Deceptions: “yes, but”, “re-”, “huh?”, “post-”, “oh yes!”

Slow-Down After Lawler: Learning Reading

Once I delved into Louise Lawler’s work, titles included, I could not read any title innocently, as the labels I thought they were. So, at first, the title of the catalogue for the 2017 retrospective exhibition at MoMA of her work, “Receptions,” had me puzzled. Especially with an exhibition in a major museum, for which the opening *is* a reception, this word makes me think of glasses with alcoholic drinks in them, well-dressed people, and the buzz of talking, rather than discussions of art works. The word also has a chic allure, and celebratory. Perhaps a reception can be held, or continued, or repeated, or has been held prior, in the salon Hodler, as Lawler’s photograph *Salon Hodler* suggests? Although almost every piece of stylish-old-fashioned furniture there is cropped, it looks chic enough, and who knows how many more Hodlers you would get to see than these promising large nudes without the cropping. A real draw. But no; Lawler’s other work “on” – related to – *Salon Hodler,* titled *Untitled (Salon Hodler)*, where the image is in a paperweight*,* makes the salon look small, due to the distortion of the round shape. The title becomes ironic, or otherwise “displaced.”

Or is it my knowledge that paper weights are smaller than this that reduces the salon? I have to look twice to make sure. The entire salon in such a small and distorted shape makes it look futile; the chic allure is gone, and what is left is a small monstrosity that seems to be receding as if in the end it will be invisible. The same can be said of *Untitled (Reception Area)*, also a paperweight, and *Untitled (Dreams),* where the dreamy quality of the set with its bedroom gear is seriously threatened by the resizing, cropping and distorting through the paperweight format.Until I notice that the “dream” part of the title refers to the conceptual artwork on the wall, Ed Ruscha’s drawing *Dream #1* (1987), and the pillow-like shapes in the foreground lose their relevance. Only then do I see Roy Lichtenstein’s cropped drawing *Ball of Twine* (1963) on the right side, representing a sculpture/non-sculpture made of worthless materials. The ball is flat, but due to the paperweight’s anamorphism, the drawing’s frame is also distorted, whereas the drawn ball, supposedly suggesting volume, is perfectly flat.

Through the distortion, which keeps Holbein’s anamorphic skull in *The Ambassadors* (1533)in the corner of my eye/mind, whether the perspectival distortion is in the artwork or in the paperweight is a bit hard to see. As is the distortion itself, which upon closer scrutiny is already in the Ruscha drawing; perspective itself becomes a distortion. The work and its title have tricked me, and enforced a slow visual itinerary through the image, countering the illusion that a picture can be seen in a glance, as well as the naturalness of perspective, and the suppositions of representation. But since I know that these are “just pictures,” the association between the title of the catalogue and the connotations of the word “reception” was either a waste of time or an exercise in what I will call “time-stretching”. Those spaces are “just images,” and their flavor of festive and chic partakes of the age-old deception of representation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This raises the question what a title is and does. I will consider Louise Lawler’s work from the perspective of her titles, that “paratext” (Genette) that seems secondary, even for some, distracting, and for others, a way of beginning to see the work for what it is, with understanding. Titles are what Derrida, (1987) after Kant, called “parergons”: boundaries that both delimit the work and invoke the outside. According to the way they function, they are part of the thing they name, and on the side (para). And because they consist of words, they are often considered irrelevant for the visual work. Either way, a work titled *Salon Hodler* is not, can never be, a salon hosting receptions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Just Words

Titles are words, first of all. What kind of a word is that, actually, “receptions”? Now, thinking of Lawler’s remaking work I want to play with the two letters “re-”at the beginning of the word, as in “return,” “repetition,” “representation,” and more. Anachronism is inherent in re-turning to earlier things, states, or actions, as the prefix implies, and as Lawler does. It counters chrono-logic and the attendant illusion of progress. Especially Lawler’s anti-war works (*No Drones*) attest to the need to do just that. Drones as the new achievement of technology, and like the earlier invention recalled in that title, nukes, immediately went to war. This is already a bit more than just a word. True enough, as another “first sight” understanding, this is only up for transformation. And mind my re- words: re-search, re-venant, re-sidue, re-mainder, re-pression, re-minder, re-ciprocating, re-presentation. They will all re-appear in this essay.

