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Interview with Tom Lawson, Dean of CalArts School of Art

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This interview took place the glorious sunny afternoon of October 7, 2006, at the Spain Restaurant in Los Angeles, California, hours before the New York Mets swept the Los Angeles Dodgers to win the National League Division Series. The interview covers a wide range of questions: from Lawson's artistic career, deanship at [CalArts](#), and writing publications, to Lawson's current thoughts on contemporary art, art pedagogy and the impact of market forces on artistic production.

Sergio Muñoz-Sarmiento (SMS): Your own work as an artist, having spanned different social, political and economic moments, how has it changed or evolved, or what problems have you noticed?

Tom Lawson (TL): So you want the whole story? [laughter] It's a long answer.

SMS: Yes, that's alright [laughter]

TL: I started being a professional artist in the mid to late 70s in New York, meaning I started showing work then. The art context in that place and point of time was quite specific; progressive art was conceptual and post-minimal. So for many young artists like me, recently arrived in town, the thing to consider was painting because it was the bad thing, and also to think about representation because it had been put to one side. I went to New York in my mid-20s, and ran into other artists coming from all over the U.S. and parts beyond, who were talking about similar things. For me I've always liked painting, but there I learned how over it was, despite the fact that you could see some of the best work ever produced by giants like Philip Guston and Jasper Johns in those years. Some of the other young artists I met were from a new place called CalArts, and they tended to be very sure of their ideas, but there were other equally interesting people from Madison, Buffalo, Nantucket and other exotic places I'd mostly never heard of. We hung out into the night,

talked a lot. In time this talking led to Susan Morgan and me starting REALLIFE Magazine, and the idea of this magazine was that it would be a place to hear the artist's voice, artists talking about each other's work, within a new media context framed by TV and movies. So we started this magazine and featured artists like Sherrie Levine, David Salle, Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince: newcomers to the city, not widely known at the time.

During this time in the 70s there wasn't much of an art market; New York itself was a weirdly impoverished city, almost bankrupted. The Lower Manhattan area where artists were gathering, Soho and Tribeca and down below the World Trade Center, was an area that was deserted after the workday. The industries that built them had all gone, and the artists who lived there were the only ones that were there at night, so you very quickly knew your neighbors. It was a weird, small village feeling and atmosphere, very experimental - - experimental living, experimental art, theater, and music, almost like an unstructured version of CalArts spread through the city. This was when I met some of the first generation of CalArts artists, people like James Welling, Matt Mullican, Jack Goldstein and David Salle, as well as Barbara Bloom, Susan Davis, and Ericka Beckman -- there was a lot of interesting stuff going on.

I focused on painting and used imagery from the tabloid press, sensationalist images, as my source material, and framed them in a minimalist context. At the same time, and along with the magazine, I also started writing. I found that I had a facility for this. I think Flash Art was probably the first to publish longer pieces of mine, although I published in various other publications, big and small. In the very early 80s there was a big regime change at Artforum and I got into that, and that's where Last Exit: Painting was published. That turn into the new decade signaled a big change, a moment when a number of curators and gallerists who had been paying attention to new directions in studio work began taking action, opening galleries, seeking a new generation of collectors. For me the significant one was Metro Pictures. Helene Winer had been working as director of Artist's Space where she presided over a kind of salon where a lot of us met. But interesting though that situation was, it was a non-profit space where you could only show once; you know it wasn't a career builder. So Helene got tired of that and decided she wanted to actually help people into the next phase of their careers, so she partnered up with an old friend, Janelle Reiring, who had been working at Leo Castelli as an assistant and together they started Metro Pictures. At roughly the same moment Mary Boone left her position at the Bykert Gallery and opened her own gallery around the corner, and Anina Nosei, first in partnership with a print dealer from LA called Larry Gagosian, then on her own, started another gallery focused on new work. All of a sudden there was this explosion of interest and a new market.

