

*Kitchen* is an installation, first shown in 1983, that places the viewer inside a structure (composed of 164 colour photographs) physically analogous to the room in question. The kitchen Lawlor represents is slightly run-down and filled with the *lacunae* of shared male habitation; triangular arrangements of empty soup cans, a stack of beer cases, numerous cigarette butts, etc. This sense of genteel decay is enhanced by the quality of the colour prints themselves. Never of archival quality, after five years their colour balance has shifted badly, giving the images the sad, sepulchral quality of the anonymous photographs one occasionally finds on the street. Two fragmentary figures appear: an outstretched hand with opened fingers and the back view of a nude male torso.

The artist's concerns with the issues of description, documentation, and representation are mediated by two essential extrinsic factors: the writing with which the work contextualizes itself, and the history of the work through five years and several installations. Lawlor has supplied viewers with not one but three "artist's statements", each subtly contradicting the others as to the origins and provenance of the work. Thus the artist not only questions the always dubious 'definitiveness' of such statements but is able to articulate the overlapping and often contradictory considerations seeking resolution in his work. Or, as

the artist states it: "An overloaded group of images may start to leak and show the seams of their related topics."

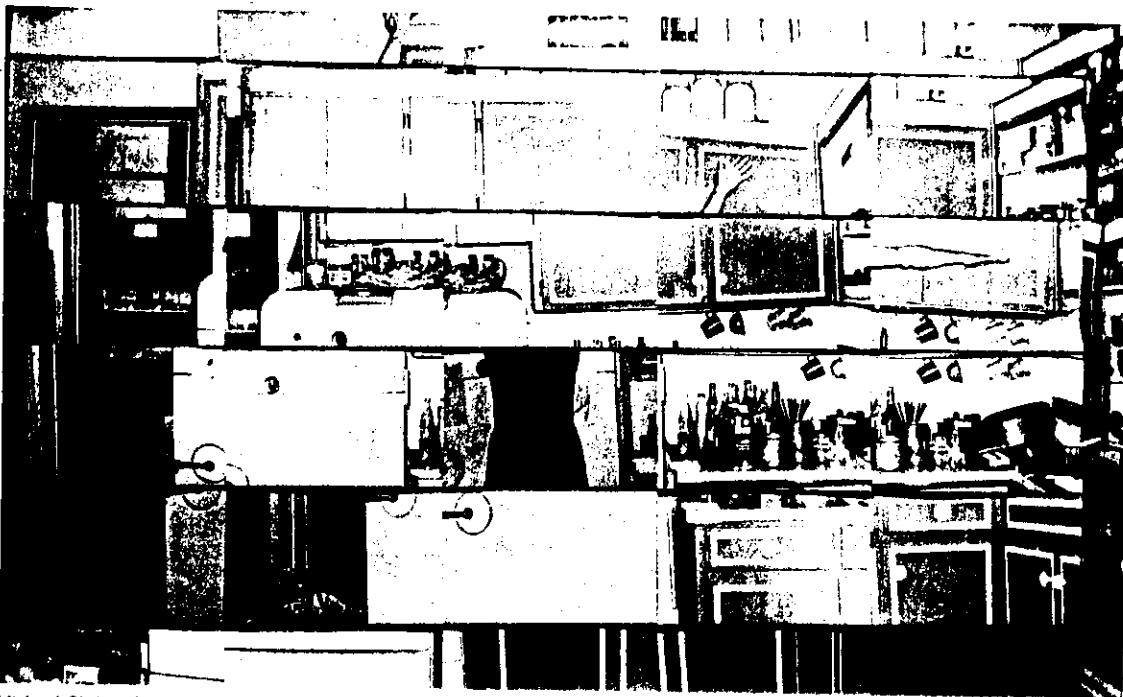
Bearing a less well-defined, and hence more problematic, relation to the work is a longer text entitled *19*, produced as a booklet concurrently with the installation of *Kitchen*. In an unadorned, flat prose that contrasts tellingly with the 'artspeak' of the "artist's statements", it tells of a rape victim being sheltered in the narrator's kitchen while police are summoned. The police arrive, the woman is taken away, and the narrative ends. What emerges most clearly from this text is the narrator's sense of futility and shame in the face of this assault, and the tenuousness of the strategies by which we shield ourselves from the horror that lurks at the edges of urban life.

To ascertain the relationship of this text to *Kitchen*, it is necessary to take into account the history of the work. As the production of an ex-student of NSCAD working in the early eighties, the exhibit's relationship to and dialogue with feminist photographic practices would hardly need to have been emphasized. The simple recontextualization of a traditional site of male domination into one of male capitulation and decay was, in 1982, a worthwhile project. The intervening years, however, have included both an expansion and an interrogation of the practices that the work was initially conceived as a response to.

This strategy of showing a work repeatedly over a long period of time, letting layers of implication and interpretation accrue to it, is a risky one, and it is not a process that the artist has let go unaided. The aging of the unfixed photographs coupled with the stark, minimal presentation join with the solidly banal surface content in giving the work a look of deliberate 'datedness', as if the work were disappearing into its own history.

This disappearance brings our consideration back to the narrative of *19*. The relationship of this text and *Kitchen* remains ambiguous, but reading the text changes the nature of the work irrevocably. Formal and historical considerations are pushed into the background; a sense of fear, loss, and pathos swamps the viewer. The extent to which this is a crude manipulation is hinted at by the contradictory "artist's statements", but the clarity and directness of *19* refute charges of cynicism. *Kitchen*, as it has evolved, seems increasingly to say that the issues of meaning and representation are subject to such bewildering historical and fashionable shifts and redefinitions that the underlying causes of the brutality of our culture, which 'critical' art is presumed to address, are often obscured by that very discourse. Or, in the words of the artist, "Careful analytic orderings are fragile walls."

Peter Culley



Michael Christopher Lawlor, *Kitchen (Fridge Wall)* (1983) (detail), installation, courtesy: the artist

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