When I take off “re-” from the word, the core that remains is “-ception,” and that unknown word does not help us understand why the exhibition catalogue is titled “Receptions”. But when my computer program, a participant in this game, automatically changed “ception” into “caption,” I can see that word’s background as “capturing”, taking, and thus, with “re-” preceding it, the word comes to mean “taking again”. Not just taking pictures again, but also capturing the viewers in the trap of reflecting on their own subjectivity. Again and again. Once I have been looking at Lawler’s titles, no title escapes my explosion of associations.[[3]](#footnote-3)

To what purpose? If “ception” turned “caption” is another attempt to make sense of the catalogue’s title by capturing or “getting” it, I have accumulated enough to bring in, and feel, the idea of multiplicity, time, and sense experience, along with humor, obliqueness, and poignancy. It might mean that not only her titles have multiple meanings, but that the work of Louise Lawler is striking – mind the polyvalence of *that* word, especially in connection to *No Drones* – for many different reasons. Looking at it flat-footedly, it is (mostly) photographic; taking its reputation at its word, it is conceptual. As such, it is critical (of the institution of art), and as such, political (e.g. feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-war). Then, all these obvious qualifiers must be qualified with the help of the list of consequences of “caption”, because in each case, an attempt to understand it in this way solicits a “yes, but” response. And this “yes, but” as well as what Foster felicitously terms a “huh?” effect (2013: 110) – the ongoing, *felt* uncertainty the combination of image and title provokes – is of acute relevance for what Lawler does with her work, of which the titles are an integral as well as separate part.[[4]](#footnote-4)

“Critical,” yes, but critique has been declared obsolete, if we believe Bruno Latour’s anti-war article from 2004. And that critical equals political is only true for those naïve believers in the power of language who think that an act or the failure to perform an expected act, in deviation from what is considered normal, is political in practice. For this would then subvert the routine semiotic of hierarchical power systems, whether cultural, governmental, linguistic, or semiotic. This is not entirely wrong, but simpler than Lawler’s work allows us to assume, and than the practice of critique justifies. The effect depends on the meaning and social embedding of “subvert,” as well as on the position of the critic, on which more below. The element “conceptual” only means that the propositional content of the works is what counts, more than or prior to their visuality. And that, in turn, makes the question of the medium, photography, totally beside the point. Yet, if the conceptual is specifically critical, and the target of the critique is the institution of (visual) art, then the idea that the visual counts less than the conceptual content cannot hold.

Moreover, if we follow Benjamin Buchloh in his call to historicize it, the moment of conceptual art is long over – he places it between 1962 and 1969 in his essay (1990). So, calling her a conceptual artist would make Lawler herself historical, which is wrong, of course. Except that the word “conceptual,” too, has that strange element “ception” in it. If “ception” means “caption” means “capturing,” “con-ceptual” means capturing together, which is an intriguing possibility that alludes to re-ciprocating. Could we call the work “post-conceptual” then, to do justice to Buchloh’s call while acknowledging later transformations? He actually uses that word (2013: 75, 81). This goes against my intellectual instincts (paradox intended). Briefly, the prefix “post-” posits that its antecedent is obsolete, but fails to warn us that without having gone through and absorb that earlier phenomenon, that what follows the prefix “post-” can have neither meaning nor function. Instead, that earlier state is integral part of what follows it, and all movements called “post-” have to take account of that presence. The title of the exhibition itself, “Why Pictures Now?” suggests some form of “postness” for the present. Postpresent, as in post-contemporary? I am reluctant to push nonsense so far.