Soon there was this influx of Europeans; Italian and German painters and critics and collectors. An interesting thing happened; we began to make a living as artists. In the 70s we were all renovating lofts, knocking down walls, doing sheetrock, simple plumbing, you know, crap work. But in the 80s we were actually selling artworks, which is a very exciting experience. For a few years it seemed like you could do interesting work and get support for it and it was all part of a growing excitement. And we all did very well.

But as the Reagan period developed and extended it began to get weirdly cynical. The politics were turning nasty, and the idea of marketing art was becoming the driving idea in making art – Ashley Bickerton made a piece with a device in it that purported to monitor the work's increasing value. Things were getting less comfortable, and by the late 80s I was getting really disillusioned with the whole thing because it was just a scene ruled by fashion more than anything. I remember a particularly sour moment -- Martin Kippenberger had a show at MetroPictures at the time of the Wall Street crash and the cynicism of Kippenberger along with a pervasive anxiety about where the money would go just got to me, made me think, "You know, is this really the world you want to be in? [laughter]"

This is the time I got interested in public art, because it seemed like a way of supporting my interest in representation differently, of getting money differently, circulating the work differently. The challenge of doing things in the public sphere, and developing some content that would connect with regular people. I did a number of big projects in New York, Madrid and various cities in the U.K., from 1987 to 1991, and I really liked them and thought them successful projections of my ideas. I did a lot of temporary murals, and I did them in situ. I wanted a chance to talk to people passing by, gathered around, asking, “What the hell is this?” I always found that people were generous and curious talking about what I was doing. I did a lot of work with images of public statuary and people would recognize that, “I know what that is, I used to play on that statue...I see what you’re doing...I remember that guy...” Or, “Hey, that’s Abe Lincoln,” and it was never Abe Lincoln, it was some New York politician from the 19th century who had worked in the Tweed machine, or a renown poet dear to the hearts of an immigrant group that had finally made enough to pay for the memorial. The work I was trying to do was to bring this submerged history back to attention, and it kind of worked, people were talking about it, after we got past the Abe Lincoln problem. [laughter]

For a few years that was pretty good, but ultimately the drawback of public art is actually politics, because at the local level you have to get through all these committees and arts commissions and departments of general services, bored employees, and traffic control. One time I had to answer a whole set of questions regarding my use of very bright colors. The concern was that they would be distracting to motorists. And this for a mural that was about 20 feet over street level [laughing], motorists wouldn’t even be able to see it.

SMS: Because billboards aren’t distracting right?

TL: Exactly, [laughter] commercial billboards don’t even have to go through all this process [more laughter].

SMS: That’s because it’s commercial.

TL: Exactly. It was on a city building, a municipal building at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, so there was also this concern that motorists on the bridge would see it and veer into the river. [laughter] I thought that was pretty exciting, so I went out onto the bridge and sure enough, you could actually see it pretty well, which was great. Bu it was also pretty small and you know, it wasn’t distracting.

Anyway, it was during this time that I moved out here to take up the job at CalArts. I’d been a resident of New York and had an investment in its representation, and an older history stemming from Britain, and I was ok with that, because it made sense to me. But I couldn’t figure out a public space of Los Angeles that made sense to me. I just couldn’t get my mind around the problem in a way that satisfied me. So I stopped thinking about public art, and got more involved in the issues of educating young artists, and when you’re running a school it takes up a little bit of time.

SMS: Just a little bit [laughter].

TL: Yes, just a little bit. I began to pursue other things in the studio. I made paintings about fire, because one of the first things you notice when you move out here is the fire season, which is a shocker if you are not from these parts. Hillsides and buildings regularly burn down in October. So I did a whole bunch of paintings based on images of fire, and it turns out there was a particularly bad season of fire followed by a season of riot, and I just thought that that wasn’t the idea; that that wasn’t the right time to show them. I didn’t want to have them misunderstood as having anything to do with ‘the fire next time.’ That wasn’t

what I had been thinking about.

SMS: Now is that something you would have thought about in New York?

TL: The fire?

