery show.
- [11.] Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures,” 48. The analogy below between the art world and the race track is hinted at by Baudrillard in “Art Auction.”
- [12.] See Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983).
- [13.] Fraser, “In and Out of Place.” I disagree with her representation of this work as a “counterpractice.”