And only then did I get it. It was the plural, the *s* that made the title so enigmatic and multi-valent. Had it been “The Reception of Louise Lawler’s Work” the title would have been crystal-clear from the start, if boring and simplistic. The plural form indicates that Lawler’s work has solicited many different kinds of reception. This pluralization does justice to the artist’s repulsion against the authority of authorship (Crimp 2001). A post-Barthesian stance, with the author’s death handing the power over meaning to the readers - plural. Grammar also participates. To title a book on Lawler’s work “Receptions” is adding to the death of the author as meaning “long live the readers,” an acknowledgement that readers, like publics, are as many and diverse as people are. The -s receives those readers with open arms, or pages. This hints that there is a sensuality factor in art (“oh yes!”), to which Lawler’s stretching of time through her “think again” titles, gives access. In the warmth of this open-arms sensation it follows Lawler’s work *Open*, where two pages of an open book, from a novel by Alberto Moravia, cropped rounded, show words – only words! – that suggest a sexual adventure and a body that “rose to open…” So easy to skip that “to”. Just a word, and barely that. And then what?

Titles, Titling, Entitlement

Why make the title such a multiply thought-inciting phrase, stretching time in keeping me preoccupied for longer than necessary, even if it is just one word? Semiotically, a title, even a one-word one, is and does many things at once, and Lawler has mastered the art of titling in that plurality of functions. That’s where the catalogue editors learned it. Lawler’s titles are not quite works by themselves but parts of the works. In the first place, titles are names. But titles are also summaries, allusions, indexes, poems, speech acts, warnings, addresses, predictions, affective tools, paratexts, parergons. And they play boss by delimiting expectations – just what Lawler refuses. As well, the word “title” has many cognates, of which “entitlement,” in the sense of “having the right (of ownership) to” is a bit troubling. Ownership comes too close to authorship, Lawler’s primary target of critique.

What she does when she titles a work “Does Marilyn Monroe Make You Cry?” is confusing people in many different directions. Such a title appeals to popular sentiment focused on a dead movie star. Saying “you” is a direct address to the viewers, implicating them in that emotional cheap shot. The use of “you” foregrounds the re-ciprocity that makes art deictic. And even the question mark alone does that, adding a compulsion to say “yes” or “no,” enforcing binary opposition, that tool for cultural simplism. She pulled the same deceptive trick with the poster for *A Spot on the Wall* (1995) consisting of a multiple-choice test evoking school exams, not asking but critically asserting “she made no attempt to rescue art from ritual” with boxes “yes” and “no” to check. And then she gives the near-identical title to an identical photograph of Monroe, “just” changing the proper name to “Andy Warhol,” trading the sitter for… well, yes, the author. But it would take ten pages or so to unpack those two titles, or that one twin title.[[5]](#footnote-5)

For an understanding of Lawler’s titles, keep in mind the “re-” issue. Re-search is searching anew, already a re-petition, as Andreas Huyssen wrote regarding Proust’s title, *À* *la recherche du temps perdu* – even if that “re-” element got lost in translation. There, it became more of the announcement of an adventure, “in search of” – with “lost time” as the treasure. With Lawler, who undermines language through consistent ambiguity, it could mean both. The titles of many of Lawler’s works are almost autonomous works themselves, forms of poetry – if it wasn’t for the artist’s rejection of autonomy, as expressed in the indirectness of the works themselves. Her titles, Proustian, make you either search anew (re-search), if you have looked at the work before re-sorting to the title; or if you have read the title first, they become, indeed, an announcement of an adventure. Key is that you decide; the title activates you into doing that. The striking force of Lawler’s titles comes from her determination to keep them oblique, ambiguous, enigmatic as well as, in the end, affectively loaded. The word “poignant,” an effect, invariably comes up in analyses of her titles. In addition to irony (saying one thing and meaning another), they are loaded with emotion, affect, and self-questioning, the latter making the irony inclusive (of the ironist). (Hutcheon 1994)

The title of the MoMA exhibition, “Why Pictures Now?” is a good example. It is not only a case of “postness” and of “re-”, since it re-uses the title of a work from 1981, which had already been re-used, as the final picture in the book of Lawler’s photographs, *An Arrangement of Pictures* – another recycled title. The MoMA exhibition title also re-vitalizes the question that 1981work as well as its title asks, with the emphasis on the deictic adverb “now.” Why an ashtray and matches now, in the current anti-smoking culture? No; it’s about pictures, not smoking gear. This *now* is the indicator of the present. In the title, the exhibition functions as a perfect summary (ception). What it summarizes is not the work as a whole but the deepest thrust of Lawler’s work.

