Louise Lawler’s signature photographs show pictures that have been arranged in various ways. Both terms are worth unpacking. The term picture crops up in numerous Lawler titles, as well as in the name of her early-1980s collaboration with Sherrie Levine, A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything. “Pictures” was the title of Douglas Crimp’s influential 1977 show and essay, with the essay being substantially reworked and republished in October in 1979. In the first version of the “Pictures” essay, which accompanied the exhibition of the same name, Crimp notes that “[to] an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema.”¹ Crimp, then, was focusing on pictures as more or less concrete entities in various media—a picture as an image that manifests itself materially, medially.²

While picturing something is a mental activity, the noun picture has strong connotations of a concrete, physical artifact, though the moving pictures of the cinema do approach the oneiric quality of dream images. In the second version of his text, Crimp created a genealogy—pitted against Michael Fried—consisting of work that does “not seek the transcendence of the material conditions of the signs through which meaning is generated.”³ The picture, in other words, is considered as an image-object, the image materialized: it is both the image as commodity and the commodity as visual entity.⁴ While we know that even the most shiny and visually alluring commodities are insufficiently visual (at least insofar as the process by which they are produced and the labor invested in making them are hidden), this is precisely the condition addressed by many of the most cogent modern and contemporary artistic practices.

Lawler’s pictures are always in transition, performed and reperformed, arranged and rearranged. The verb arrange shows up in the past tense in the titles of several Lawler works (Living Room Corner Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Sr. [1984], for example) that depict artworks as arranged in homes or offices. What Lawler shows in these photographs is the continual performance of artworks. A Pollock is reperformed by collectors by being combined with a decorative soup tureen. Pollock’s art, of course, was marked by a modernist refusal to picture, with the all-over drip patterns exorcising the last remains of the classic Western tableau composition. What remained was the picture as a physical entity—paint on canvas—bearing the traces of its own making, the marks of Pollock’s performance of paint, of painting. In Lawler’s Pollock and Tureen, Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Connecticut (1984), one of Pollock’s paintings is shown reperformed in a manner that rather counteracts the heroic connotations ascribed to his paint-dance in the arena of his canvas.

⁴ This materialization is tantamount to mediation.
In a 2004 dialogue with George Baker, Andrea Fraser revisited her early appreciation of Lawler’s work, as manifested in her 1985 essay “In and Out of Place,” affirming that she read Lawler’s practice as a performative one, consisting of “Arranging pictures, producing matchbooks, issuing gift certificates, sending out invitations, presenting art and institutions through these activities.” In Lawler’s work, we may say, arranging becomes a form of material picturing: working with existing pieces to create new arrangements that Lawler’s camera then turns into photographic pictures. Picturing as arranging; an arrangement as picture.

To arrange is thus one way of performing images as pictures. But the arrangement of seemingly “finished” art objects by collectors is only one example of the general performance and reperformance to which the picture amounts. Lawler’s performance is often reiterative, with her own works being reexecuted or repurposed in various ways, to the point where an artwork is no longer a more or less clearly defined object but instead a scattered archipelago of events. In the process, another kind of arrangement reveals itself to be crucial—the arrangement of various pictures and nonpictures, of visibilities and invisibilities.

Code and Contingency
In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the appropriation of pictures was theorized as an act of critique, but by the mid-1980s, conceptions of art as critical practice were under attack. One manifestation of this was the popularity of Jean Baudrillard’s notion of a semiotic universe of total simulation, according to which apparent alternatives were actually all part of the same code. Even a critical take on an existing picture was considered to be playing the game and remaining within the same coded world. In this Baudrillardian art world, “commodity artists” such as Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach had it both ways by giving the precession of simulacra the form of conveniently exclusive and expensive objects.

