



From left: Lea Lublin, *R.S.I.—Dürer, del Sarto, Parmigianino, 1983*, acrylic, C-print, postcard, and ink on canvas and wood. Installation view, Le Quartier, Centre d'Art Contemporain de Quimper, France, 1995.

Lea Lublin, *Le milieu du tableau: Espace perspectif et désirs interdits d'Artemisia G. (The Center of the Painting: Perspectival Space and the Forbidden Desire of Artemisia G.) (detail), 1979*, ink, acrylic, and graphite on canvas, 98 3/8" x 96 1/2".



Lea Lublin

STÄDTISCHE GALERIE IM LENBACHHAUS,
MUNICH

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"IF WOMEN set themselves to transform history, it can safely be said that every aspect of history would be completely altered." In 1990, art historian Griselda Pollock chose philosopher Hélène Cixous's powerful statement to discuss the exemplary relevance of Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi within a feminist reformulation of art history. But this quotation might just as well characterize the driving force of Lea Lublin, an artist active some three centuries after Gentileschi who is only now receiving the international recognition she deserves, in a recent retrospective at the Lenbachhaus in Munich. Pollock argued

that Gentileschi's legendary painting of decapitation, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, ca. 1620, demonstrated a "presence" that is "not expression, but a production against the semiotic grain of those structures that would 'cut off her head.'" She followed Cixous's assumption that while masculinity is culturally ordered by the threat of castration, it is decapitation that regulates and silences femininity. Through her enactment of such a violence in her own work, Gentileschi deflects the threat, clearing the space of painting for a feminine voice in an otherwise unseen social process.

A decade before Pollock offered this reading of Gentileschi, Lublin had already engaged her forebear's epic painting in an installation produced for a group show at the Parisian gallery Yvon Lambert in 1979 dedicated to the seventeenth-century painter's resonances in contemporary art. Lublin's contribution consisted of a four-part drawing, each panel nearly the size of Gentileschi's original; an accompanying wall text; an essay for the catalogue discussing the function of perspective in painting; reproductions of a series of preparatory sketches; and the partial reprint of a 1957 book, *Myth and Guilt*, by psychoanalyst Theodor Reik. Blurring the boundaries between art and its commentary, Lublin parsed Gentileschi's work as a presence actively changing in our space: Judith's sword, isolated in the first of the four drawings, reappears as a pointed phallus, and Holofernes's arms, raised in agony against penetration, turn into spread legs. The final drawing alludes to a scene of childbirth as much as murder,

reversing the typical gender roles that Gentileschi had already confounded. Without deviating from the work's original layout, Lublin pushed the medium of painting beyond its traditional parameters, socializing its process in order to further her conviction that art is, at its most fundamental, a process of both reading and enacting social desires.

This complex Gentileschi project was just one small component revisited in "Lea Lublin: Retrospective," the first comprehensive show of Lublin's multivalent oeuvre following the artist's death in 1999, curated by Stephanie Weber. The exhibition included a range of both finished objects and working documentation, remaining faithful to the artist's insistence on paralleling the production of her works with the documentation of their process. In Lublin's art, visual studies become visual practice.

Lublin, who was born in Poland in 1929 and migrated with her family to Buenos Aires at the age of two, began her artistic career in Argentina as a painter and soon gained considerable success there and in Paris, where she moved in 1965. This retrospective, however, followed Lublin's own self-historicization, beginning with the artist's definitive break with painting in 1964 and her subsequent production, in loosely chronological order. Lublin abandoned painting because of its inherent self-referentiality; for instance, Gentileschi's beheadings, however powerful a presence they created, always referred back to other paintings. Lublin instead embarked on what she termed a "*proceso a la imagen*" (image process), making use of

From left: Lea Lublin, *Voir clair: "La Gioconda" aux essuie-glaces* (To See Clearly: The Mona Lisa with Windshield Wipers), 1965, acrylic, glass, tape, and paper on canvas, with pressboard, wood, rubber bulb, wiper, motor, 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 19 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
 Lea Lublin, *Dissolution dans l'eau: Pont Marie, 17 heures* (Dissolution in Water: Pont Marie, 5 PM). Performance view, Paris, March 11, 1978.



any form and material that seemed fit to enhance a praxis of representation in space, whether in writing, drawing, collage, photography, video, sculpture, environments, or performative and participatory practices. Yet even as Lublin ceased to paint, she constantly engaged the medium's specific social and formal conventions. Lublin used painting as a template that could be brought into a vibrant transmedial process, in which social desires are not only represented but processed to return as embodied visual practices.