Like all instances of deixis, such as “I” and, relevantly, “you,” the word “now” has no semantic core; no dictionary meaning. Deictic words only make sense in the context of specific utterances; events, acts, not fixed meanings. Thus, the exhibition’s title could refer to another de-authorizing gesture the artist makes: the rejection of the artwork’s eternal, or at least enduring status. The use of “now” means *this* exhibition and the artworks it presents, exist now – only now, only in the present. The works did exist in the past, but it is now that they function, are meaningful and useful, and thus fulfill their task of artworks as acts of art creating events – adventures.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Especially in combination with the anti-war works, “now” means that we have our hands full with the present, and that even if 1981 is long gone, its after-effects for the now still haunt the world. And only because of that haunting is it relevant to bring the old work back. With the spectre (re-venant) of “no nukes” in “no drones” and many other re-sonances, our now is filled, or sounding with violence, war, and other horrors that require action. Asking the question concerning pictures is saying that pictures are potential weapons in the present. The 1981 work endures in, and for, the now. And for that endurance, a title is useful. Titling an artwork is not only claiming entitlement to it, (copyright) but also titling it, as an act of naming, and thus giving it, not the artist, the right to exist and function, the power to act – now. Could it be called activist? My answer will be “no.”

What’s in a Name?

In a short but incisive article on that 1981 work, written a propos of its re-use in a book, Douglas Crimp unpacks the complex relationship in Lawler’s work between pictures and the words that comment on them. He writes:

What Lawler’s photographs have shown is that institutional critique not only may be leveled at the impulse toward making pictures – “Why Pictures Now?” – but can take the form of a picture. (2012: 505)

What Crimp is pointing out here is not merely the repetition in the gesture the work performs – its “re- factor” – but also a certain inevitable complicity inherent in that re-. This, I contend, is what loads the works emotionally, making the oblique, tongue-in-cheek humor both lighter and stronger than traditional institutional critique, and transforms the activist art into “activating art.” In such complicity lies the importance of “re-” for contemporary political art. Complicity, inescapable as it may be when art is critical of art, can only be constructive if it is acknowledged and endorsed. This resonates with Gayatri Spivak’s 1999 reiteration of inevitable complicity. In its turn, Spivak’s important call for such acknowledgment is a positive re-vision, not a “post-” but a bringing back to *now* of Adorno’s after-Auschwitz indictment of the complicity of cultural studies. Making pictures to question pictures is such a case of inevitable, and self-aware complicity.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The “Now” from the question that constitutes the title makes it clear that the question cannot be answered, but neither is it a rhetorical question with an obvious answer. *Now*, the present that adverb deictically indicates, is radically contemporary but cannot be severed from the past. During the slow ending of the war that so marked his thinking, in 1944 Adorno realized the war was not going to be over in 1945. In a short text in the collection of *Denkbilder,* or “thought images”, *Minima Moralia*, Adorno describes, in one devastating sweep, the permanent state of war the world is in and which we are only *now* beginning to notice; the role of the media in obliterating this state from perception; and the financial interests of global proportions that sustain that war and even make it indispensable.[[8]](#footnote-8)

I consider Lawler’s titles with or in the works “activating thought images.” But the invocation of Spivak and Adorno demonstrates that the labyrinthine semantics and temporalities – anachronism and time-stretching – of titles such as Lawler’s oblique invocations of world-shattering thoughts as much as funny little feminist teases, require some more reflection on the question what a title is. The first aspect of titles is that they are “rigid denominators” or “designators”: proper names, uniquely referring to single, individual items. The name of a work identifies that work, enables its cataloguing, and added to the author’s name, insures copyright. That Lawler is keenly aware of the social need as well as the drawbacks of the custom of the proper name is not only clear from her Monroe works, where the huge difference between one proper name referring to an iconic dead movie star, and the other claiming authorship, muddles the neat concept’s waters. But this had already been thematized in *Birdcalls,* that mocking of masculine name recognition as an entrance to success. Birdcalls are sexual appeals from males to attract females; and so are, this work intimates, the artist names that resonate through the art world-hierarchical and sexual traps. As the earliest work in the exhibition, this sound work literalizes what re-sonating means – sounding again, in repetition as a claim to fame. Its title and the work itself draw attention to the social work of names.