SMS: No, the politics.

TL: Yeah, it was local weather conditions, local politics, local housing patterns; it was those kinds of thing I was thinking about. I was thinking about Goethe's Faust. I wasn't thinking about inner city politics.

Then, within the year there was a huge earthquake that rattled CalArts and we had to evacuate the building for six months for repair. My job went from being merely the dean to the entire project manager looking to find alternative locations, figuring out what we needed to continue, and how and where to provide that, and keep everyone's spirits up. I really got into it because it returned me to the day to day excitements of doing public art. I was out on the road much of the time. I got a cell phone for the first time, a laptop with fax connector, so I could be in touch with Joann at the art office. She was in a trailer on the parking lot at CalArts, and I was driving everywhere in the Santa Clarita Valley creating the art school again and making sure that people were ok with it.

We found these amazing Lockheed buildings that had been test sites for stealth technologies -- a huge hangar and wind tunnel, and all these experimental labs. They gave us the use of the main building and we cleared it all up, turned small offices into studios, and bigger offices into art galleries and classrooms. Some students left, but the ones who remained learned a lot about improvisation and experimentation, hands-on. There was a student there who had done some prior projects about public interactions and he made a bar that opened every afternoon at five [laughter]. It was an amazing six months.

In this period I got myself a new studio and began doing a new set of paintings that I still don't know what to think about. They were diptych paintings with each panel about the size of a table-top (3' x 5'). Up until this point I had kept a studio on campus, but after the earthquake I didn't have access to that studio and couldn't get my work out. So I got this idea about making art that would fit in the back of a station wagon. I needed to make something that I could pick up and get out.

But wanting still to make large paintings, I started making the diptych thing. They were juxtapositions of interiors and faces. The interior spaces were all -- well, the whole thing was psychological. The pictures of interiors were of insane asylums, cramped little cells with wooden benches, narrow hallways and steep staircases, that kind of space. Across a slender divide of bright color these confined spaces sat next to large faces, mostly found in old movie stills and newspaper clippings, expressing some kind of emotion. They were faces wracked with extreme emotion; they could be shouting, screaming, laughing. They are strange paintings in flat acrylic color and I showed them in London, but nowhere else. They were not well received. The most response I got was: "I guess this is Los Angeles color." I said, "Los Angeles color? Los Angeles color is bleached out non-color, what are you talking about?"

So mid-90s I'm enjoying the teaching, running the school and thinking about art, a kind of abstract thought that can feed writing, but not painting. Studio wise I'm having a bit of a hard time. You know, I had been so involved with the whole New York thing since arriving there as a 25 year old, that coming to a new city when I was 40 I never really got into the process exactly. I was out of the feed-back loop.

Now, my parents had died in the late 80s, first my dad and then my mother a few years later. After she died my brother and I shared a small inheritance, much of it old furniture that had actually been my grandmother's. I found that I felt very attached to that stuff, and to the idea of Scotland. Suddenly I was faced with the idea that if I were to go back again I'd be a tourist, and having to stay in a hotel room, kind of weird. So I took the money and bought an apartment in Edinburgh and put this old furniture in it so it's a nice memory container. Susan and I still go there every year, sometimes two or three times a year.

During the mid-90s I went a lot because I was working closely with the art school in Glasgow; they have a process called 'external examination' where people from the outside come and basically ratify that the grades are ok. I was the external for the painting department for a number of years. During that same time I was invited to be one of the co-selectors of the British Art Show, which is a -- I love the word -- quinquennial exhibition, every five years. It's a national exhibition organized by the South Bank Centre, London's premier organization for all of the arts, including the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the National Theatre, and the Hayward Gallery. That's to say, it's a big deal. The show is intended to be a survey of significant trends in British art, and our version was the official moment of recognition for the Hirst/Emin/Gordon generation; pretty hot. For a year and a half I went to London at least once a month to meet up with my two co-selecting colleagues and visit studios and talk about what we were seeing.