In 1986 Lawler participated in Brian Wallis’s exhibition Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object, which united her and Pictures Generation peer Barbara Bloom with Koons and Steinbach, as well as Andrea Fraser, under the umbrella of the Baudrillard-heavy discourse of the mid-1980s. Wallis focused on “the abstraction of the consumer object [that] has been achieved through the spectacular effects of advertising, display, and presentation.” According to Baudrillard, use value was supplanted by exchange value only for exchange value in turn to become subservient to sign value: the object had gone from a seemingly autonomous fetish object to being a mere manifestation of the fetishism of the code. In the catalog of Damaged Goods, it is Hal Foster who articulates the consequences for artistic production of Baudrillard’s opposition between symbolic exchange and capitalist market exchange. In a structuralist redefinition of commodity fetishism, Foster

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distinguishes between Lawler’s continuation of the “anarchistic critique of the readymade” in the late-capitalist economy and the “cute-commodity art” of Koons and Steinbach. A corrective critique of commodity art of the kind Foster describes is offered by Barbara Bloom’s photo, on the catalog cover, of an exclusive car dealership with, to the left of the image, a cleaning lady who functions as a return of the repressed—the repressed labor going into not just the production but also the maintenance and presentation of those seemingly autonomous commodities.

Foster’s text is immediately followed by a Lawler piece that exists in several versions. In this case, a back-and-white image of a kiwano (a horned melon originating in Africa) with a $5.99 price tag is joined by a caption stating “It costs 590,000 dollars a day to operate one aircraft carrier.” Here we have a juxtaposition that is markedly different from the interplay of coded commodity objects on Steinbach’s signature wall shelves. Lawler’s opposition of these two objects suggests that Baudrillard’s totalizing conception of the code is in fact not total enough, with the production of coded, branded image-commodities being itself a historical development at the forefront of twentieth-century capitalism. Sign value produced added value at a moment when expansion was becoming otherwise difficult and profit margins were under pressure. Lawler’s spikey melon is certainly consumed in part for its exotic and different nature, and her piece is also related to Lawler’s garishly colored slot machine photos, in which which fruit becomes signifier. Here, however, the light brings out the texture of the fruit in a way that preserves some alterity. Meanwhile, the operating cost of the aircraft carrier is a stark reminder of the military-industrial effort needed to create global divisions intact: between (at the time) the West and the Eastern Bloc and between the First World and the Third World. Mission accomplished.

Far from being an old-fashioned act of critique, a tired rehearsal of the act of unveiling the hidden truth behind the spectacle, this is a careful parsing of the conditions and antinomies of the late-twentieth-century regime of visibility. A kiwano and the operating costs of an aircraft carrier: with this update of Lautréamont’s famous chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella, Lawler creates an assemblage of seeming incompatibilities. They are hardly the binary opposites (Coke/Pepsi) that Baudrillard sees as exemplary for the rule of equivalence. They introduce economic and political antagonisms precisely by not constituting a readymade pair of opposites. There is a statistical tendency in some of Lawler’s work from the 1980s; for instance, *Them* (1985) consists of a photo of chipped plaster casts of Greek sculptures whose size, we are informed, stands for the $11 per capita that is spent on health research in the US and the EU, while the much larger painted surface on which it hangs represents the $75 per capita spent on military research.

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8 Hal Foster, “(Dis)Agreeable Objects,” in *Damaged Goods*, 17 (see note 6).
9 Louise Lawler, “From Two Editions,” in *Damaged Goods*, 19 (see note 6). *Two Editions* was the title of the piece in the show, which contained both color and black-and-white versions of the kiwano picture.
10 See Jean Baudrillard, “The Orders of Simulacra,” in *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 115–38. “The Orders of Simulacra” is part of Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, but it became current in the 1980s art world through the somewhat decontextualized version in *Simulations*.
11 The same data were used by Lawler in her cover design for the 1986 *Printed Matter* catalog, in which health research and military research were visualized by a black and a white rectangle respectively (with the black containing the text). A related work, using the same data but a different
By visualizing the data and by giving one visualization the seemingly allegorical form of a photograph of damaged classical bodies, Lawler problematizes the production and circulation of statistical data that tend to become a kind of semiotic static.

A different version of the *Damaged Goods* piece—or a different piece containing the same text—consists of glasses embossed with the line about the aircraft carrier. Along with paperweights, glasses were a staple in Lawler’s work of the 1980s and 1990s. Both appear to be subaesthetic; both have the ambiguous materiality of glass, hovering between transparency and opacity. Both are lenses, optical devices. An *Artforum* ad for Lawler’s exhibition *It Remains to Be Seen* (1987) shows a glass, lit from the side, etched with the title of the show, the words casting a shadow over the logo for Lawler’s gallery. So what, in fact, does remain to be seen? In this ad, the glass functions as a somewhat random medium for the exhibition title, becoming an optical device that multiplies the text by casting shadows. As with certain works of Fluxus and Conceptual art, seemingly aniconic elements generate images, images that become pictures. However, while the picture in question may to some extent be the result of a text, a speech act, it is very different from the coded simulacra under which Baudrillard subsumed all signification.

