

FRONT DESK APPARATUS

FRONT DESK APPARATUS is pleased to continue its ongoing *One Work | One Month* series with a month-long showing of Sherrie Levine's *Loulou*—a bronze sculpture cast in 2004:

Sherrie Levine
Loulou, 2004
Cast bronze
12 x 6 1/2 x 7 1/2 in.

The series takes inspiration from Lillie P. Bliss, an art collector who resided at this address (29 East Thirty-Seventh Street) from 1866 until 1929. We don't consider presentations to be exhibitions, but follow Lillie's tendency to show works discretely—one work at a time.¹ When Lillie hosted viewings at the house, an art handler from nearby Macbeth Gallery would retrieve a single work from the fourth floor store-room and place it on an easel on the parlor floor. Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples* (1895-98) would replace *The Bather* (1885). Matisse's *Interior* (1917) would replace Redon's *Orchids* (1912), etc. Increasingly, Lillie's conduct as a collector transitioned away from something private to something more public. She would host lectures and recitals at the house.² Sometimes she would play the piano.³ In 1913 (the year of the *International Exhibition of Modern Art*—an exhibition she helped to fund), Lillie acquired Edgar Degas's *Jockeys on Horseback Before Distant Hills* from Durand-Ruel, New York.⁴ The painting, a small oil from 1884, for which she paid \$20,000, is the work the Museum of Modern Art would later exchange for Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* in 1937. Two years later, when Alfred Barr exhibited *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* in November 1939, the work was shown ten years after MoMA's inaugural *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh* exhibition. At the time (November 1929, two weeks after the stock market collapse that began October 24), Lillie was MoMA's vice president (the institution's first) and one of its three founders (with Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Mary Sullivan). Eight of her works were exhibited in MoMA's inaugural loan exhibition—works that would later lay the foundation for the institution's permanent collection.⁵ Before then, one could find these propped on an easel—one work at a time—next to Lillie's piano on the parlor floor at 29 East Thirty-Seventh Street.

From May 1 until May 31, *Loulou* will stand in a vitrine at Front Desk Apparatus. Visitors are welcome Tuesday through Thursday from 10AM to 5PM and by appointment. Additional talks and readings will run adjacent to the presentation. A copy of Sherrie Levine's publication *Flaubert: un Coeur Simple* (1990) will be on display in the office library.

LOULOU

I'm interested in sameness—what does it mean
for two things to be identical, or not? ⁶

— Sherrie Levine

The story of *Loulou* begins in 1984.

In New York.

Before *Loulou* is a sculpture, or an edition cast after an electrotype model Sherrie Levine finds at a flea market.

Before May 2023, when *Loulou* stands in a vitrine at 29 East Thirty-Seventh Street.

In 1984, the story of *Loulou* begins when Levine copies Gustave Flaubert's short story
Un Coeur Simple (1877).

She copies it and publishes it (the copy) as “A Simple Heart (After Gustave Flaubert)” in *New Observations* No. 35 (Labyrinths/Paracriticism), alongside Peter Halley’s “On Line,” Izhar Patkin’s “Form of Service” and Linda Nochlin’s “The Ballad of Miss Etta and Dr. Claribel.”

1984 is the year before Baskerville + Watson Gallery moves from 24 W. 57th Street to the floor above the Curt Marcus Gallery in the 578 Broadway Building. They don’t represent artists yet, but Levine is working on her second exhibition for the gallery. Her first for Baskerville + Watson closes in 1983, after solo exhibitions with A&M Artworks in 1982 and Metro Pictures in 1981. She will show knot paintings and watercolor copies of illustrations by Fernand Léger, El Lissitzky and Piet Mondrian. The watercolors and drawings are traces on 11 x 14 in. pieces of paper. The paintings are 20 x 24 in. easel-size boards.

