

Interviews with Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson

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Interviews with Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson

MARTHA BUSKIRK

Sherrie Levine

Buskirk: Duchamp is relevant to your recent work that makes specific references, and to your work in general. But let's start a bit earlier, with the shoe sale that you did in 1976, and the strategy of taking a found object into the gallery and selling it there.

Levine: After I got out of school in the early seventies, I was teaching in California and I bought the shoes at a secondhand store in San Jose. When I moved to New York I brought one suitcase of my clothes with me and seventy-five pairs of little black shoes. I brought them to Stephen Eins, who had a storefront at 3 Mercer Street and was interested in showing work that was specifically about commerce. We held a sale, as opposed to an exhibition—a shoe sale. The announcement was a postcard with a picture of a pair of shoes on it. It read "two shoes for two dollars." We held the sale two Saturdays and sold all the shoes.

Buskirk: Do you still have any of the shoes?

Levine: I have one pair left. When Parkett invited me to make a multiple for them, I asked if they would be interested in remaking the shoes. In the beginning I was trying to find a readymade shoe. But I couldn't find anything I liked, so I suggested that we remake the original shoe.

Buskirk: It's very Duchampian, this idea of taking the original readymade and making it into a fabricated readymade.

Levine: Yes. I wasn't sure about it at first, but I was really pleased in the end with the little brown shoes that we had fabricated.

Buskirk: In the interim they were known mainly through the one photograph that's usually reproduced. So they were first a readymade, then existed mainly in the form of a document, and then reappeared as a fabricated readymade.

Levine: I had photographed every one of the original pairs, but unfortunately I didn't keep any of the photographs.

OCTOBER 70, Fall 1994, pp. 99-112. © 1994 Martha Buskirk.



Buskirk: But you did keep the one pair of shoes?

Levine: I kept them because I didn't think of them as art. They were in a box with a bunch of odds and ends. I was lucky to recover them.

Buskirk: It's interesting that the shoes were in this very tenuous state between being art and not being art.

Levine: That was the reason Stephen wanted to show them. And a shoe is the ultimate fetish object.

Buskirk: A fetish object that's also a commodity.

Levine: I'm very curious about that area where the commodity meets the sublime.

Buskirk: Let's come back to your work in the late 1970s . . .

Levine: I began to make collages with silhouettes cut from fashion magazines. I wanted to make work that was very economical in its formal means, yet layered and complex in meaning. I realized that what I had been doing with the collages was putting one picture on top of the other.

Buskirk: Certainly the collage works are about the representation of the work of art in a printed context, and that determines their scale as well. I'm interested by the move from the play with the image—whether the collage works, where you've taken a plate from a book, or the works where you've rephotographed plates from books—to the other works that you've done, like the gold knots, the checkerboards, the chevrons. These have been referred to as generic paintings, but ones that also move more toward the status of objects because of their emphasis on texture and materiality.

Levine: I see the collages and the photographs as very formal and material works too. I love the physical qualities of paper. I'm very concerned about the texture of the paper and the edges. I pay close attention to the print quality of the images. For me, the collages and photographs are very materialized objects.

Buskirk: In her essay on the Bachelors, Rosalind Krauss picks up on your statement that Duchamp provided you with a way to make sculpture, and she talks about the implications of having to look for a way to make a sculpture. Your sculptural work also plays off both two-dimensional and three-dimensional works. Do you make a distinction between these two approaches?

Levine: I always make things that I want to look at. Objects that help me understand something or experience something that I didn't before. I choose things that I want to see—which I think is what most artists do. That's my motivation. I think: What would it be like to cast a Brancusi head in glass? What would that look like? How would I feel if there were six or twelve of them in a room together? What would that mean to me? What I'm interested in is the almost-same.

Buskirk: With respect to the almost-same, you seem to insist on the "almost" part with materials—going from porcelain to bronze, or going from bronze to glass, in the Fountain and in the Newborn. With the shift of materials you made the urinal into a sensuous, precious object.

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Duchamp's Fountain.



Left: Sherrie Levine. Chimera: After a Broken Leg. 1994. (Photo: Kevin Noble.)