A crucial moment in recent art history for Lawler’s practice is what was once characterized as the dematerialization of the artwork in Conceptualism during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Of course, the rejection of traditional media such as painting and sculpture and the preference for printed matter notwithstanding, art did not really dematerialize; it would be more accurate to say—using Martha Buskirk’s felicitous phrase—that artwork became contingent. This means that, rather than one solid object, we are dealing with a concept that may be objectified in numerous ways, though these are usually controlled by the artist: a Lawrence Weiner piece can be printed on paper or executed as an enamel plate or painted on the side of a building. The piece becomes intellectual property first and foremost, awaiting its performance, its actualization, its materialization on a printed page or on a glass.

Lawler’s black-and-white 1981 photograph *Why Pictures Now* shows one of her matchbooks, inscribed with the phrase “Why pictures now,” lying in an ashtray. Indeed, why pictures now? The interest in pictures in the late 1970s was not, in its more interesting instances, a simple rappel à l’ordre, a return to a properly pictorial art after Conceptualism’s linguistic turn. Instead, the Conceptual questioning of objecthood and of the commodity was brought to bear on the commodity as quintessentially visual, as capital that has become image, in Debord’s famous turn of phrase. The object in *Why Pictures Now* is a marginal commodity that was used as a photograph, is titled *Well Being* (1985), while in *Storage* (1986/87), a red dot stands for the 6 megatons of explosive materiel used in World War II and a painted rectangle represents the 16,000 megatons in the 1980s arsenal. In 1988/89, *Storage* was included in “AIDS and Democracy: A Case Study,” which was part of Group Material’s four-part project *Democracy* at the Dia Art Foundation. Here, the health statistics obviously took on a very specific meaning.


vehicle for advertising as early as the late nineteenth century. As insignificant an item as a matchbook may appear to be, it was integrated in a visual economy—with typographical language in advertising tending toward the image, toward the logotype, the eye-catching sign. The black-and-white photo also suggests a still from a film noir, or perhaps a Hitchcock film—which might make the matchbook into an overlooked McGuffin or clue. However, this piece is not a return to narrative or to fiction in any straightforward sense. Rather, the suggestion of fiction seems designed to suggest intersecting trajectories of objects and subjects, assemblages of things and people.

The becoming-contingent of the art object is obviously part of a more general transformation of the commodity in the postwar era, one that continues apace today. Objects become informed, informational; they become contingent data-objects. Whereas Baudrillard made objects contingent by treating them as mere carriers for sign value, recent reflections on digital culture stress that coding itself is performative—think of Kenneth Goldsmith’s argument that coding should be thought of as a form of writing in a given programming language. Writing about digital technology, Hans Dieter Huber and Boris Groys have emphasized that code is nothing unless it is actualized or embodied—performed in some manner: “Unlike traditional image media such as paintings or drawings,” Huber argues, “digital works exist in two completely different forms—the state of notation and the state of performance.” Groys makes similar claims, but both authors’ conceptions are overly binary: in their theories, the digital file that is being performed seems to come out of nowhere. In such a theory, the focus is on consumption as an act of performance, but the production of the file remains opaque; the file comes to take on divine qualities, becoming pure transcendence. In Lawler’s case, the iterations of the photographs from analog to digital and from paperweight to distorted digital print suggest a continuum of transformations in which production, consumption, creation, appropriation, and repurposing all blend into one another.