In view of the latter aspect of titles as proper names, copyright, one could expect Lawler to use the easy way around such issues, the title *Untitled*. Many artists resort to that solution to the contradictions of copyright. Lawler does it sometimes, but adds, in brackets, a supplement. The above examples based on paperweights, *Untitled (Salon Hodler)*, *Untitled (Dreams)*, and *Untitled* *(Reception Area)* are perfect instances of such ambivalent gestures: to name and (not “or”) not to name. “What’s in a name” might be the underlying question, yet the mention of “Untitled” combined with the bracketed supplement does perform the job linguistics assigns to names. And to emphasize this doubleness, the ambivalence is made literal in the title/work *Twice Untitled.* Showing the back of two canvasses, this photograph suggests the work behind the scenes of the art trade; the indifference when display is finished or not yet begun. But as a photograph, it cuts off the sides of both unidentifiable paintings, and playing with composition and light and dark, makes a new artwork against the odds of the depicted situation. Art making is just work, says the photograph. But with “twice” meaning ambi- from ambivalent, and “untitled” refusing to name, these words together title the work in a unique phrase that names it, for all the purposes of naming, including in complicity with copyright – ownership – authorship issues.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Titles function differently in different genres or media, however. Vicea alleged an analysis of titles in the press, for example, where these names have a clear function: to announce the news item in the shortest possible form, but informative nevertheless: a caption, (or ception, with “re-” in the guise of cultural clichés). And there should be no textual dependency between title and text. This is only to be expected to lead to the current practice where editors make the titles after reading (if we are lucky) the articles (Sullet-Nylander). This example already suggests that the linguistic category of rigid denominator is insufficient to help us understand how titles function in other domains, such as visual art. Lawler’s titles do something with the visual image that makes both words and pictures indispensable to each another. This mutual dependency, which makes her titles the opposite of newspaper titles, demonstrates that the linguistic category, useful for a first identification and cataloguing, is rigorously insufficient.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Re-venant, Re-sidue, Re-m(a)inder**

*Revenant:* the French word for ghost or specter, literally “the one who comes back,” is a concept brought back with Derrida’s analysis of the enduring presence of inequality, and the *now* of it, which recalls Lawler’s question about the point of images in the present. Derrida’s book was a prophetic recall of Marx’ prophetic proliferation of spirits, specters, and spooks in *Capital*. Prophetic, because he describes so precisely the increasing culture of debt now called, with a disingenuous avoidance of that prefix, “neo-liberal” although it is neither new nor liberal. In that term, “re-” concealed as “neo” is integrated with deception. To consider Lawler’s titles in light of this idea of *revenant* is another step, after the discussion of complicity, in my inquiry into the political-poetic nature of Lawler’s titles. The back-and-forth movement that characterizes the temporality involved in such cynical economistic politics as Derrida sketches, (re-)makes specters of us all. The French word, meaning literally “coming back,” holds the warning that the bad things from the past will come back to *haunt* us, and the re-call will be indirect, oblique, as Crimp noticed Lawler’s gestures to be. Replacing “nukes” by “drones” is hardly a helpful replacement in the (re-)reality evoked; it is the need to remember the nukes, their remainder in the drones, that the title foregrounds – which is “why (we do need) pictures now”.

As the “now” in the exhibition title as well as the work from 1981 indicate, Lawler’s art is radically contemporary, and her titles do much of the work needed to achieve that contemporaneity. Titles, I wrote above, are not only names in the sense of identifiers but also summaries, in that they “capture” in their “ception” the essence of the work, or scene, that they picture, for the now. But what that essence is remains to be seen, as *Untitled (Dreams)* already demonstrated. The difficulty of distinguishing what matters most in a picture comes from the tension between the desire to look at the picture and experience its look, on the one hand, and our knowledge of the artist, which distracts from that act of looking. For seeing *Untitled (Dreams)* depends on the knowledge that Lawler photographs artworks by others, in scenes or “arrangements.” Without that knowledge, especially the title for a work that looks similar and has the same artwork in the picture, now called *Untitled (Unmade Bed)* disturbs the notion that the reception of the artwork is purely visual.