The first work one encountered in the exhibition was the sole surviving piece from the 1965–66 series "*Voir clair*" (To See Clearly), in which Lublin placed photographic reproductions of iconic figures in history—including Mona Lisa, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro—behind glass, challenging the audience to spray water on them with a baster. The water would then be cleaned off by a mechanized windshield wiper attached to the picture frame. From this beautifully ridiculous gesture of clarification, Lublin's investigations into history's visual presence widened dramatically in their media and scale. An exemplary mixture of original works, careful reconstructions, and extensive documentation, the exhibition convincingly resisted the temptation to project a developmental logic onto Lublin's expansive production or to enhance its legibility by tying her to more established narrations of the Latin American–Parisian avant-garde nexus of the 1960s. Lublin's understanding of art was precisely related to her awareness of the post-Perónist Argentinean struggles, on the one hand, and her very early investment in French

structuralism, specifically Lacanian psychoanalysis, on the other. Art for Lublin was never a medium of politics, but a political medium in its own right.

At the Lenbachhaus, works such as the Gentileschi project were shown alongside broader investigations, from the early '80s, of perspective and sex in Renaissance Madonna-and-child paintings. Here, as in the former work, an implicit desire is unearthed via the reconfiguration of the spectator's—as much as the painter's—gaze. In *R.S.I.—Dürer, del Sarto, Parmigianino*, 1983, Lublin methodologically combines Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist techniques of abstraction with her own psychoanalytically schooled deconstructions of painterly composition, producing large-scale arrangements of shaped canvases that unfold the Renaissance paintings outward from the point of their desired center: the naked child.

But it was Lublin's less object-oriented practices, such as her "*Interrogations sur l'art: Discours sur l'art*"—an ongoing series of interviews she started in 1974 and performed in countries all over Europe, everywhere from public squares and markets to museums—that rendered her "image process" an interactive exchange, in which the viewer herself became the picture that was caught in its own performance. Lublin had already been exposed to Jacques Lacan's theories in Buenos Aires via Oscar Masotta's writings, and she intensified her engagement after moving to Paris, attending Lacan's lectures and undergoing analysis herself. A Lacanian centralization of desire is rearticulated in Lublin's oeuvre via her insistence on the homologous

connection among textual readings, conversations, and interrogations within her image process.

Against the backdrop of an almost-ten-foot-long banner on which Lublin had stenciled a set of twenty-seven questions, all beginning with *IST KUNST EINE . . . ?* (Is art a . . . ?), passersby, art critics, fellow artists, and kids were queried about their understanding of art. In "*Interrogations sur l'art*," the interviewees were filmed while answering, their images simultaneously displayed on a closed-circuit television, so that they could reflect on their own visuality. Lublin engaged in discussions that forwarded art as a "system of communication," as she stated in one of the interviews, briskly rejecting the Romantic notion of a self-referential artistic practice proposed by one of her subjects. At the Lenbachhaus, a set of monitors showing excerpts of those recordings was accompanied by the interrogation banner, photographs, notes, and sketches. And the series was confronted in the same large gallery with its feminist inversion, "*Interrogations sur la femme*" of 1978, for which Lublin produced a similar banner, now with a stenciled list of questions mirroring the public perception of women in French society. Where the banner dedicated to art started with *IST KUNST EIN VERLANGEN?* (Is art a desire?) and ended with *IST KUNST EIN SYMPTOM?*, its feminine version asked, *LA FEMME EST-ELLE UNE VICTIME SEXUELLE?* (Is the woman a sexual victim?) and ended on *LA FEMME EST-ELLE UNE ÊTRE DIVIN?* (Is the woman a divine being?). No questions were asked of the general public, but the banner was