In Lawler’s recent “adjusted to fit” installations, some of her photographs are digitally altered in size and shape to match the proportions of the exhibition walls; a single photograph can thus be morphed in multiple ways. In the 2011 installation No Drones in London, photographs of paintings by Gerhard Richter depicting fighter planes and a skull were adjusted in this way and presented in front of a hanging mirror ball, which cast its light upon them. The performance of digital data is no longer limited to sounds or images on a laptop or smartphone, and, as with 3-D printing, where the performance of data takes physical form, Lawler’s files are executed on a material substrate and integrated in three-dimensional spaces. In this respect, such installations are the reverse of Lawler’s now defunct 1990s online piece Without Moving/Without Stopping, which allowed the user to move virtually through a collection of plaster casts in Munich. A further twist in Lawler’s “adjusted to fit” exhibitions comes with the transformation of her squashed and stretched photos into

15 The commonly known type of matchbook was patented in 1892, and first used as a vehicle for advertising in 1894.
line drawings, which allows her to then turn them into oversized pages from a coloring book, thereby inviting yet another kind of mental performance from the viewer.

If existing pictures can be reperformed by being arranged in various ways, Lawler’s process clearly foregrounds the process of picturing itself as performative. David Joselit has characterized certain contemporary artistic practices as *transitive painting*. Under this conception, artists ranging from Stephen Prina to Jutta Koether “[invent] forms and structures whose purpose is to demonstrate that once an object enters a network, it can never be fully stillled, but only subjected to different material states and speeds of circulation ranging from the geologically slow (cold storage) to the infinitely fast.” Indeed, in a passage that recalls Andrea Fraser’s inventory of Lawler’s actions, Joselit updates Richard Serra’s famous verb list to account for these developments:

Since what counts in transitive procedures is not the nature of the material acted upon (such as lead or rubber) but the generation of form through action, Serra’s list can easily be repurposed through a simple change of “direct objects.” Relational Aesthetics, for instance, might be said to consist of learning how “to scatter, to arrange, to repair, to discard, to pair, to distribute, to surfeit” groups of people. At the same time, the verbs “to enclose, to surround, to encircle, to hide, to cover, to wrap, to dig, to tie, to bind, to weave, to join, to match, to laminate, to bond, to hinge, to mark, to expand” may be applied to the behavior of pictures within digital economies. Such substitutions mark a shift from the manipulation of material (paint, wood, lead, paper, chalk, video, etc.) to the management (or mismanagement) of populations of persons and/or pictures.

In the 1980s Lawler was repeatedly invited to take part in the “arrangements of pictures” that were the exhibitions organized by the collective Group Material, including *It’s a Gender Show, Art and Leisure, Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)*, and *The Castle*. In its emphasis on developing a shared critical practice, Group Material clearly differed sharply from mainstream curatorial practices, yet the exhibitions also participated in a transition to an economy in which cultural commodities are never finished but are instead subject to continual performance, recontextualization, and revaluation. Like Group Material, Lawler has participated in and articulated the transition to an economy in which a premium is put on flexibility and various forms of participation. There the production of value is increasingly “culturalized,” as fans and users produce added value through their investment of time in and attention to certain brands—from designer shoes and coffee to Facebook. Indeed, Lawler’s ability to articulate the contradictions inherent to this economic regime is conditioned by her work’s partial participation in it.

Performing in an Event Culture

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Lawler’s use of multiple-choice questions is highly relevant in this era of the informational commodity. Today’s consumer, or user, is constantly being asked for feedback, for example, or whether s/he agrees with certain legal terms. Baudrillard highlighted opinion polls as symptomatic of the rule of coded equivalence. But what about choices that don’t add up? Lawler’s text piece She Made No Attempt to Rescue Art from Ritual—Yes/No was first executed in 1994, when the Internet economy was in its infancy. Here, as in the traveling 1995–96 exhibition A Spot on the Wall, the text was used as a quasi caption or subtext for one of Lawler’s paperweights. The text also appeared on the poster of the Graz version of A Spot on the Wall. In this case, one could theoretically answer this question—made to look like a statement of fact by the absence of a question mark—by checking either the “yes” or the “no” box. When the text was presented in A Spot on the Wall in conjunction with the paperweight Untitled (Collection of 60 Drawings, No. 1)—or today at the Stedelijk Museum in conjunction with the paperweight Untitled (Recent)—the change in medium and context would perhaps first seem to constitute a conservative museification of a piece of ephemeral printed matter. In fact, the installed version brings out one of the piece’s qualities, as any reflex to check one of the boxes must now itself be checked. The nature of binary choices as the dominant form of economic and political participation is foregrounded.