Right: Max Ernst. Young Chimera. Circa 1921.

Levine: I thought it would be challenging to work in a traditional sculpture material—something with an immediate aesthetic credibility. I was very surprised when I saw my first *Fountain*. When I made the decision to cast the urinal, I was thinking primarily about Duchamp, but the finished high polish bronze sculpture more readily evoked Brancusi and Arp.

Buskirk: It's striking how the material itself could create those associations.

Levine: I think the anthropomorphic form of the urinal also recalled those artists. Buskirk: You also thought in another way about Duchamp in that the catalogue for the presentation of your Fountain was modeled after the catalogue for the exhibition at the Menil Foundation in Houston that was devoted to

Levine: I thought that it would be amusing to make the catalogue an appropriation. Buskirk: But those are two different trajectories. The Brancusi association is more in the experience of the work itself, whereas the catalogue is focused on the Duchamp connection.

The *Melt Down* pieces were also included in that catalogue. They seem particularly interesting for the way in which they seem to play off Conceptual art—in the sense of taking an arbitrary screen or set of criteria, there the computer reading of great works of art—and then using that as a basis for further work.

Levine: I had made some woodcuts based on a grid created by a computer reading of some modern masterpieces. In addition to the grids of twelve, I also received a printout of a grid of one—in other words, a monochrome. I had

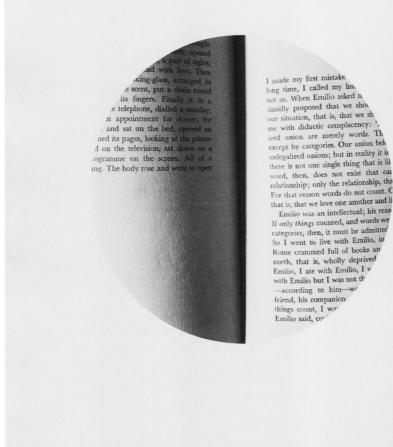
- been thinking about how I could generate a monochrome painting for quite a while.
- Buskirk: You say "thinking about how I could generate a monochrome painting"—
 this is similar to what you said about looking to find a way to make a
 sculpture. The search for a conceptual grid or a rationale for your work
 seems to be a unifying theme.
- Levine: Yes, I am always trying to find a way to fit these things into a larger framework so that the work creates an environment where each reading informs all the other readings, and the latest work informs the earliest work.
- Buskirk: Duchamp, too, did not create a body of work based on stylistic unities; the unities of his work have a more conceptual basis.
- Levine: Gerhard Richter's work has this same aspect—I can't look at any of his paintings without rethinking all the others. It's that Borgesian notion of the present enriching the past.
- Buskirk: In both your early statements and early writings about your work, Borges is a reference. Indeed, there is a sense of very specific shared references in your critical bibliography. It seems now like the bibliography has been expanded outward. And you have also referred to a number of different types of art.
- Levine: I like to read, and I generally experience a healthy symbiotic relationship to the critical attention I receive.
- Buskirk: It does give high modernism a particular twist, though, when you take it through the readymade—the idea that the urinal came out looking like a Brancusi is funny in that regard. There are certainly people who would make a division between Duchamp and modernism's trajectory, whereas making a urinal into a Brancusi collapses those two.
- Levine: I was trying to collapse the utopian and the dystopian aspects of high modernism. It's something of an ongoing obsession of mine.
- Buskirk: To turn to the piece you are working on now—the piece that will use the Eames leg splints. You're returning to a found object, a very specific one. The leg splint is a practical object, but one made by a recognized artist, so it already has the quality of existing in an in-between state.
- Levine: In the early 1940s Charles Eames figured out a way to mold plywood, and he used it to fabricate a chair. Shortly after this discovery, the United States Navy commissioned him to design plywood splints and gurneys for them.
- Buskirk: You found some of them for sale?
- Levine: Yes, at a modern furniture store. I bought thirteen of them.
- Buskirk: In addition to your attraction to the readymade, you seem to have a strong interest in seriality and repetition. Your interest in high modernism seems to have been shaped or filtered through the art of the 1960s—particularly Minimalism and Conceptual art.
- Levine: Repetition is implicit in the notion of the readymade. I think that's one of the reasons that I'm drawn to this tradition.