During this time Britain was going through a series of slow crises. It was the end of the Thatcher/Major period, and the Tories were seen as corrupt and ineffective, out of touch. It was also the beginning of the end for the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and there were bomb scares in London quite regularly. So when the labor party came in under Blair, part of the promise and part of the excitement, although it's hard to imagine now that Blair excited anyone, but he did, part of the excitement was a promise to bring about constitutional change to devolve power back to the older nations within the Union, to create local parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. What came of that for Scotland was called devolution -- a new parliament, sort of equivalent to a state government, with tax raising power, but still subservient to central government for the big issues.

I really got into reading about all of this. Whenever I was in Scotland I read the latest that people were writing from left, right and center about whether Scotland should be fully independent or partially independent. In the course of all that I discovered a historical figure from the 18th century, an interesting figure from the period of the French Revolution, someone who had spoken about republican politics at that point and had been punished for it. I started researching this man and just got lost in the research, and this is a project I'm still working through. I've written a couple of little books using archival material and my ultimate goal is to patch all these little books together and make some sort of novel. It's constructed using the same principles I use in the paintings, found materials, tweaked and manipulated and stuck together. The story is a fantastic story, full of all kinds of adventures, violence, drugs and betrayal, mixed with radical politics and their accompanying paranoia, all kinds of great stuff, and actually kind of contemporary.

This work of research and writing freed up my imagination again and I eventually got back into painting. So in the last seven years or so I've been painting again. At some point I realized that giving huge amounts of energy to all kinds of public work, from murals, to organizing big exhibitions, arguing school budgets, it's a lot of energy, and interesting and selfless in some way, but not actually as rewarding as it theoretically ought to be. So I go back into studio production and I've been making paintings, and really liking it. I'm going to show some of these paintings in a few months here in LA, so it's like going public with what I have been doing under the radar, privately. [laughter]

SMS: Instead of taking what you've been doing public. [laughter]

TL: But you know, all the other stuff continues. I got involved in the [Afterall](#) project, about 4 years ago now, which is a whole other big mess in some way, trying to figure out how two institutions can collaborate on a publication that makes sense to both of them, an editorial group where we all know each other, and like each other, and at first glance think we agree, but when we actually get down to cases we don't agree. It has been complicated trying to resolve all that, and an ongoing project. The journal has moved forward, it's gotten better. We have some important new support from the Warhol Foundation, We've just gotten a new distribution deal that's going to make it much more visible than it has been in the United States and we're launching a website...

SMS: And then [Documenta](#)...

TL: And then Documenta, but I don't really understand exactly what Documenta is doing; I guess they're doing a side stream with journals and magazines, and they're asking these journals and magazines to address three topics, which are: modernity and antiquity, bare life, and education.

SMS: What is number two?

TL: Bare life. That's the one I don't really get, but there's a philosopher who we're all supposed to be really excited about -- Giorgio Agamben -- and that's his theory, bare life, the essentials of life. As it was explained to me it makes a certain amount of sense, sort of about Darfur vs. Beverly Hills, how can that be possible in a just world, and is there such a thing as a just world? I'm not quite sure how art addresses that. Actually we're having an editorial meeting here in LA later this weekend, and this will be one of the topics on the table, so in a few days I may have an answer of some kind, but right now I'm kind of in the dark.

SMS: Maybe we can go back to this Afterall/Documenta issue by me asking you, when do you think art first became critical, or about critique, because that seems to be a word that gets tossed around a lot, "what does your work critique?," or "my work critiques..."

TL: I think in our period, on an aesthetic- philosophical level, very abstract philosophical level, it goes back to Clement Greenberg. His contention was that art has an obligation to self-critique. With him it's a critique within the medium, the idea that painting reduces itself to its essentials as a kind of series of progressions to an end point, and he's talking about Pollock. It's highly formal and it's got nothing to do with politics, except in the most rarified way, but it puts that idea into play in, what, the 50s? He begins to argue it earlier but by the 50s he articulates it more clearly. By the late 60s the conceptual art movement, in part arguing against him, begins to articulate the role of critique in a more generalized, political forum. It's at that moment that a pure aesthetic idea gets picked up and turned against itself, and we begin hearing about the idea that art needs to question it's own institution of itself. Not simply the aesthetic form, but also what it stands for and what it represents in the larger sense -- and if it's only part of the larger trappings of bourgeois capitalism then we should do something about it.