She Made No Attempt […] etc. also showed up on a matchbook that served as the announcement of the Amsterdam version of A Spot on the Wall; here, a format usually associated with a basic form of advertising became curiously inquisitive. Lawler has produced a substantial number of matchbook pieces over the years; one example—executed a number of times in different ways—simply says “NO SMOKING.” However, such a phrase on a matchbook is of course rather perverse and anything but simple. The piece recalls an early score by George Brecht, in which, after being instructed to “[arrange] to observe a No Smoking sign,” the reader is given two options (another binary choice): “smoking” and “no smoking.” George Maciunas designed a poster version of Brecht’s score, using only “no smoking” and turning the letters into an Op art–type graphic pattern. Difficult to decipher, the phrase could be a description as well as a command—and in any case, the deciphering of the text became the primary event. Around 1980 Lawler worked on an unfinished no-smoking short that was to be shown in cinemas before the main feature. For some time, a moving image would be shown—in the version that came closest to being realized, the image consisted of an aquarium and its denizens—to which a “no

21 A Spot on the Wall was shown in 1995–96 at the Kunstverein München; the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz; and De Appel, Amsterdam.
22 Untitled (Recent) (1995) shows an arrangement Lawler photographed at the Stedelijk Museum when she prepared for the Amsterdam version of A Spot on the Wall.
23 The first version of this matchbook, white on black, is from 1978. A red-on-white version, with a parrot photo on the inside cover, was made for the 2009 show Re-Gift, curated by John Miller.
24 Brecht’s development of the Fluxus score, which could be performed in multiple ways or not at all, is a crucial moment in the becoming-contingent of the art object.
25 Brecht’s original score is part of his Water Yam box of event cards, which has seen multiple editions since the 1973 Maciunas-designed first version. Some ten years before Maciunas’s design, Brecht had already used a no-smoking sign as a readymade (the object is in the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection at the MoMA), and in 1966 he made a quasi sign in the form of a No Smoking assemblage, with cork letters on canvas.
26 There are a number of 16 mm films in Louise Lawler’s archive pertaining to this unfinished project.
smoking” subtitle was added after some time. Such an announcement before a feature film is experienced by audiences as dead time, as time wasted waiting for the cinematic event—but Lawler wanted to prolong it. On a Lawler matchbook, the words no smoking are structurally confusing; either the function of the matchbook or its inscription is void.27

In his 1961 book The Image, Daniel Boorstin analyzed press conferences and other scripted situations for the press as manipulative nonevents dressed up as events: they were pseudo-events.28 By the mid-1960s, it was becoming increasingly clear that Fluxus events and happenings were being integrated into the economy of the pseudo-event, as pop culture became inundated with “events” and “happenings” in the service of PR, advertising, and fashion. The pseudo-event was indeed the “bad dream” of much of the avant-garde performance of this period, as Carrie Lambert-Beatty has put it.29 Lawler’s ephemeral pieces void the pseudo-event and reveal it as a nonevent, a void event, one whose very emptiness and openness suggests that it is a potential event, a framework in which an event could take place. By showing a movie without the picture (as in her 1979 A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture) or sending out invitations to a regular performance of Swan Lake (as she did in 1981), Lawler formalizes the event and turns the “normal” purpose (watching a movie or Swan Lake) into a pretext. The planned pseudo-event becomes a site on which something might appear. In the case of the Swan Lake piece, that site was a high-culture spectacle, one seen at a remove, from a decontextualized perspective.30 A Movie Will be Shown Without the Picture announced that an event would take place regardless of one’s decision to attend, although one’s attendance at and assistance in the performance might have an impact on the event in some way.

With some of Lawler’s pieces, the event becomes visible as a hole in time—an overly managed nonevent.31 The staged event is a condensed presentation of contemporary labor as performance and thus serves as a privileged site for investigating the conditions of contemporary performance. Lawler intervenes in contemporary labor from within. A Movie is far from her only understated and pointed intervention in event culture. When, in 1982, she distributed red matchbooks labeled “An evening with Julian Schnabel” at a lecture Schnabel was giving, Lawler foregrounded the rise of such lecture-events and the increasing importance of artistic self-presentation. The Neo-Expressionism of the early 1980s was not a real return to historical Expressionism, and it was only in part a return to outmoded kinds of artistic production. Schnabel may have used certain traditional media and forms, but he did so in the context of a thoroughly media-saturated and performative artistic practice. As Ann Goldstein put it, with her intervention Lawler reframed Schnabel “as a