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Buskirk: With the leg splint, you're also using a found object that—like the shoes in the 1970s—has a very specific relation to the body.

- Levine: It does have a wonderful mask-like quality, and I thought it would be amusing to make a work of art titled Chimera: After a Broken Leg, referring both to Duchamp and Max Ernst.
- Buskirk: Choosing the splint as a readymade has a very different meaning now than it would have had ten or fifteen years ago.
- Levine: The splints have the same formal qualities as the modern sculpture that interests me—that commingling of the anthropomorphic and the geometric. Finding the splints when I did was serendipitous in the sense that finding the shoes was serendipitous. But, of course, we find what we seek.

May 13, 1994



long time, I called my hu. not so. When Emilio asked n timidly proposed that we show our situation, that is, that we sh me with didactic complacency: ' ized union are merely words. Th except by categories. Our union belo unlegalized unions; but in reality it is there is not one single thing that is lib word, then, does not exist that can relationship; only the relationship, tha For that reason words do not count. C that is, that we love one another and li

If only things counted, and words we categories, then, it must be admitted So I went to live with Emilio, in Rome crammed full of books an north, that is, wholly deprived Emilio, I ate with Emilio, I v with Emilio but I was not th -according to him-wr friend, his companion

Louise Lawler. Open. 1980.

Louise Lawler

Martha Buskirk: In thinking about the relevance of Duchamp for more recent practices, one particularly important issue is the degree to which he thought very carefully about the nature of the work of art and how its meaning is shaped by the context in which it is presented. How did your own interest in these issues develop?

Louise Lawler: My own relation to Duchamp is after the fact. I guess I wasn't aware of the complexity of his relationship to context; to me, Duchamp signaled a "bottle rack" (who uses that?), a weird looking urinal, and a lot of pictures of him smoking and enjoying the sun with other people.

In college my class spent a term in New York City, sharing a floor with fourth-year architecture students overlooking Union Square. As a part of the curriculum we visited artists' studios. One sculptor was constantly trying to convince us to ask to visit Duchamp. She was actually wild-eyed with enthusiasm. The rest of us sat there mildly intrigued that he was in fact (we thought) somewhere near Twenty-third Street. I'm telling this to collapse a historical distance as well as to acknowledge it.

Buskirk: Who were you looking at when you were first thinking about context and the way a work of art is understood?

Lawler: When I came to New York to live I was skeptical about what you do as an artist and didn't expect to actually be one, but I diligently went to the galleries on Saturdays. Uptown, on the East Side, I wasn't sure you were supposed to go in. It wasn't so much whose work it was that interested me but looking at how it was working, what was expected of it in these situations. There were also a lot of shows about being outside of those contexts—on a pier, under the Brooklyn Bridge, on a roof. 112 Greene and 98 Greene (Holly and Horace Solomon) were other sites for performance and dance. Not a salon by invitation but a loose community; I would recognize at least a quarter of the audience at each Grand Union performance. Being outside, these events have remained somewhat outside which has made me feel somewhat responsible for reinserting information about them. By "outside," I

mean not being placed in the habitual position and format of art, retained and referenced in some places but rarely in written histories.

Before that I assisted some of the artists in an Earth art show. It was presented by the Cornell University Art Museum, but somehow seemed "impressarioed" by Willoughby Sharp (founder with Liza Baer of *Avalanche*). The German video producer Gerry Schum was there. The gallerist John Gibson came. This was of course an inside/outside situation, but it already was a time when being outside the institution certainly made sense. Work could be clandestine or part of a "Be In."

In response to your question of who I was looking at, I liked Pop art, meaning Warhol, Lichtenstein. But the list is much longer: Artschwager, Ruscha, Buren, Weiner, LeWitt, Barry, Graham, Baldessari, Neil Jenney, Chris D'Arcangelo, Peter Nadin, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, Benjamin Buchloh, Michael Asher, Allan McCollum, Andrea Fraser. This list in no way acknowledges the differences between looking and talking, or involvement with other work that may mean less to others and more to me. I think art is part and parcel of a cumulative and collective enterprise, viewed as seen fit by the prevailing culture. Other work, outside work, makes up a part of this.

