

It is hard to find the meaning of a work of art.
It is hard to find the work of art.

by Maxwell Graham

Starting in 1987 Laurie Parsons developed a considerably new articulation of art making. If the full gravity of the innovation wasn't absorbed at the time perhaps it was because Parsons' sincerity was so profound and her ambition so anomalous. Simplified renditions of Parsons' progression claim that after initially exhibiting found objects as works of art a single revelation occurred and led to a total retreat into social work. What is thought of as two chronologically successive bodies of work the first object oriented the second socially oriented were actually always entwined. Parsons work was always a form of producing meaning through an acute sensitivity to surroundings. There is no object without a society.

Laurie Parsons' submission slides to the Lorence-Monk Gallery were images of pieces of wood. These objects and others that Parsons exhibited have often been unfairly referred to as unaltered. The purist notion of the readymade publically constructed in the middle of the century applied to a body of Duchamp's work made mostly between 1913 and 1917 was retroactively drenched in the myth of the autonomous creator. As Elena Filipovic has researched "instead of their being the result of immediacy or a genial discovery, as 'invention' implies, one might instead recognize the labor implied in the administrative, non artistic aspect of the curatorial."¹ The notion of the readymade is akin to immaculate conception. We understand how dramatically altered all trees have been and how wood is nothing if not a tree altered. Writing in the New York Times a year later Roberta Smith's review of Parsons' first one-person² gallery exhibition included numerous pieces of wood and wisely acknowledged the constructed

nature of the work. "There's more to this show than initially meets the eye or mind and, given time, it can grow on you. First, there's the deliberateness of the pieces themselves and the poignant way each of them ranges between human care and neglect. A ruined black umbrella, carefully fastened, leans against the wall, as if respectfully propped there by its last user. A doubled strand of twine is knotted at regular intervals – to what purpose is unclear – but it bears once more the imprint of human consideration."

That sheet of submission slides was kept and updated by the gallery staff as part of an archive and also as the source from which images of the artist's work would be disseminated and circulated in the world. At some point Parsons insinuated three extra slides into this sheet including an image of a face from Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and an image of a tie-dyed t-shirt at a Woodstock reunion and an image of a clear uninterupted blue sky. The engagement expanded the vision of what Parsons was willing to consider as her work to include a film race relations New York City a face and a shirt counter culture utopia nostalgia retro and the heavens the ozone layer the monochrome. The engagement also expanded the vision of what Parsons was willing to consider as her work to include secretarial administrative routine filing public relations. Parsons' active collapsing of any distinction between consequential substance and day to day operation is clarified by the later's facilitated introduction of the former into the literal world via the slide. In much the same way Michael Asher's work moved into the office. In much the same way Michael Asher's work moved into the outside.

That first full-gallery² exhibition of Laurie Parsons' work occurred at Lorence-Monk Gallery in New York in 1988. Not quite a title not quite a press release the only statement accompanying the exhibition was a single sentence "This show is dedicated to my family and friends, with all my thanks." The exhibition contained 29 works of art. The titles of the works were *V*, *tree with wire*, *hanging things*, *suitcase*, *black log*, *bicycle seat*, *double poles*, *black carrier*, *bunch of dogwood*, *green cushion*, *twin things*, *black mat*, *tree stump*, *black + red top*, *rope*, *bench*, *white cloth*, *tar block*, *umbrella*, *preacher's rock*, *branches*, *knotted string*, *bag*, *dirty log*, *stone*, *charcoal*, *broken container*, *yellow rope*, *pile of stones*. No materials and no dimensions were listed. 1 work hung on the wall. 8 works leaned against it. 20 works were on the ground. Every work of art was worn and weathered and worked. There is barely a trace of color beyond grays and browns and dulled blacks and bruised whites. *green cushion* is faded. *black and red top* is more rust than paint. Even the works presumed natural are all wrought. *pile of stones* contains glass and metal. *charcoal* contains metal and plastic. The dirt on *dirty log* is more dirty than dirt. *branches* are sawed off. *tree stump* is sawed off. *preachers rock* is concrete. *bunch of dogwood* is bound together with a string. *black log* is milled lumber. *tree with wire* is knotted with telephone wire and rooted in a plastic trash bin with the labels facing forward. Most of the other work are meant to hold to contain to cover and to carry. *hanging things* is a display rack holding a display rack holding a display rack holding a bundle of metal foil. *yellow rope*, *rope*, *knotted string* are actually all knotted and all been tied before. *suitcase*, *bag*, *broken container* are all soiled

from their cargo. *black carrier* is a hand truck. *black and red top*, *twin things* are lids. *bench*, *green cushion*, *bicycle seat* have been sat on many times and *black mat* has been stood on many times. *V* is a special piece. *V* is the first work of art in the exhibition and is apart from the others. *V* is the only work that is capitalized. *V* is a used bedframe.