SMS: It's interesting because on that note, I remember we did a panel back after September 11th which you were part of, and my sentiment and that of quite a few people in the general audience was that this event was going to shift art back to the public realm and away from the market and create a need for artists within the U.S. to engage political action and do social commentary. Did that happen?

TL: [laughter]

SMS: I was going to make a statement but decided to ask a question...[laughter]

TL: [laughter] It's interesting, because in today's Times...

SMS: Which times?

TL: Today's *Los Angeles Times*...what day is it?

SMS: I think it's the 7th of October, 2006

TL: In today's LA Times, Christopher Knight, chief art critic of the newspaper, has a long review of the Orange County Museum's California Biennial, a survey of recent art out here, and he makes the case that there does seem to be a newly politicized art production going on. I forget how exactly he puts it, but what he wants to say is that it's not just an easy sort of sloganeering art like last time around, which was the early 90s, but now a more complex consideration which is a fallout of the war, not quite directed at the war but more about other residual issues, abuses of power, and things like that. But reading his descriptions -- and I haven't seen the show, it just opened and Orange County is a long way from here [laughter] -- the work is all pretty much framed within market constraints. You know, compact video installations, various series of photographic works. It doesn't sound as though it's using this new political thinking to create new forms or to challenge perceptions. I mean, it's Orange County of all places. I think we're in a very odd political moment where art is very conservative and contentedly so, and the political consciousness and protest art form is a box set that you get as one alternative in an array of possibilities. You can get your political, smart, conscience solving area, and your aesthetically pleasing area, and your erotically titillating area, and it's all good, and culture is rich, and we're a complicated people but we're not going through a moment when culture is upsetting anything or demanding that it upset anything, and I don't know actually what to make of it because I'm getting older and I don't necessarily want to see things get upset, you know. [laughter].

SMS: What does that mean?

TL: You know, ten years from now I'm thinking of retiring...

SMS: It's the reality of things...

TL: Yeah, it's the reality...

SMS: Ok, ok...

TL: When you're in your early 20's you can see revolution coming, and fuck it, it doesn't matter! Let's smash everything, begin anew. In your 50s that doesn't seem so appealing.

SMS: It's amazing because you're touching on these issues that I've wanted to ask you about, like the realities of life versus the realities of making art. For example, in art school no one is ever really taught how to make a living, a living when you're 30, 35, 40 or 50. So a long question made short, does art have a boundary that it meets: health insurance, steady income, retirement?

TL: I don't know that art does, but artists do. I was just talking last week to someone who wants to be our new alumni director. She's been talking to a variety of alumni, some successful and some not as much, and she said that she had encountered quite a bit of bitterness from some, who showed resentment at their peers

who they thought had sold out and made millions, while they were stuck making cabinets or teaching. We talked about this at some length because it goes right to the heart of what you think your life will be if you're driven by this idea of being an artist. You have to understand pretty early on that you're going to make some compromises in one place or the other. Not exactly that you're going to compromise your art, but that you're going to allow some limits to what you're going to do if you feel you want to have a reasonable way of living with some sort of continuity to it.