Levine installs drawings and paintings after Kasimir Malevich and Egon Schiele for an exhibition at Nature Morte the same year, with the aphorism: “We like to imagine the future as a place where people loved abstraction before they encountered sentimentality.”⁷

At the time, Levine considers herself “a still life artist—with the bookplate as [her] subject” and consensus around her practice already underscores the ways in which art accumulates divergent meanings over time and in different contexts.⁸

In 1984, “every work, every image, is leased and mortgaged.”⁹

In her review of the Baskerville + Watson exhibition for *Artforum*, Jean Fisher describes how “[Levine’s] displacement of the [modernist/masculine] image from its historical context compels us to attach a different meaning to it. A slippage occurs away from what is intrinsic to the image to what frames it...perhaps because it transforms the status of the image from information to *souvenir*. The *souvenir* is that which stands (in) for that which is ostensibly absent...[and] always in excess of the thing itself and only relative to the extent of the investment in it.”¹⁰

In 1984, Levine copies Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart* word for word:

[4
The parrot was called *Loulou*.]

[The heart] sheds its leaves like a tree [and]
cannot hold out against certain winds.

— Gustave Flaubert

Flaubert said that he wrote *A Simple Heart* to please his friend, the writer George Sand. She does not live to read it.

Of the story, he writes: “It is just the account of an obscure life, that of a poor country girl, pious but fervent, discreetly loyal, and tender as new-baked bread. She loves one after the other a man, her mistress’ children, a nephew of hers, an old man whom she nurses and her parrot. When the parrot dies she has it stuffed, and when she herself comes to die she confuses the parrot with the Holy Ghost. This is not at all ironical as you may suppose, but on the contrary very serious and sad. I want to move tender hearts to pity and tears, for I am tender-hearted myself...”¹¹

Before *A Simple Heart*, parrots flit through Flaubert’s work and through his letters.

In a letter from December 9, 1852, Flaubert describes vanity as a “parrot [that] hops from branch to branch to chatter away in full view,” and later, “I musn’t die without making sure that the style

I can hear inside my head comes roaring out and drowns the cries of cicadas and parrots.”

Charpentier publishes *A Simple Heart* in 1877, in a collection titled *Trois Contes*.

In 2002, Levine publishes “pathos: Trois Contes*,” in *October*’s Summer issue.

* Levine thanks colleagues at the Getty Research Institute for their friendship and intelligence. She also thanks Julian Barnes.¹²

In 1984, Barnes publishes *Flaubert’s Parrot* with Alfred A. Knopf.

The novel follows a retired English doctor to France, where he visits various historic sites significant to the Flaubert biography. In Rouen, he discovers two museums claiming to display the stuffed parrot that stood on Flaubert’s desk as he wrote *A Simple Heart*. While trying to identify which is authentic, we learn that Flaubert’s parrot could be any one of fifty (“*Une cinquantaine de perroquets!*”, p. 187) that had been held in the collection of the municipal museum.¹³

Parrots speak only others’ words, and (so far as we know) speak them without understanding, in an act of perfect imitation and inane transmission. “The parrot is finally a highly troubling symbol...that casts doubt on the assumed connection between intention and utterance, and opens up a margin of uncertainty—the uncertainty of interpretation—in the understanding of any utterance, or any text. Flaubert’s restless quest for the right word and the perfect turn of phrase thus appears not simply as the search for aesthetic perfection, but also a progressive laying bare of language’s recalcitrance, its autonomy. It may be the writer’s fate to make language express not himself but itself. This may be the final stage in artistic “impersonality”: the writer becomes the stage manager of language,” and the artist becomes the stage manager of art.¹⁴

It’s speculation, but convincing enough to see parallels between these descriptions and those made about Levine and her use of existing artworks or her imbricated status as “collector, curator [and] critic.”¹⁵ Nowhere is Levine’s work more itself than at the moment (or just after) it exits from its singular shape. “I feel my pieces are most successful when they function as membranes permeable from both sides so that there is an easy flow between past and future.”¹⁶ As if to say, there is a danger or inevitability to the nearness of identification. And maybe there’s something more useful, beyond or before itself, in the work identification can neither completely recall nor fully forget. An easy “slippage from information to *souvenir*,” or a release from proximity.