Not one of these objects had been meant for distanced beholding or viewing. Everything has been used. Their appearance in the exhibition as works of art is not the result of having been discarded but as having endured.

"I wish that I could give you something....

but I have nothing left.

I am just an old stump.

I am sorry...."

"I don't need very much now," said the boy.

"just a quiet place to sit and rest.

I am very tired."

"Well," said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could,

"well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting
Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest."

And the boy did.

And the tree was happy.³

The following year the second full-gallery exhibition of Laurie Parsons' work occurred at Galerie Rolf Ricke in Cologne in 1989. The exhibition contained the same 29 works of art that were shown in the previous exhibition at Lorence-Monk Gallery. Rather than being considered as a touring exhibition these were two different exhibitions with the same works of art. Different exhibitions because of different gallerists different galleries different cities different publics different years. In two different

highly complex exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1979 and 2005 Michael Asher brought a work in the museum's collection a bronze cast of a marble sculpture of George Washington made by Jean-Antoine Houdon into the most historically appropriate period gallery. Though Asher's structural operations were identical almost every other facet of the two exhibitions was drastically varied from the staff to the surface of the sculpture to even the building where the sculpture was found residing prior to its move⁴. As Anne Rorimer wrote "From within its own thematic parameters, Asher's work overtly acknowledges that it, unlike a freestanding sculpture, is not self sufficient; it elucidates its contextual auspices, the museum."⁵ Parsons' exhibition at Galerie Rolf Ricke evidenced a similar procedure. Just like Asher Parsons' exhibition consisted of moving an object not made by the artist from outside to inside. While Ashers' two exhibitions occurred a quarter century apart at the same institution Parsons exhibitions occurred only a year apart at not only distinctly separate institutions but in distinctly separate regions of the world. Parsons work doesn't itinerate duration so much as it welcomed the particular character of place and community to compose signification. Both of these artists' second exhibitions took the operations of the first to be worthy as a work in itself. In a signed document made on the occasion of the second exhibition outlining the reinstallation sale or transfer of all the objects as one cohesive and contingent work Parsons writes "Twenty nine pieces that together comprise a body of work. They are intended to be exhibited in one room... They are to be placed naturally and sensibly..." Parsons' second exhibition verified that the artist's principal objective was not to

make freestanding self sufficient sculptures. Further on in the document Parsons suggests that during reinstallation almost all of the works "can be lightly dusted or blown with air (by mouth only)."⁶

The following year the third full-gallery exhibition of Laurie Parsons' work occurred at Lorence-Monk Gallery in New York in 1990. The gallery had recently moved into a newly expanded space designed by architect Max Gordon. An announcement card designed by David Smoak Advertising & Graphic Design was printed and mailed to all of the gallery's contact list. An employee of the gallery Stephen Szczepanek touched up the wall paint from the previous exhibition and focused the lights. An employee of the gallery Ana Sokoloff sat at the front desk and spoke with visitors. A photographer Nicholas Walster was scheduled and took documentation images. Susan Lorence and Robert Monk owned the gallery and paid the water bills the electric bills the gas bills the phone and fax bills the employees' paychecks and strategized ways to support and disseminate the exhibition and all of their artists' work. However. The announcement card did not say the name of the artist nor the title of the exhibition nor the dates of the exhibition. The artist did not bring into the gallery any objects nor did she propose any interventions architectural rearrangements or conditional deviations. The lights focused on the walls. The photographic documentation reveals only the architecture. Contrary to what is often written about this exhibition the gallery was most purposefully not empty. It was filled with life. It was filled with light and friends and critics and collectors and students and conversation. The reduction

of what was necessary to create meaning had shifted from moving older objects into an exhibition space to moving an older exhibition into an exhibition space to an exhibition space itself only moving.

The following year the fourth full-gallery⁷ exhibition of Laurie Parsons work occurred at the Forum Kunst Rottweil in Germany in 1991. The exhibition was curated by Udo Kittelmann. The exhibition poster proclaimed in the same size font in alphabetical order Udo Kittelmann Laurie Parsons Rottweiler Bürger.⁸ For six months leading up to the exhibition the artist prepared by learning rudimentary German. For the six week exhibition Laurie Parsons lived inside the Forum Kunst Rottweil in the center of the exhibition space. The only object that Parsons brought was a box of musical records. All of the essential furnishings including a long wooden table coat-rack lamp flowers rug chest potted plant appliances and utensils were brought by the People of Rottweil for Laurie Parsons to use. They even brought a large brass bed. Every morning Parsons worked in a shelter for persons with disabilities. Every afternoon during its normal open hours the Forum Kunst Rottweil was indeed open and the artist welcomed the People of Rottweil to spend time having coffee and cake playing cards listening to music and getting to know each other. During these normal open hours a gallery attendant was tasked with unlocking and locking the front doors and from behind a front desk monitoring the exhibition.