You can recklessly say, "Screw that, I'm going to make the art I want to make," and just make it. The people who have the balls to do that are either the ones that make a lot of money at their art, or they make nothing. It's an absolute gamble that for some pays off tremendously. Even those ones do not necessarily have a happy life because it's a very stressful life, being on the edge of your creativity at all times and having to please collectors, curators and critics, but it has its own soul, and you have your own focus and you just plunge ahead. But if you're out of sync with the times, or you're not as good as you think you are, and you don't connect to a support structure you just...well, it's a life of despair and disaster. So it's a very small percentage of artists out of art school that are willing to take that risk. Most of us try to figure out how to survive, and you begin by doing part-time things and at some point you realize that a steady paycheck is a really great idea. Interestingly enough people can find their steady paycheck in the market, and that's where another kind of compromise comes, when you realize that you've made something, an object or gesture that has wider appeal, and you start to make it again, and again, and again. On one hand that can be kind of nice, you get your studio and your assistants and you're making these things every day, but existentially it's maybe a bit fucked up.

I actually like the teaching option. The compromise there is that you're not in your studio every day, but while you're making your money you are talking about art and you're talking to younger artists and encouraging new thinking. You're staying alive on some level, emotionally and creatively, and when you're in your studio you can do whatever you like and you can follow whatever eccentric idea you have because you're not depending on the outcome being your paycheck. You are hoping to get people's attention, but it doesn't figure in quite such a dramatic way.

SMS: Do you think, well, there's been a lot of talk recently of the MFA being the new MBA. What does this mean, do you believe that?

TL: I don't know what that means. I think it's just a journalistic kind of cynical catchphrase.

SMS: Cynical?

TL: Yes, cynical. I mean, it's true that the art market has, in the last 10 years, been an optimistic growth market and one fueled by young art, and so it's true that more recent MFAs than ever before can leave school and start selling art, and do quite well for a period of time. I think that's what it's about; there are all these young artists jetting around the world, paying off their loans, living pretty well, and so it looks like a successful strategy. The problem with it is that it's based on the idea that the art market is forever upward, and we know that can't be. I think, and I like, that at CalArts we take the market with a pinch of salt, and that we discuss the fact that there are alternatives and other ways of being an artist, and other ways to think about art, because time will come when there won't be such a hot market. The 60s saw a booming market and then a crash, and the 70s was a period of stagflation, oil crisis, and no market, really no market. To the point where it was politically ok for congress to support art. The NEA gave out individual artist grants and the New York State Council gave grants and even New York City gave out individual artist grants. It was welfare to artists because the economy was so bad.

So, you know, there's nothing to say that we won't return to that. Walking around Chelsea it looks like a speculative bubble to me. I don't see how that amount of fancy real estate can be sustained.

SMS: Do you think that the difference between the 80s and now, that the 80s were predicated on real property, or hard industrial market, like oil, where as now we have a market that is dictated more by an intellectual property structure where a CalArts grad, any college grad, or heck, any high-school kid can get an idea, go online, and they're the creator of the next *Simpsons*. Now one can invest in something that doesn't have a physical limit.

TL: Sure, it can be something that may be so significantly different that it has changed the situation, and so the market and creative ideas can be more limitless than I'm thinking.

SMS: Hmmm, there's...

TL: But not probably...

SMS: [laughter] Not that?

TL: Well, there's a market for creative ideas and an art market, but again, to go back to the Orange County Museum show that I haven't seen so it's good to comment on. If everybody is making work that is fairly constrained, physically and conceptually, then nobody is actually developing the creative property side of things. Kids who make reliable goods for a flourishing market can do well, but the kids who are going to make a ton of money are going to be thinking very differently. And probably not taking part in the conventional art world as we know it.

SMS: I was thinking more from the perspective of the buyer, the Gates', the Nortons...

TL: Sure, if people make enough money sure. But even then if we enter into a domestic environment in which our entire entertainment environment is increasingly digital, if the i-Pod model is capturing movies and TV shows and we're looking at them wherever we want, then visual artists are going to have to figure out how to insert themselves into this environment, or how to maintain a viable alternative. Like I said, I've been painting a long time, and I very much like the idea of the museum environment where you go and contemplate something. I continue to hold that there's a value to that. I think that the gallery/museum can offer a useful a place of refuge.

Another thing I've become interested in over the last 10 years is gardening.

SMS: Hmmm...