27 Lawler acquired her own imprinter for matchbooks when the company she had asked to produce them refused because of the “conflict of interest” this text generated.
30 See Ann Goldstein, “In the Company of Others,” in Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back), ed. Helen Molesworth, exh. cat. Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, OH; Wexner Center for the Arts; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 140–41.
31 I have borrowed the phrase “hole in time” from Tim Griffin, “The Personal Effects of Seth Price,” in Artforum 47, no. 10 (Summer 2009): 288.
theatrical event.” A slightly less direct intervention in the ideology of Neo-Expressionism can be seen in the one-night exhibition/event organized in 1982 by Lawler and Sherrie Levine at the James Turcotte Gallery in Los Angeles as part of their series *A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything*. All the gallery contained was a blue card mounted on the wall containing the name of the series (which served at that point as a kind of brand name), their own names, and the phrase “His gesture moved us to tears,” as well as a stack of copies of that same card for visitors to take home.

While evoking the renewed cult of the painterly gesture in Neo-Expressionist painting, Lawler’s Schnabel project in fact shifted attention to different gestures, to a different kind of performance: that of art-world denizens attending an exhibition, bringing their self-performance to the event. “His gesture moved us to tears” is a statement in the past tense and thus cannot be taken as a score or instruction, though the card also contained information about the time and date of this one-day exhibition, setting the stage for other gestures during the exhibition-event. Switching from one type of gesture to another, the staged event of *His Gesture Moved Us to Tears* also suggests that performance may be the real medium of contemporary art: the material to work with, to shape and reshape, to cut and reassemble. By working with and performing various media and discursive systems, Lawler also foregrounds the self-performance of various actors in the cultural field. In the process, their performance becomes its own double. Performance itself is here reperformed, and perhaps unperformed, suggesting a possibility for different forms of action in our event culture.

The “event” at the Turcotte Gallery was another kind of arrangement, another kind of assembly or assemblage. The card functioned not so much as an event score but as an event trigger. It was not so much that the participants were executing a performance score presented on a card; instead, the card was acting on them. Perhaps even more than the Conceptualism of the late 1960s, the earlier Fluxus movement again provides the most direct and illuminating historical precedent. In Fluxus, as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh put it, “[the] object acquires the condition of a ludic interactive model in which participant and producer are equals.” In some cases, such a Fluxus object is a contingent realization of an event score; George Brecht considered selecting a no-smoking sign as a readymade realization of his event score before Maciunas designed his version, and he did in fact choose an exit sign as a realization of another score. As an event trigger, the card with the words *his gesture moved us to tears* is itself a “ludic interactive model” in which the relations not only between producer and participant but also between that pairing and the card-object itself form an instable constellation—an assembly that is in fact an assemblage of people and nonhuman participants, such as an unspectacular bit of printed matter.

From Arrangement to Assemblage

32 Goldstein, “In the Company of Others,” 141 (see note 30).
33 For a more elaborate analysis of this dialectic, see chapter 5 of my book *History in Motion* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).
35 This is the “Word Event” that (seemingly) simply states “EXIT.” A photo shows the sign installed above the back door in Brecht’s house in 1962; see Julia Robinson, “In the Event of George Brecht,” in: *George Brecht: Events. A Heterospective* (Cologne: Museum Ludwig, Walther König, 2005), 66.
Lawler has always refused to lord over her work as authorial authority, as Subject in the Know determining the objects’ meaning; she has been generous to the point of self-effacement. One might say that Lawler lives the death of the author on a daily basis—which is not to say that she is not extremely precise and self-critical. Her precision and criticality is situational and mediated by shifting circumstances, encounters, and collaborations.

It Remains to Be Seen contained a number of photographs as well as other kinds of work by Lawler. One wall held displays of several sets of glasses, including champagne glasses designed by Richard Meier and accompanied by wall text that read “Louise Lawler & Richard Meier.” Under the heading “Art by Design,” the press release (written by Lawler) stated: “A designer learns from previous products and pays attention to the needs of the client. Requirements must be met and satisfied. The intention is known. This striving for solutions has been heard and echoes to a useless and decorative conclusion.”