In 1988, Levine publishes a copy of *A Simple Heart* for Galerie nächst St. Stephan in an exhibition catalogue with reproductions of her work and another copy (in book form) for Bernard Marcadé’s ANTICHAMBRES *Affinités Sélectives* at the Paleis voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels in 1990. Levine rejects the first edition of the publication—with its dark brown end papers—and destroys all available copies. Imschoot, Uitgevers print a second edition of 50 signed and numbered copies (and 50 AP) a year later in 1991.

Right now, a copy of Levine’s *Flaubert: un Coeur Simple* (SL AP 23/50) is on display in the Front Desk Apparatus office library.

Loulou.

Loulou : a bronze sculpture from an edition of 12, cast in 2004 after an electrotype model of a parrot that Levine finds at a flea market (we don’t know where or when).

That year, Levine exhibits six *Loulou* editions at Faggionato Fine Art, London:

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In 2007, three *Loulou* editions features in exhibitions at Nyehaus, New York, Chantal Crousel, Paris and Simon Lee, London.

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In 2015, an edition at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Harrisonburg.

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In 2016, an edition at the Neues Museum: Staatliches Museum für Kunst und Design Nürnberg.

In 2021, an edition at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

In 2023, an edition at Front Desk Apparatus, New York.

On screen, or side-by-side on a page, in going from A to B and then from B to A, the familiar exchange in Levine’s work—between original and copy—orders material, image and information into a temporal “vibration.”¹⁷ That’s “basically what the work’s about,” she says—“[the] space in the middle where there is no picture,” where meaning can “build energy,” distribute and multiply between things. One and one doesn’t always make two, but sometimes five or eight or ten. With *Loulou*, perhaps it’s this additive cadence (the parrot from Flaubert’s story, Levine’s re-published copy (copies), the found prototype and Levine herself) that opens to the “slippage from information to *souvenir*,” from “past” and “future,” where the valences of art history and repetition channel through and coalesce in the silent shine of a bronze parrot. Here, Levine’s work isn’t just a mediated artifact of social and material circumstance, but a reckoning with the matter-of-fact contingency this overlap brings to her art and its identification. Maybe this plays into the work’s “slippage” or reifies in its “skip,” but it may also be something closer to the confusion and objectivity one comes to know in the language *Loulou* speaks, but persistently fails to understand. It’s unclear if this failure is a byproduct of aesthetic austerity or beauty, or something else entirely. Something closer to repetition itself. Something closer to reality.

Beside Levine’s general strategy of presenting apparent sameness as contradictory, as well as focusing attention on the difference between “originals” and their “copies”, the coincident presentation of *Loulou* as story and sculpture offers a discrete example of the artist’s enduring investigation into the codes of sameness (of copying, referencing, remaking, etc.) that bring nuance and productive confusion to our understanding of “one work.” And, if *Loulou* operates overtly as a repetition, perhaps it’s in the sense described years ago as a space where “ideality and reality collide”—where notions of contingency, story and beauty vibrate and disjoin.

This all relies on a certain reversal of before and after. But it’s hard to know which “after” is “before” and which “before” is “after,” and how it’s possible to know either from staging *Loulou* (in the middle of things) where there is no “one picture” and no “one work.”¹⁸