I'm trying to point out that there are many issues concerning context that can be referenced before and since Duchamp. Some attempt to eliminate it as a codified situation and others to exacerbate and make more evident its conventions. Sherrie Levine and I tried the latter in our collaborative work, A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything. We were the presenters, taking on the position of the gallery, not being subsumed by it. A consistent, conservative invitation was sent out, announcing an exhibition that was a matter of agreement between the two of us—sometimes her work, sometimes my work, in different locations, for one night only.

- Buskirk: It seems that your work, even when situated within a gallery space, continually pushes at the edges. How has the terrain shifted since you started out?
- Lawler: 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.
- Buskirk: Another thing that's central to your work is collaboration. Some are very explicit collaborations, like with Sherrie Levine or Allan McCollum, while others are implicit.
- Lawler: Collaborations can produce a shift in focus and concerns. For example, Ideal Settings for Presentation and Display was a collaborative work with Allan McCollum where we totally played up the fact that the gallery is a kind of backdrop or stage—incorporating stage lights and painted pedestals, displaying the objects in a sort of walk-in advertisement.
- Buskirk: Along with the idea of the work as a collaboration, you've also emphasized the author name as a label that individuates a work.

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Lawler: It makes more sense to me to describe a work that deals with this issue, rather than talk about it. There was a show at the uptown Castelli gallery entitled "Amalgam" in the 1980s. It was a show of works on paper by a lot of the main gallery artists. Their names were being put in press type that was about an inch high next to their works around the room—Johns, Warhol, etc. I approached Marvin Heiferman, who worked at the gallery at the time, and said I would like to put a work in the show, but the wall label would say "Anonymous." It was a photograph of an open book of short stories by Alberto Moravia, edited by being printed in a circle.

Buskirk: You also did a piece at Castelli that was a gift certificate. I was wondering how that worked—and whether you were thinking specifically about Duchamp's works in the form of checks.

Lawler: I don't want to play the dumb artist. I suppose I knew something about Duchamp and Yves Klein having done something with checks. To be honest, I'm still not exactly sure how theirs worked. I think I looked at Brooks Brothers and Barneys to figure out the terms and layout, and then designed it to look like Castelli typography. It was another big works-on-paper show, this time downtown. Most of the works were quite large. Around the corner from a Rauschenberg, and before you got to the Longo, I installed one gift certificate under a piece of plexi, and in press type above wrote "Gift Certificates Are Available," and they still are.

Buskirk: You have done some works that were specifically related to political events—as in the work that focused on the Helms amendment, or the glasses that you inscribed with a statement about the cost of operating an aircraft carrier—but those pieces are not as didactic as some of the political art that we're seeing now. How do you view the idea of political content in art?

Lawler: With the Helms amendment piece, I knew what I was doing in a different way than I often do. There were reasons that determined my choices. It was produced for an exhibition at the Photographic Resource Center in Boston at a time when there was much controversy over the content of photographs by Mapplethorpe and Serrano in exhibitions funded by the NEA. I made ninety-four prints of a black-and-white photo of a plastic cup—sort of archetypal Weston peppers, with bright whites and dense blacks. They were matted with the name of each senator in press type on the mats-red for Democrats, blue for Republicans. They were installed in pairs, one above the other, alphabetically by state around the room. The frames were dark wood, and the wall was painted gray. In the six spaces where there was no photo there was an excerpt of the Helms amendment which stated that no federal funds could be used to support AIDS educational material that condoned a homosexual lifestyle. The text stood in place of the four senators who abstained from the vote and the two who voted no. The cup to me had a certain feeling of a medicalized environment, and it also had a classical element to it. You don't know how people are going to perceive or read it—

they wouldn't necessarily think about anonymity, and what gets taken away when you're always drinking from a plastic cup in a hospital. But the work in general was very much a product of its times. The codes which produced its conventions of display—pictures, text, paint, quantity—embraced the issues wholeheartedly with a fervor that is hopefully recognized and felt.