The press release continued, “[this] is an exhibition that attempts to pull apart by bringing together,” before acerbically noting the convergence of art and design in the age of commodity art and architect-designed teapots.

By adding her name to Meier’s, Lawler may at first seem to have come close to creating cute-commodity art, suggesting an equivalence between herself as artist and Meier as designer, with their combined names functioning as a new brand. However, as with her other glass pieces, the accompanying texts (and sometimes images) turn these everyday objects into problematic things that no longer perform in their habitual manner and/or are being performed, necessitating different forms of (inter)action. Taken together, the six Meier glasses spell out the word M-I-N-I-G, introducing into the horizontal realm of sign value a reminder of the vertical axis of production and in particular the extraction of raw material (such as sand/silica for glass production). As with the glasses embossed with “It costs $590,000 a day to operate an aircraft carrier. 1986,” a dimension of the economy on which the interplay of branded commodities depends is made visible, or legible—though one could of course also rearrange the glasses, thus scrambling the text. The glasses of another edition (from 1988) each say “It is something like putting words in your mouth,” a rather literal twist on the familiar phrase. But who is putting words in whose mouth? Lawler in the reader/viewer/user’s?

The piece was also executed by Lawler in the form of a cardholder with cards saying “It is something like” on one side and “putting words in your mouth” on the other. As with His Gesture, the “work” is perhaps less a discrete paper object than the events it generates, the assemblies it occasions; such assemblies are another type of arrangement, and it is not always clear who such an arrangement is “by.” Is it by Lawler, by curators, to some extent by the contingent object itself? During a seminar on appropriation and dedication organized by If I Can’t Dance, I Don’t Want to Be Part of Your Revolution in early 2013, the card’s interpellation of the reader/viewer

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38 For contemporary theory, the thing has come to stand for what upsets and problematizes what W. J. T. Mitchell calls the “ordered ranks of objecthood.” (Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want?, 112 [see note 2].) The object performs in accordance with well-established protocols; the transition to thingness, i.e., malfunctioning, is one that turns performance into action.
and possible responses were addressed by a number of participants. Furthermore, the work was a discreet presence during presentations by Gregg Bordowitz and Grant Watson.

If modern philosophy has tended to treat objects as determined by the subject’s ordering gaze and actions, recent theory accredits much more agency to the object than the “theological whims” of the seemingly self-acting commodity. Bruno Latour is among those who treat objects or things as actants in their own right. Lawler’s matchbooks, announcement cards, and glasses cultivate a different kind of agency than her photographs do; the first two in particular are cheap (free, in fact) and insinuate themselves into people’s homes, lingering around, becoming a temporary part of the arrangement and confronting their keepers with quizzical statements. On occasion, Lawler herself puts in an appearance as a resolutely speaking subject, turning the object into a conduit by unambiguously giving her political opinion: a 2003 Metro Pictures announcement card, for example, stated “No drinks for those who do not support the anti-war demonstration.” Here too the usually inconspicuous announcement card develops an agency beyond its usual remit, making the recipient wonder if and how this could actually be enforced. Is this just a conceptual piece, or will people have to state (or lie about) their political opinion in order to get drinks?

In the preparations of her exhibition at the Museum Ludwig, Lawler toyed with the idea of writing detailed biographical statements on a number of her ephemera. This abandoned reperformance of her printed matter recalls her paperweight Untitled (Dreams) (1993), which is accompanied by an extensive caption providing the biographies of the artworks that we see arranged in a white bedroom: Edward Ruscha’s Dreams # 1 and Roy Lichtenstein’s Ball of Twine. We learn that they were at the time both owned by Leo Castelli and that the older and historically more significant work, the Lichtenstein, had been lent out to a large number of exhibitions—its visibility in high-profile shows being of course in the gallery owner’s interest. In this sense, they come to approximate the future techno-commodity that Bruce Sterling has dubbed spime—a product that is embedded in the net and thereby becomes “the protagonist of a documented process. It is a historical entity with an accessible, precise trajectory through space and time.” But accessible for whom, under which legal, technological, and cultural conditions? Meanwhile, of course, the NSA and other intelligence services are busy turning us into spimes, tracking our communication behavior and amassing data and metadata that dwarf the list of Untitled (Dreams). If this seems far removed from Lawler’s work, where do you think those drones get their data? “This will mean more to some of you than to others,” as Lawler’s list ends.

