

Project Gallery

Shana Lutker

**Pérez
Art
Museum
Miami**

English

Again Against, A Foot, A Back, A Wall

Since 2012, Shana Lutker's practice has found focus in Surrealism, an early 20th-century avant-garde artistic and literary movement that grew out of Dadaism. Centered in Paris, the Surrealists sought to liberate the subconscious as a vehicle for expression and allow psychic automatism and dreams to guide their creative output. This radical moment in Western art history has proven ripe territory for Lutker, extending the concerns of her earlier work and giving narrative structure to her sculptural, textual, and performative explorations.

Lutker specifically investigates the Surrealists' quarrels and scuffles, as this band of cultural insurrectionists was prone to all manner of physical altercations over issues ranging from the ideological to the romantic. Lutker initially encountered these disruptions reading the biography of André Breton, the movement's founder. She was drawn to a moment when artists formed tightly knit communities, produced manifestos, and displayed physical declarations of principle that could lead to blows. This is a moment, the artist notes, that feels quite distant from ours and to which she seeks to connect us through these works.¹

The History of the Fistfights of the Surrealists (2012–) is a series of eight “chapters,” each focused on a particular fight. Thus far, Lutker has realized two: one addresses a brawl from 1923 through installations presented in Los Angeles and Zurich and a performance in New York; a second explores an eruptive protest from 1926 in the form of an installation included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. For Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), Lutker presents a third chapter addressing an ambiguous public melee that occurred in a Parisian theater in 1925.

The cause and implications of this particular fight are elusive; it is unclear what led to the Surrealists' disruption, the message their protests were meant to convey, or what was at stake. What Lutker does know: on May 29, 1925, at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, a group of Surrealists shouted down a lecture by author Robert Aron titled “Literature and the Average Frenchman.” Their interjection escalated and two Surrealists, Philippe Soupault and Robert Desnos, jumped onto the stage, where Desnos yelled violently. A brawl began with the audience, who reacted unfavorably to this intrusion. Eventually, the police interceded and restored order. The lecture was

abandoned, but the program continued as scheduled with a selection of scenes from the play *Au Pied du Mur* (Backs to the Wall) by Louis Aragon. The play was directed by and starred Antonin Artaud, opposite his lover, actress Génica Athanasiou. This is what Lutker has pieced together from various accounts and it forms the genesis of her current project.

While some of the impetus for Lutker's research into this fight was an attempt to find its cause, her project does not seek to resolve this question—the pursuit of resolution has never been the nature of her practice, which comfortably keeps ambiguity and unknowability at its center. Instead, by creating an open-ended synthesis of the many characters, references, and artworks that emerge from this event, as well as her own reactions to them, she provides the viewer with an experience akin to her own subjective way of learning about and understanding this history. Lutker's investigation takes two forms: an installation of objects in the gallery, *Again Against, A Foot, A Back, A Wall*, and a performance, *The Average Mysterious and the Shirt off its Back*, presented the night of the exhibition's opening.



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Lutker has articulated that her interest in the objects she creates is due, in part, to their status as “posing as historical witnesses” to these fistfights. The objects comprise forms inspired by the specificity of this historical incident, as well as forms that recur throughout her practice.² For instance, the most prominent sculptural object, *A handsome confused puppet*

¹ Lutker published an artist book to accompany this project, in which she describes her interest in the Surrealist fistfights, expressing admiration for “the ‘revolutionary’ spirit of these artists,” their zeal and commitment, as well as some skepticism at their motivations for resorting to violence. Shana Lutker, “The Bearded Gas and the Blowing Nose,” chap. 1 in *Le “NEW” Monocle* (2012).

² “On Hand Holding and Constellation: A Conversation between Kris Paulsen and Shana Lutker,” in *Shana Lutker*, ed. Lauri Firstenberg (Los Angeles: LAXART, 2015, forthcoming).