The re-venants or re-mainders of past threats and violence are already implied or explicitly invoked in the art of others, as Lawler’s preferred working method unearths and re-arranges them. So, the question is, how does her work, and especially her titles, add to that, in acknowledgement of her complicity – as in making a picture of the questioning of pictures. The specters bring to the now a residue – something real and material, ineradicable, that circumscribes, delimits, what the present allows.

Especially titles such as *Grieving Mothers (Attachment)* do what seems impossible. They bring history of the *longue durée* to the present, by means of the recipients’ ability to make the association, actively. This title alludes to war; Adorno’s ongoing one, still on. The word “attachment” is a teaser like “receptions” and with *now* we cannot read it without thinking of our daily email traffic, the endless streams of advertisement attached, the catastrophic waste of energy this entails. But what we see in the image is something else. The image and the title re-ciprocate, as do “I” and “you” – they become deictic. The plaster cast wings from ancient Greek sculpture *Winged Victory* does many things at once in connection to the title. There is no grieving mother in sight; Lawler does not re-present her titles.

Plaster means cheap, second-rate, copy. But copy is not cheap in connection to Lawler’s “re-” works. Moreover, the wings are broken off from the animal that could fly, powerfully roam the sky. The attachment, an iron rod that holds sculptures together, is visible, pointing to its broken-wings status, as the loss of power. In this literal presence, the attachment may or may not re-call *Birdcalls* and the many meanings of that work. But the title only makes sense if we re-call that ancient theme of grieving mothers, already pervasive in the epics – that eminently masculine genre – of Homer and the Bible. In the wake of that theme, suddenly, the word “attachment” becomes again what it once was, its meaning emotional connection. All this makes so much sense, now, in the time of drones and other forms of war. This is the combination of oblique and poignant, light and strong, of Lawler’s critique. It says “no” to war, acknowledges complicity and yet brings back the re-venant of grieving mothers into the present; intimating that we had re-pressed it, so that we need the re-minder. This horizontality between work and viewers makes the difference between activist and activating art.[[11]](#footnote-11)

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1. On the exhibition of paperweight works as both jewelry store and peep show, see Krauss 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This in spite of Andrea Fraser and George Baker’s witty and polemical conversation, with Fraser saying: “one of Lawler’s most literal titles, that just says what it is: *Salon Hodler* (in Molesworth 2013: 105). It’s not. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This idea of trapping the viewer is a shorthand formulation of Lacan’s explanation of anamorphosis (1998: 92). See Mignon Nixon’s brilliant article on *No Drones* for this and many other brilliant insights (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Space is lacking to discuss in more depth Foster’s article, as well as the others, by Benjamin Buchloh, Sven Lütticken and Philipp Kaiser in this excellent publication (Kaiser 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. By titling his article “Does Louise Lawler Make You Cry?” Jack Bankowsky seems to have missed the anti-authorial stance in the (a-)symmetry of the title(s). (2004) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a lucid explanation of deixis within linguistic theory, see Levinson (2004). I have specified that concept in terms relevant for visual art (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a lucid discussion of the two implications of Adorno’s initial position (the ethical and the semiotic inadequacy of art after the Holocaust), see Van Alphen (1997). I discuss Adorno’s indictment as well as its later retraction in semiotics terms in relation to the art of Doris Salcedo (2010, Introduction and Chapter 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Out of the Firing Line” (2003). *Denkbild* is a useful concept to understand Lawler’s titles. Richter describes thought images thus: “the miniatures of the *Denkbild* can be understood as conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual hovering between philosophical critique and aesthetic production.” See Richter (2007: 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The question of titles as rigid denominators is addressed by Vicea (2003). More on titles from a linguistic-semiotic point of view in Paquin (2008), and an illuminating essay on the subject for literature, Genette (1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I only know one other artist who does something so complex with titles, the painter Marlene Dumas, who actually published a book with her short texts and titles (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Among the many wonderful contributions to my understanding of Lawler’s art I have no space to acknowledge here, is Alvarez (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)