39 The announcement for this seminar is at http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/appropriation-and-dedication-seminar/.
41 Bruce Sterling, Shaping Things (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 76.
42 No Drones was Lawler’s preferred title for her exhibition at the Museum Ludwig, though this was abandoned for not resonating in Germany. Some time after this decision, German defense minister Thomas de Maizière was attacked by the opposition and the media for doing nothing to stop the disastrous Euro Hawk project. The Euro Hawks were to be unarmed reconnaissance drones, and the debate focused on the ministry’s having wasted more than 500 million euros in taxpayer money.
In *Untitled (Dreams)*, the arrangement that is visible in the picture, which is already modified by the semispherical lens of the paperweight, becomes part of a larger assemblage, one that includes not only the visible picture but also the iterations of the objects, the shifting relations between pictures, picture owners, and other subjective or objective agents. A crucial piece in this respect is *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture*, when the film in question was *The Misfits*. Lawler has since also executed the piece with *The Hustler*, and, in 2012 in Amsterdam, *Saturday Night Fever*. It was another event as nonevent; an assembly of people to witness a film that is not to be seen, only heard. While there are plenty of photographs of the Amsterdam version, they cannot show the actual event, which took place in near darkness; still, photos taken just before and after the “screening” perpetuate the event, just as a photo of *His Gesture Moved Us to Tears* perpetuates and modulates that event.

The events generated by Lawler’s assemblies thus have a much more diffuse and interesting temporality than that of event culture. The actual event is a node in a network that amounts to an assemblage of different types of agents engaging in unusual performances or actions. They range from Lawler herself to various other human participants and things. This assemblage is not to be seen; it is a virtual image that both demands and sabotages acts of picturing. What we are dealing with is not some godlike digital file manifesting itself, but an open-ended dialectic of things and people, of moments of subjectification and objectivation. It is a dialectic because contradictions and antinomies keep emerging; one only need think of the fact that contemporary artists operate in a project-based “intern economy,” in which un(der)paid young people in their twenties or even thirties add value to their practice.

Lawler has long had an interest in casting, once using a picture of Meryl Streep as her own portrait on the cover of an art magazine, and has considered making performative interventions in art spaces that would involve the casting of actors. Such pieces would deal with the threshold of visibility, necessitating a careful approach to actors’ different levels of recognizability; in fact, the increasing star culture in video art, with artists casting highly recognizable faces, was one factor in Lawler’s abandonment of this idea. But what about actors who remain under the radar, who insert themselves in the picture as inconspicuous extras? What of these “wretched of the screen,” to use an expression of Hito Steyerl’s, and their equivalents in the art world? A 1992 photo by Lawler shows a gallery assistant seen from behind, in front of an Ed Ruscha stain painting. Artnet.com informs us that one print of this photograph (from an edition of ten) sold for $22,500 at Christie’s on March 8, 2013. This too is part of its biography. The title, *Not Cindy*, brings to mind Cindy Sherman’s stint as a gallery assistant in the 1970s, when she would supposedly

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43 The 2012 Amsterdam version of *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* was organized by the present author with Louise Lawler, If I Can’t Dance, I Don’t Want to Be Part of Your Revolution, and the Stedelijk Museum. See http://www.ificantdance.org/PerformanceInResidence/SvenLuttickenLouiseLawler. A small publication is in the works for early 2014.

44 Many theorists who use the term *assemblage*—from Deleuze-Guattarians and post-Operaists to Latourians and proponents of various new materialisms—have a beef with dialectics, identifying dialectical thinking with teleological historical narratives and the subjection of life under rigid schemata. As I have argued elsewhere, I consider this rejection of dialectics *tout court* to be reductivist and unproductive.

sometimes show up in character, dressed up like an archetypal secretary. This art-historical lore too is part of the assemblage.

The actors, extras, objects, and other agents that are part of what we tend to call “Lawler’s work” may take it in directions that are not necessarily foreseen by the artist-author. As privileged as her agency is in some respects, the real work may very well happen in the chance encounter between a student and a matchbook.

*The title of this essay is a remark from an email by Louise Lawler, indicating that her plans for the exhibition at the Ludwig were not set in stone.*