From left: Lea Lublin, *Fluvio subtunal*, 1969/2015, mixed media. Installation view, 2015. Lea Lublin, *Fluvio subtunal, Zona de la participación creadora* (*Fluvio Subtunal, Zone of Creative Participation*), 1969, mixed media. Installation view, vacant department store, Santa Fe, Argentina.



paraded through Paris in a procession that was part of a feminist action day, which culminated with the works being thrown into the Seine.

If art's social boundaries, the isolation of the individual work from its site of production, and the work's subsequent idolized existence that leaves perception as a mere after-

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thought were in a constant state of dissolution in Lublin's work, the cultural parameters of gender were also constantly and forcefully being acted out and confronted. In May 1968, Lublin contributed to the Twenty-Fourth Salon de Mai at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris with a work titled *Mon fils* (My Son). She installed a crib in the museum, above which Plexiglas panels were painted with colorful, schematic images of her son and the animals printed on his bedding. For the duration of the exhibition, Lublin lived with seven-month-old Nicolas in the museum, openly putting into practice an image of femininity that was supposed to remain within the private realm.

The retrospective made clear that such actions always remained specific to their sites. In the late '60s, Lublin organized a series of spectacularly staged, large-scale environments and happenings in Argentina and Chile. In

1969, she produced *Terranautas* (Earth Astronauts) or the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires (an institution as famous for its vanguard role in Argentina as for its political ties to the US), a humorous reaction to the Apollo moon mission earlier that year, as well as the two-thousand-square-foot *Fluvio subtunal* in a vacant department store in Santa Fe, Argentina, consisting of nine interactive areas visitors traversed in a given order. In the *Zona tecnológica*, for example, visitors walked amid projections of photographs of the workers who had built the municipal highway tunnel whose opening occasioned the work. The *Zona de la participación creadora* (Zone of Creative Participation) included a shooting gallery and a snack bar; the environment's central piece, also called the *Fluvio subtunal*, was an almost-sixty-six-foot-long translucent inflatable plastic hose in which visitors walked barefoot through water, surrounded by more inflatables. One entered and left this phallic tunnel through two vaginal openings.

Weber partially re-created this environment, making legible the masculine/feminine duality of experience so often at stake in Lublin's work. The show's combination of reconstruction, documentation, and commentary demonstrated not only the intended sensory immediacy of Lublin's original environments but also our own temporal and geographic distance from them—another testament to the specificity of experience laid out in the artist's image process. As this process is built on the presence of Lublin's own experience, the show restaged the artist's work from its inherent antagonism, her absence. But in

rendering this urge toward immediacy as the work's past life, the exhibition opened up the art's ongoing actualization: Just as Lublin read Dürer, Gentileschi, and Malevich, we read Lublin today.

In an essay for the 1979 Yvon Lambert catalogue, Roland Barthes characterized the story of Judith and Holofernes as an "available structure"—even if the "events" stay the same . . . the psychological motivation of the personages can change completely." Barthes argued that painting inverts this availability: "Since the *before* and *after* of this moment are not represented, the meaning remains suspended between several possibilities: one can interpret the moment *ad infinitum* or one may just as easily not interpret it at all: it is contradictorily literal and polysemic. . . . There lies the force of painting: in the abrupt reversal of roles." At the Lenbachhaus, Lublin's oeuvre was introduced as exactly this kind of "available structure"—open works that, even as their forms were able to be redisplayed or re-created over time, constantly shifted their viewers' psychological motivations and responses, challenging and refocusing our perspectives. It is exactly this mutable quality of painting that Lublin exported from the medium. For her, each form, each visual experience, each social construct, each lived moment, had the capacity to "completely alter" history and be transformed in turn. □

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