TL: The great thing about a garden is that it's also a place of refuge; it's a place where you go and do some digging when things are getting frustrating. It's pleasant and real and satisfying, and some months later you get a reward: a tomato or a blossom. In the meantime you've created this environment in your backyard that is peaceful and pleasant to be in. I think there's a way in which art, or some aspect of art, has a way of doing something similar to that. I think it's a genuine value, different from the cutting edge where visual representation intersects with politics. As I said, I'm getting older.

SMS: Interesting. That's something I've been thinking about. Ironically for me, by going to law school, it created a space like a garden, where I could meet a client and a month later you can resolve their problem:

there's no critic, no one else between you. Sure, at times it depends on juries or judges, but there's another type of reward, to a large extent separated from art, from the art world, and from the art market.

Let's go back to CalArts. One thing I noticed this past spring at Harvard Law School was how much power it has in terms of how law is taught in the U.S. and internationally.

TL: Didn't they change their first year structure, their foundation year?

SMS: Yes, completely. One thing that I heard was that there was a movement in the near past to change law school from a three-year program to a two-year program. I believe this was a fairly successful drive, gathering votes from all U.S. law schools except Harvard. Harvard vetoed this idea and so it didn't pass. When I hear these stories I relate them to CalArts, because no matter where I've taught I meet people who attended CalArts and are either teaching there or have taught there. It's like law schools, most law professors come from Harvard. What is it about CalArts that makes it so successful and influential?

TL: What makes it so unique is its point of origin. By luck or happenstance it came into being in the late 60s. An extraordinary thing happened at the beginning; the people who were hired to create it, Robert Corrigan and Herb Blau, the president and provost, were appointed by a board of Disney and Nixon hangers-on, among the most conservative, right wing fixer in Southern California at the time. They were thinking of the school as an entertainment complex, a destination like Disneyland, and a feeder school for the industry, and for some reason they hired these two guys who came out of progressive, experimental theater, and gave them carte blanche. I imagine they did the research, came up with these two as 'the best in the business', and decided, as good, hard-headed businessmen, to empower them to make the best art school. And so the two of them set to work. They in turn persuaded all these amazing characters to come in and create the schools, not just the art school, but all of them -- Mel Powell in music, Sandy McKendrick in film -- and an amazing group of people who were all dedicated to a non-mainstream way of thinking. They in turn hired faculty who were also thinking differently, and in the art school's case there was Allan Kaprow, Michael Asher, John Baldessari, Doug Huebler, a group of conceptual artists who were rethinking art and thus how you taught art. It would make no sense to them to set up a school that went about its business in the traditional way.

These decisions and hires set in motion the paradigm, and now everyone that comes in to teach here is brought in with that in mind: the 70's revolt of Womanhouse, where it was not just about rethinking art but about rethinking the way women should interact with the idea of art. During the 80s it was about making it more political in a theorized way. And in the 90s things became more concrete, more concerned with making art again, and also with connecting directly to the various communities of the city through an agency like CAP. In this evolving way everyone continues to be very conscious about working with an animating legacy that is different from the way that other art schools were set up.

You know, every year, in fact next week, I go to the annual conference of NASAD (National Association of Schools of Art and Design), and that's where I get to meet all of my fellow deans, and you know, for the most part they are a conservative bunch. Most of them stopped being artists or even teachers when they moved on to administration on a full-time basis. But we all believe in the importance of art, and of teaching young artists how to make art. Most of them, however, believe on some fundamental level, that art should be a traditional kind of thing taught from a foundation level of drawing and painting developed at later stages within the older categories of painting and sculpture, with new media as another medium, rather than trying to combine them. And I find consistently at these meetings that they say: "Oh Tom, you and CalArts, you speak for that other thing, that interdisciplinary thing. We like to learn from you but we won't change to

there's no critic, no one else between you. Sure, at times it depends on juries or judges, but there's another type of reward, to a large extent separated from art, from the art world, and from the art market.