Buskirk: You once mentioned to me rephotographing Duchamp's Air of Paris at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Lawler: It seemed like a particularly poignant one to do about repackaging because that glass vial looks so strange to us. In fact, all the readymades are interesting-looking things now, and their normalcy is gone.

It seemed like something that I liked, but could have done a bit better. With the shadows from the case, what I was photographing wasn't so visible to me—which is an interesting thing with black-and-white film. You see things so differently, and the shadows become so prominent.

The other picture I'd taken of the *Air of Paris* was in Sweden, where they had it hung on a string. All I took was the shadow.

Buskirk: In playing with shadows, of course, you're also doing something Duchampian . . .

Lawler: Yes. You can make suppositions about that, but you can't necessarily ascribe them to the artist. You see connections, but that doesn't necessarily mean that's where the artist got them. But that also doesn't mean that they're not there. This discussion of Duchamp seems a good opportunity to express my discomfort with too much referencing of authority that is restrictive, rather than acknowledging the work's "kindling" effect and use.

And this points to one reason why I resist interviews: they foreground the artist—tell too much about what wouldn't be known when confronting the work. In rereading and trying to rework my responses, I find I am always backing up, wondering why I responded as I did, and filling in. It becomes a matter of selection.

May 20, 1994

Fred Wilson

Martha Buskirk: The intersection of the work of art and the museum is an issue of increasing importance for twentieth-century artists—both for Duchamp and for contemporary work. You have focused very specifically on how the museum is assembled and how meaning is constructed in that context. I'm also interested in the conjunction between being an artist and being a curator, and the degree to which the two overlap.

Fred Wilson: I've been asked if my work came from various theoretical discussions, but actually it didn't; it came from my experience in museums. Having worked as both a curator and an artist, there is a big difference between the two. With curating, the whole notion of irony is not involved, often for good reason—because the public in the museum space often expects some form of universal truth or knowledge, a notion I hold suspect. The fact that I'm an artist in an institution gives the viewer a certain leeway in how to respond to this work. All my work is extremely personal. In curating, that is forced more to the background because of the emphasis on so-called objective scholarship, which tends to make the viewers passive in their experience of the exhibition. I'm always trying to push the exhibitions farther than I would expect a museum curator to go.

Buskirk: Though of course some of what could be understood as personal vision in Mining the Museum was really based on scholarship, on a close examination of the details of the collection and its archive, which allowed you to come up with identifications and other information that had not been found, or perhaps sought, before.

Wilson: I have nothing against scholarship. It's important that, in my work, I'm not making grandiose claims from nowhere. But I do like the audience to think about scholarship in a more open way. In Mining the Museum I'm not trying to say that this is the history that you should be paying attention to. I'm just pointing out that, in an environment that supposedly has the history of Maryland, it's possible that there's another history that's not being talked about. It would be possible to do an exhibition about women's history, about Jewish history, about immigrant history based on looking at things in the



Fred Wilson. Installation at Seattle Art Museum. 1993.

Right: Mining the Museum. Baltimore Museum of Art. 1992.

collection. I chose African American and Native American information because that was impossible for me to overlook. But it was never to say that this was *the* history you had to be looking at. And certainly that exhibition was not about a straight black history. If I'd wanted to, I could have borrowed things from other museums around Maryland and around the country and made a more cohesive black history in the linear fashion, the way museums do. But that's not what I was trying to do.

Buskirk: There seems to be a foregone conclusion in your work that you are working from within the institutional space—that you are not trying to make a gesture that exists entirely in another space, but that you're working with histories that have to some degree already been constructed. Did that always seem self-evident to you as a direction?

Wilson: After Mining the Museum and the work in Seattle, it seemed to make the most sense. I'm really interested in surprise and how one reacts on an emotional and intuitive level before the intellectual self kicks in. That synapse seems to happen best when you feel that you understand the situation that you're involved in, and the museum setting is one where people feel that they know what to expect and how they're supposed to act. It's a way, once I have people disarmed, to get them to push past their comfort zone. Otherwise, if they walk into a space that's already an environment where they're on their guard, you can lose a lot.