(2015), a mirrored lightbox that reads, “I’ve dreamed of you so much I don’t think there is time to wake up”—a paraphrased idea from a 1930 poem by Desnos—operates in multiple ways. While its function recalls theatrical spotlights, its text relates to the interaction of the two lovers in *Au Pied du Mur*. In transposing the language of Desnos’s poem onto the narrative of the play, the object becomes an embodied conjecture on Lutker’s part—perhaps Desnos’s poem bears influence of what he saw and heard at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier on May 29.



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Likewise, the pile of broken glass vials, *The antidote is on the table*. (2015), that sits on a stair-like platform recalls the antidote bottle that the unfortunate heroine of *Au Pied du Mur* declines to take at the behest of her lover after swallowing poison (which she also took at his behest). It also relates to the opening scenes of *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (The Seashell and the Clergyman), a 1928 proto-Surrealist film written by Artaud, and again starring Athanasiou. Directed by Germaine Dulac, an early scene depicts the repeated shattering of glass vials, and a resulting mound of glass. Artaud played the role of the cruel lover in *Au Pied du Mur* opposite Athanasiou in 1925 and wrote the treatment for the 1928 film as well. Perhaps this reappearance of broken glass in the film is only remarkable to Lutker because she encountered it when she was focused on the broken glass in the play. Or, it could be that the vials of poison and antidote taken and refused by Athanasiou inspired Artaud to write an analogous scene in his subsequent film. It isn’t clear, and it isn’t meant to be. The pile of broken glass and the light piece demonstrate the way in which Lutker’s objects serve as research, conjecture, and abstraction—forms that emerge from particular narratives, but go on to find further dimensions and meaning.

These objects, and others in the space—among them graphite “boots,” an abstracted bodily form that recurs in the artist’s vocabulary; a granite book that refers to the “literature” at the heart of Aron’s disrupted lecture and to the form of a library book stand; and a lead curtain that could allude to the theatrical setting of the lecture or to the architecture of PAMM—have distinct points of reference. Like many of the sculptural works in Lutker’s practice, they are highly abstracted reinterpretations of real objects. Lutker transforms and makes strange everyday things through manipulations of form, material, and scale, as well as through gestures such as doubling or displacing. In conversation with Lutker, the

art historian Kris Paulsen has discussed the artist’s work in relation to the way in which we encounter people or objects in our dreams. One might describe a dream by saying, “I was at my parents’ house, but it wasn’t my parents’ house”; similarly, Lutker explores the way in which we apply language to and identify something that is in fact not that thing—the mind “knows,” so the object or person becomes transformed.³

For many years, Lutker created work focused around psychoanalysis. In a practice that astutely reconciles process and form with subject, she approached this field from many positions, ranging from the extraordinarily subjective to the thoroughly researched, and through many modes—sculpture, text, installation, and performance, among others. Exemplary of her work from this period are her “dream books,” a series she produced between 2003 and 2008 in which she transcribed accounts of her dreams in the tone and layout of the *New York Times*. In this, Lutker positioned herself as both analyst and analysand, bringing the cool tenor of expertise and distance to bear on her own intimate subconscious wanderings. Subsequent projects saw her annotating these records in diagrammatic, text-based drawings and realizing, in miniature scale, the art she dreamed she had made. These projects illuminate the blurring of the personal and academic and the imagined and concrete that has given shape to her practice.

Lutker’s subject matter has shifted over time, but she has maintained the methodology and ethos that she developed during this period; her work contains subjective elements while continuing to find grounding in intense periods of research. While Lutker pursues information in a meticulous and scientific way, it is the subjective position and a Warburgian mode of exploring⁴, in which a web rather than a line is constructed, that are privileged and fundamentally guide her practice. She is drawn in by the way one idea or fact gives way to the next, leading her to pursue one footnote instead of another, to draw resonances between distant materials, to excavate subplots, and to be attuned to tertiary characters. The recurrence and reappearance of certain images, ideas, and words—as exemplified in her initial encounter and re-encounters with the Surrealist fistfights themselves—guides both Lutker’s thinking and her production, and resonates in the viewer’s experience of her work.

