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Laurie Parsons's Disappearing Act

An artist book introduced by curator Bob Nickas seeks to present a new generation to the artist, who abandoned her art career 30 years ago to practice social work.



Louis Bury June 8, 2022



Laurie Parsons, "Glass with Butts" (1989) from her book *36 Slides 1986–1990* (Hassla, 2021) (all images courtesy Hassla)

You'd be hard-pressed to find a recent artist's book that achieves more with less than Laurie Parsons's *36 Slides 1986–1990*, whose informational, Ruscha-esque title belies the depth and poignancy of its recuperative conceit. Storied curator Bob Nickas, a longtime champion of Parsons's work and possessor of the titular slides, wrote to the former artist requesting permission to reproduce them in book form. Parsons, who left behind a budding art career to practice social work in the early-mid 1990s, amicably granted permission but made clear, as Nickas expected,

that “she did not want to be involved” in the project. The book, as much a creation of Nickas as of Parsons, points to the importance of social bonds in the production of art historical memory.



Cover of Laurie Parsons, *36 Slides 198–1990* (Hassla, 2021)

The slides themselves foster an almost archaeological mood. Many depict piles of rubble and refuse excavated from a site along the Hudson River and arranged indoors as non-sites, in Robert Smithson’s sense of the term. Many others show lone found objects — an empty beer bottle; a sleeveless maxi dress; a plank of painted wood — that Parsons salvaged in New York City and photographed to determine if she might incorporate them into installations. In the remaining handful are miscellanies — a portrait of a woman friend; a still from Spike Lee’s film *Do the Right Thing*; an image of the end of a camera film roll that resembles a portentous sunset — that may not be ruins in their own right but now appear like fragments from a bygone era.

The result is a tiny, unassuming book with outsized emotional resonance. Everything in *36 Slides* exists at a conspicuous remove from its

own past: reproductions of images that were originally formatted in the now-dated medium of projector slides, published by a curator who a decade ago took a step back from the New York City art scene in which he’d been ensconced. Nickas’s introduction adroitly balances personal reminiscences with contextualization of Parsons’s work. Together with his comprehensive 2003 *Artforum* article, “Whatever Happened To: Laurie Parsons,” and Sarah E. James’s excellent 2019 *Frieze* article, “What Art Can Be: Laurie Parsons’s Quiet Exit From Art,” the book will introduce a new generation to a former artist with scant few extant works.



Laurie Parsons, "Number 58" (1986), wood, 2 x 63/4 inches

Beyond just providing an entrée to Parsons's art practice, *36 Slides* also serves as a reminder of how soon the contemporary moment becomes history and how easily history can be forgotten as it recedes from immediate view. Every artistic generation probably has to experience obsolescence for itself in order to grasp its impact, as it's the kind of lesson that's hard to learn in the abstract. But Bartleby-esque acts of withdrawal pose uniquely palpable challenges to business-as-usual presumptions of continuity. Thanks to Nickas and others like him, we know that decades ago a young Parsons moved on from making art with clarity and finality. In the time since, the curator has done his part to provide a record of her artistic past that's also a glimpse of how it will feel when today's artistic forms and debates seem as remote to the future as yesterday's can to us.

36 Slides 1986–1990 by Laurie Parsons (2021) is published by Hassla and is available online and in bookstores.