Let's go back to CalArts. One thing I noticed this past spring at Harvard Law School was how much power it has in terms of how law is taught in the U.S. and internationally.

TL: Didn't they change their first year structure, their foundation year?

SMS: Yes, completely. One thing that I heard was that there was a movement in the near past to change law school from a three-year program to a two-year program. I believe this was a fairly successful drive, gathering votes from all U.S. law schools except Harvard. Harvard vetoed this idea and so it didn't pass. When I hear these stories I relate them to CalArts, because no matter where I've taught I meet people who attended CalArts and are either teaching there or have taught there. It's like law schools, most law professors come from Harvard. What is it about CalArts that makes it so successful and influential?

TL: What makes it so unique is its point of origin. By luck or happenstance it came into being in the late 60s. An extraordinary thing happened at the beginning; the people who were hired to create it, Robert Corrigan and Herb Blau, the president and provost, were appointed by a board of Disney and Nixon hangers-on, among the most conservative, right wing fixer in Southern California at the time. They were thinking of the school as an entertainment complex, a destination like Disneyland, and a feeder school for the industry, and for some reason they hired these two guys who came out of progressive, experimental theater, and gave them carte blanche. I imagine they did the research, came up with these two as 'the best in the business', and decided, as good, hard-headed businessmen, to empower them to make the best art school. And so the two of them set to work. They in turn persuaded all these amazing characters to come in and create the schools, not just the art school, but all of them -- Mel Powell in music, Sandy McKendrick in film -- and an amazing group of people who were all dedicated to a non-mainstream way of thinking. They in turn hired faculty who were also thinking differently, and in the art school's case there was Allan Kaprow, Michael Asher, John Baldessari, Doug Huebler, a group of conceptual artists who were rethinking art and thus how you taught art. It would make no sense to them to set up a school that went about its business in the traditional way.

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become you, but we'll steal the bits that work for us...new media, yeah, we'll try that, but let's not integrate it in a way that has painters also making video, no we're not going to do that. We'll allow video, or we'll allow digital work, but we'll keep them in boxes."

So CalArts has this position that is kind of crucial, that is recognized as a place where you can think differently. Like I said, I think we're in a much more conservative cultural moment than we were in the 60s and the 70s, or even in the 80s, and so the national debate in art schools is back to basics, that all art students should spend at least one year learning serious drawing, how to draw, but not asking how to draw what? What's that? What do you need? And that question can't be answered because everyone knows what it means to draw...[endless laughter]

SMS: I think we should probably stop there...[laughter]...

Bio:

Thomas Lawson has shown paintings at MetroPictures, New York, Anthony Reynolds, London, and the Richard Kuhlenschmidt and Rosamund Felsen galleries in LA as well as in many public institutions around the world. Surveys of this work have been mounted by the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art at La Jolla, the CCA in Glasgow, and the Battersea Arts Centre in London. He has created temporary public works in New York, New Haven, Glasgow, Newcastle, and Madrid. His essays have appeared in such journals as Artforum, Art in America, Flash Art, frieze, and October, as well as numerous exhibition catalogues. From 1979 until 1992 he and Susan Morgan published and edited REAL LIFE Magazine. He has organized and selected many exhibitions, for such venues as Artists Space, PS1, The Clocktower, and White Columns (all New York), National Touring Exhibitions/Hayward Gallery, London, and the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. His work has been collected by the Brooklyn Museum, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Arts Council of England, Scottish Arts Council, Emory University, University of Colorado at Boulder among others. He has received 3 Artist Fellowships from the NEA, project support from Art Matters, Inc, and Visual Arts Projects, and a residency fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ucross Foundation. He has taught at SVA and RISD, and now teaches at CalArts, where he has been dean of the Art School since 1991. In 1999/2000 he worked with the architectural partnership EMBT/RMJM to identify the role of the visual arts in the design of a new parliament building for Scotland. Since 2002 he has been co-editor of Afterall journal, and recently saw a book of selected writings, *Mining for Gold*, published by JRP/Ringier, Zurich.

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