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1. MoMA Archives Oral History Program: E. Cobb, July 06, 1988, p. 2.
2. A clipping from a 1926 edition of the *New York Times*, describes a lecture given by Forbes Watson on “An Interpretation of Modern Art.”
3. MoMA Archives, p. 5.
4. Together with her friends, art collectors Louisine Havemeyer and John Quinn, she persuaded the curator of painting, Bryson Burroughs, to host the *Loan Exhibition of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Art* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1921. Quinn lent 26, Bliss 12 (including five Cézannes and her Degas painting) and Havemeyer two works (both women were anonymous). Lillie also helped with funds to enable the *International Exhibition of Modern Art*.
5. To the surprise of her friends, Lillie donated most of her art collection, 150 works of art, to the Museum of Modern Art following her death in 1931. The museum, first conceived as a space exhibition purposes only, was enabled through Lillie’s bequest to lay the foundation for a proper permanent collection. The conditions attached to the bequest in the will included a “secure financial basis” to be provided to the museum within three years. The conditions were met and MoMA’s permanent collection secured.
6. “The Anxiety of Influence – Head On. A Conversation Between Sherrie Levine and Jeanne Siegel” in *Sherrie Levine*, exhibition catalog (Kunsthau Zürich 1991), p. 18.
7. Jeanne Silverthorne, “Sherrie Levine: Nature Morte Gallery,” *Artforum*, January 1985 .
8. Sherrie Levine / MATRIX 94, Wadsworth Atheneum, April 1987, p. 3.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
10. Jean Fisher, “Sherrie Levine: Baskerville + Watson Gallery,” *Artforum*, April 1984. Cont. “The secret of artistic success, like commercial success, resides in the balance between that which is surprising and that which is “well-known,” between information and code. ...One flatters the “taste” of a public, and the eclecticism of a sensibility enfeebled by the multiplicity of forms and available objects. In this way one thinks one is expressing the spirit of the moment, whereas one is merely reflecting the spirit of the marketplace. Sublimity no longer is in art, but in speculating on art.” In New York, she shows knot paintings and lead works. Collins and Milazzo include a knot painting in their MEDIA POST MEDIA exhibition at Scott Hanson Gallery, NY, presenting Levine’s work with 18 other artists. All women. At Hirschl & Adler Modern a lead work hangs in a group exhibition LEAD with an early lead prop piece by Richard Serra and wall pieces by Jannis Kounellis and Günther Förg.
11. Sherrie Levine, “pathos: Trois Contes,” *October*, Vol. 101 (Summer, 2002), pp. 84-95.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-95.
13. In an ambivalent room, shelf after shelf of birds. ...There, standing in a line, three from the original fifty. Perhaps *Loulou* is one of them. Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.
14. Peter Brooks, “Obsessed With the Hermit of Croisset,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1985.
15. Craig Owens, “Sherrie Levine at A&M Artworks,” *Art in America* 70, no. 6(Summer 1982): 148.
16. Sherrie Levine Interview, *Village Voice*, 1985.
17. Sherrie Levine, quoted in Jeanne Siegel, “After Sherrie Levine,” *Arts Magazine* 59, no. 10 (Summer 1985): 144. “I want to put a picture on top of the picture so there are times when both pictures disappear and other times when they’re both manifest; that vibration is basically what the work’s about for me—that space in the middle where there’s no picture.”
18. *Ibid.*