Through the application of rigorous systems and formal structures, as well as an acute aesthetic, material, and tonal sensibility, Lutker transforms the intuitive and subliminal underpinnings of her practice into objects and scenarios that feel at once uncanny and self-evident. This destabilization of the familiar and a reliance on symbolic rather than precise representation is one way that Lutker counters the Minimalist notion of the autonomous object and the authoritarian declaration of objectivity. There are strong feminist undertones to the artist’s prioritizing of her own subjective experience and the way in which her ambivalent and uneasy objects secure a space of interpretation for the viewer. In creating installations, bringing these objects together and devising their particular

3 Ibid.

4 Aby Warburg was a German art historian whose work focused on classical and Renaissance art. While his scholarship remains an important touchstone, his methodologies, namely his “mnemosyne atlas,” have become a vital part of his legacy. This “atlas” took the form of boards upon which Warburg would pin interconnected images, prioritizing a subjective, thematic organizational model for his research and ideas over a linear, temporal, or historical one.



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choreography in a space, Lutker draws the viewer into the process of creating meaning alongside her.⁵ The viewer becomes the subject, and in some ways, the researcher, as well, experiencing both the disjointed narrative of history and the latent and destabilized subtexts contained in these objects; the experience is akin to the sensation of waking after a dream to try to recall its details, facts and impressions entangling.

It is the interstitial space between language and object, reality and subconscious, specificity and abstraction, truth and fiction that informs Lutker's process. Something of this process remains in the final objects she creates, and something of the talismanic and the quotidian that defined the Surrealists' objects in revolt imbue her contemporary forms. The uncertainty inherent to Lutker's work, and to the histories she puts forward, also opens the space for the viewer to create new constellations of connection, and to read meaning into ambiguity.

Diana Nawi
Associate Curator

Biography

Shana Lutker (b. 1978, Northport, New York) is based in Los Angeles. She received a BA from Brown University and an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her work has been included in group exhibitions in Los Angeles, Zurich, Mexico City, Stockholm, New York, Cleveland, Houston, Lisbon, and San Francisco. Most recently, she was included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Her work will be the subject of a survey exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. in 2015. She is the executive director of Project X Foundation, publisher of *X-TRA*, a Los Angeles-based contemporary art quarterly.

All images courtesy Shana Lutker and Susanne Vielmetter Projects Los Angeles.
Photos: Shana Lutker

- Cover Study for *A handsome confused puppet*, 2015
Digital image
- 2 *#research*, 2015
Digital image
- 3 *The antidote is on the table.*, 2015
10,000 broken glass bottles, 15 x 36 x 36 inches
- 4 *B o o t s*, 2015
10 graphite blocks, approximately 12 x 11 x 2 inches each

⁵ In her conversation with the artist, Paulsen remarked on the experience of identifying recognizable shapes in clouds, and the common impulse to point out that observation to another so that they can see what you see, "shar[ing] your vision." Lutker and Paulsen go on to identify the gallery space as a critical site for the mutual generosity inherent in the shared act of interpretation, in which we agree to "see from the position of another." "On Hand Holding and Constellation."

Project Gallery: Shana Lutker

May 7–September 27, 2015

Shana Lutker

b. 1978, Northport, New York; lives in Los Angeles

All works courtesy the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

A handsome confused puppet, 2015

Glass box, fluorescent lights, wooden base, and casters

49 x 30 x 19 inches

Average litterature (sic), 2015

Granite

9 x 28 x 36 inches

B o o t s, 2015

10 graphite blocks

Approximately 12 x 11 x 2 inches each

Curtain, no. 3, 2015

Lead and steel hardware

Approximately 96 x 60 inches

The antidote is on the table., 2015

10,000 broken glass bottles

15 x 36 x 36 inches

The Speaker, 2015

Felt

31 x 23 x 11 inches

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I'VE
DREAMED
OF YOU
SO MUCH
I DON'T
THINK
THERE IS
TIME TO
WAKE UP.