Buskirk: What you've done in working with the rhetoric of already established spaces has been related by critics to Conceptual art. I was wondering how self-consciously you were positioning yourself in relation to Conceptual art of the 1960s and '70s, or to art of earlier periods.

Wilson: Being schooled in college in the mid-1970s, Conceptual art was in the dialogue of the art school, and I had an interest in it. But more recently I've

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seen a lot that I was not familiar with then. So I guess I could say that I was generally familiar with it, but not immersed in it.

Buskirk: Yet, whether or not you were referring explicitly to Conceptual art, one could say that Conceptual art created a space in which people could understand the issues that you have dealt with in your work.

Wilson: In being a curator for a number of years, I honed this particular craft. Certain people like Broodthaers were doing work based on the museum, but I wasn't aware of it until later, so I really came to this from my experience.

Even though I do consider myself a Conceptual artist, I also work totally from the visual—how the things relate to me, and how the environment that I'm in works with me. Every environment that I do is for me very much a visual relationship of objects, and how they are placed in the space.

Buskirk: There's been a great deal written about your installation in Baltimore, and less about the one in Seattle. Obviously these were different types of museums, a differentiation that is the product of a historical process that separated the fine arts from natural history, ethnography, historical documentation, and so on. I'm interested in how you have put into question, in Baltimore, the idea of the artifact and its interpretation. But I'm also curious about your expectations in Seattle, where you were working not in a historical society but in an art museum.

Wilson: What I loved about Seattle was that it was the exact opposite of what I had been working with in Baltimore. It was a totally new museum, which hadn't been open a year, as opposed to the historical society, which had been there since the mid-nineteenth century. It was not the emotional experience of Mining the Museum, because they didn't have that kind of visceral American history that so closely relates to my personal history.

This museum, like the Metropolitan, and all museums that have general

collections of art from around the world, have all jumped into saying that they're multicultural. And to me, they're about as multicultural as the British Empire: all the cultures are there, but who decides what they have to say, what's next to what, and what's important? So I decided to look at it in terms of how history is created in the linear nature of the floor plan of the museum, which takes you from the ancient world, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, through Medieval Europe, Renaissance, and so on, until you end up in twentieth-century American art. Then the other collections are elsewhere in the museum, and not really part of that march of history. So I tried to mix the collections together in a way that made sense to me, and tried to point to the fact that these things are set up in a very specific kind of way.

What was also different was the fact that these things were interspersed throughout the institution. I was a little concerned, because I'm very much interested in controlling the space. But what I lost in being able to arrange the exact space I gained in that notion of surprise, that ability to catch the viewers off guard so that they look at everything more closely. Another reason I liked Seattle was because I didn't want to be a person who only did things about African American history, even though it's very important to me.

Buskirk: You've worked with the rhetoric of museums, but you've also done exhibitions in galleries. Even though a gallery of contemporary art does have a history, and does carry associations, it is in some ways a less heavily loaded space than the museum.

Wilson: When I do a piece at Metro Pictures, or even the Whitney Biennial, you're going to that space and you know that you're expecting something unusual or unexpected. I can't fool you to think that it's a museum.

Buskirk: I am interested in this idea of taking the objects that are already in the fine art museum and recombining them to create a sense of surprise. There have been so many other moments already in the twentieth century when artists have attempted to raise questions or to create a sense of shock by bringing objects or images that would not normally be considered art into the space of the exhibition or gallery, and later the museum. On the other hand, you are trying to work with what is already in the museum.

Wilson: That's true. I am in many ways responding to the history of art and trying not to do what has been done before, which has a lot to do with notions of the exotic. If anything, I'm trying to expose that notion for what it is by showing things that are familiar and making people see them differently. What can you bring into a museum now that wouldn't belong in a museum? There's basically nothing. So that whole approach is out the window. To me it's much more rigorous to look at the museum itself and to pull out relationships that are invisibly there and to make them visible. That, to me, is much more exciting.

June 14, 1994