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Lizzie (Lillie) P. Bliss

- 1864– Lizzie (Lillie) P. Bliss is born near Boston April 11, 1864.
- 1866– Bliss family re-locate to 29 East Thirty-Seventh Street.
- 1891– Thirty-four paintings by Claude Monet are shown at the Union League Club of New York. Cornelius Newton Bliss (president at the Union League Club from 1902-1906) acquires Monet’s *Manneporte near Étretat* from Durand-Ruel, New York in 1909. The work is later included in the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest and enters the Metropolitan Museum’s collection in 1931.
- 1908– Lillie acquires first works from Frederick Keppel and the Kelekian Gallery on advice from Louisine Havemeyer. Lillie meets Abby Rockefeller through Christian Archibald Herter.
- 1909– Lillie befriends Arthur B. Davies (via Dikran Garabed Kelekian) after visiting his “Catalogue” exhibition at Macbeth Gallery. She acquires *After Rain* for \$750. Until his death in 1928, Davies would be instrumental in shaping Lillie’s interest in contemporary art and subsequent financial support through acquisitions and funding projects like the *International Exhibition of Modern Art* in 1913.
- 1911– Lillie joins the Woman’s Cosmopolitan Club, established by Abby Rockefeller “for the benefit of New York women interested in the arts.”
- 1913– She acquires a painting and a pastel by Degas and an oil by Renoir from Durand-Ruel, New York. The painting, *Jockeys on Horseback Before Distant Hills*, formerly called *Racecourse*, a small oil from 1884 for which she paid \$20,000 is the work the Museum of Modern Art would later exchange for Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. Version O)* (The Museum of Modern Art acquired the painting for \$24,000 in 1937 from Jacques Seligman & Co. The museum raised \$18,000 toward the purchase price by selling Lillie’s Degas and the rest came from donations from the co-owners of the gallery Germain Seligman and Cesar de Hauke. Alfred Barr exhibits the work in *Picasso: 40 Years of His Art* in 1939). The Degas and Renoir are shown at the *Armory Show* of 1913 (organized by Davies) with Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, Honoré Daumier’s *The Third Class Wagon*, Georges Braque’s *Violin: “Mozart Kubelick”* and Constantin Brâncuși’s *Une Muse*. Lillie meets collector John Quinn.
- 1914– Lillie establishes her first “Music Room,” adjacent to her third-floor bedroom. She commissions Davies to execute thirteen oil panels to cover the wall. As an accomplished pianist, Lillie identifies compositional relationships and structural rhythms as common to both visual art and music.
- 1916– Lillie acquires 17 watercolors by Paul Cézanne from Montross Gallery.
- 1921– With the aid of John Quinn and Louisine Havemeyer, Bliss convinces Bryson Burroughs, curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum, to organize a show titled *Loan Exhibition of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Art* in an effort to bring attention to contemporary French painting. Bliss (anonymously) lent twelve works to the exhibition, including five paintings by Cézanne.
- 1926– Alfred H. Barr attends *John Quinn Memorial Exhibition* at Art Center, 65 East 56th Street. Lillie organizes a lecture at 29 East Thirty-Seventh Street on the “interpretation of modern art.”
- 1928– Arthur Davies dies in Florence, Italy.
- 1929– MoMA opens with its inaugural *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh* exhibition on No-

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vember 7th, two weeks after the market crash that begins October 24, 1929. Lillie is MoMA's first vice president and one of its three founders (with Abby Rockefeller and Mary Quinn Sullivan). Eight of her works feature in the inaugural exhibition.

- 1930— A year before her death, Lillie moves uptown. She installs Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples* over the piano in the apartment's "Music Room," a quasi-gallery space designed for the presentation of the collection. She places Picasso's *Woman in White* and Cézanne's *Bather* with newly-commissioned furniture from Jules Bouy. When asked by Monroe Wheeler (director of exhibitions and publications at MoMA) how she came to appreciate "outlandish pictures," she answered in two words: "modern music."
- 1931— Lillie dies, leaving her collection to MoMA with the condition other members raise an endowment fund of \$1,000,000 (later reduced to \$750,000) to care for them. With Rockefeller leading, 160 members produced \$630,000, including \$100,000 from the Carnegie Corporation. *A Memorial Exhibition: The Collection of the Late Lillie P. Bliss* opens on May 17 at MoMA. In the catalogue, Eleanor Belmont describes Lillie as an "advocate for modern art when it had few admirers, a patron when it had almost no market; finally through her keen intelligence, valiant championing of young artists, and her personal experience with their work, she became not only an important collector but one of the best judges of contemporary painting in this country. To gather that which has stood the test of time takes skill and taste, but to select wisely from the vast amount of unweeded material produced by contemporary artists, requires taste, courage, and insight that amount almost to the gift of prophecy." *The Memorial Exhibition* travels to Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts.
- 1932— Mary Sullivan opens an art gallery on East 56th Street, employing a young Betty Parsons. Parsons earns a slender income from sales of her own work and gallery commissions.

We'd like to thank the Sherrie Levine Studio, David Zwirner Gallery, Steve Henry and Leo Koenig for their support and assistance with this project.

Open hours: Tuesday through Thursday from 10AM—5PM and by appointment.

For inquiries: info@frontdeskapparatus.com