Parsons' work anticipated but remained divergent from much of the art that would occur in the following decade. Whereas many artists'

methods invited the visitor and audience onto the stage of the exhibition space to actively participate in the unfolding of a constructed narrative Parsons work approached something far less theatrical more observant and ingloriously organizational. Laurie Parsons also participated in numerous group exhibitions. For an experimental exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York in 1990 titled *Work in Progress? Work?* six artists were invited to use the gallery as a public studio for four weeks and to exhibit their finished work on the fifth. Parsons' contribution to the exhibition was to work in the gallery as an office assistant. Carin Kuoni wisely wrote in a review that "Parsons took the decisive step away from the theater to a continuous integration into the administrative apparatus of the gallery, whereby her apparent individuality and her position as an artist dissolves quite clearly."⁹ The review goes on to recognize an accord with the work of Miere Laderman Ukeles. Starting in 1969 Ukeles envisioned a theory and program of Maintenance Art. In four works made over the course of two days in July 1973 at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford Connecticut Ukeles cleaned the vitrine of a five thousand year old mummy on loan to the museum Ukeles locked and unlocked various doors of the museum Ukeles washed and mopped the plaza and steps in front of the museum Ukeles washed and mopped the court inside the museum. In a note written in 1970 Ukeles offered "Rather I want to use my freedom to move not only "up" and "away," but also "sideways," "backwards," "through," and "around and around"; to weave and loop and to loosen up existing structures: to see them."¹⁰ A conservator at the Wadsworth Atheneum who observed Ukeles' cleaning of

the vitrine as a work of art then wrote an additional condition report on the vitrine itself.

An exhibition at Le Consortium in Dijon in 1992 titled *1968* was Laurie Parsons' second at the institution. The exhibition was organized by Bob Nickas an independent curator and writer and Xavier Douroux a co-founder and co-director of the institution and Franck Gautherot a co-founder and co-director of the institution and with Eric Colliard a curator of the institution. The administrator responsible for overseeing all the operations of the institution was Irène Bony. Laurie Parsons had a bouquet of flowers sent to Irène Bony's desk each and every week of the exhibition. Though the office door was open and the bouquet was visible to visitors neither the announcement card nor any checklist said the name Laurie Parsons.

In the Aperto section of the 1993 Venice Biennale in Italy Laurie Parsons had a considerable pile of sand scattered throughout a gallery. Once again no catalogue nor announcement card nor any checklist said the name Laurie Parsons.

Slightly later in 1993 at the MuHKA Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp in Belgium an exhibition was curated by Yves Aupetitallot and Iwona Blazwick and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and titled *On Taking a Normal Situation and Re-translating it into Overlapping and Multiple Readings of Conditions Past and Present*. As part of Parsons' contribution to the exhibition the museum published a small run of an exact duplicate of the artist's personal 120 page spiral bound diary. Between the green covers every line is filled with the artist's worries and hopes and struggles. There is no colophon

there is no title page and nowhere does it say the name Laurie Parsons. I have often wondered about copies on bookshelves and in desk drawers that have made their way into the world that there is no way to know it is a work of art. I have often wondered about copies on bookshelves and in desk drawers that have made their way into the world that there is no way to know that one of them is real.

From the very first page of Laurie Parsons' diary "We pick we choose we fall. We're caught in the circumstances."

Thank you to Bob Monk, Bob Nickas, Rolf Ricke and most of all to Laurie for everything.

- 1 Filipovic, Elena. *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016. p. 76.
- 2 The term "one-person" gallery exhibition feels hopelessly inaccurate here. In contradistinction I consider the term "full-gallery" exhibition both to entail in the traditional sense that no other artist's work was exhibited that month and also in the unusual sense that the work encompassed to an expanded extent all of the gallery's space and staff and operations.
- 3 Silverstein, Shel. *The Giving Tree*. New York, Harpers & Row, 1964.
- 4 Consider also Asher's projects for Skulptur Projekte Münster in 1977 1987 1997 2007.
- 5 Rorimer, Anne. "focus: Michael Asher." *Michael Asher: George Washington at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1979 and 2005*. Ed. Rorimer, A. & Moeller, W. Chicago and New Haven, Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press, 2006. p. 32.
- 6 The work's certificate.
- 7 The term "full-gallery" exhibition feels hopelessly inaccurate here. In contradistinction I considered the term "full-town" exhibition.
- 8 The People of Rottweil.
- 9 Kuoni, Carin. "Work in Progress? Work?" *Kunst Bulletin*. April 1991. p. 52. Translation mine.
- 10 Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. "A Note on Being a Woman Maintenance Artist, ca. 1970." *Mierle Laderman Ukeles*. Ed. Phillips, Patricia C. Queens and London, Queens Museum and Prestel, 2016. p. 214.