

THE *Beat*
AND THE *Buzz*:

INSIDE THE

L.A. Art

World

by Richard Hertz

FEBRUARY 12,
2009

For Tom

THE *Beat*
AND THE *Buzz*:

INSIDE THE
L.A. Art
World

by *Richard Hertz*

With gratitude
and best
wishes,

MINNEOLA
PRESS



Richard

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Thomas Lawson

I was born and raised in Glasgow on the west coast of Scotland. When I was growing up in the fifties and sixties, it was a tired, depleted industrial city, a place mired in poverty and violence, and I soon knew I wanted away. In its heyday there had been money, and there was a good museum and great library. It was in the library that I first encountered the Surrealist magazines—Blind Man, *Listes ratures*, *La Révolution surréaliste* and realized there was something more complex to visual art than the Impressionist paintings in the museum. I left Glasgow to go to college and went as far away as I could imagine, to the old university city of St. Andrews on the other side of the country. All of eighty miles away, although I must add that it took a very long day to travel that distance then, as there were no motorways or direct rail connections. I was studying English literature but persuaded the administration to let a small group of art students set up their studios in an old empty schoolhouse that the university had recently bought. After first going east to St. Andrews, I began a lifelong movement westwards, enrolling at Edinburgh University to study art history with the idea of learning something about the meaning of art.

During my two years at Edinburgh I became interested in the work of Jasper Johns. One of my tutors, Ivor Davies, was an artist active on the fringes of a British movement that used destructive techniques like fire, acid-throwing, and axe-wielding to make art. Davies suggested I seek an interview with Johns as my thesis project. I traveled to New York in the summer of 1974, met and interviewed Johns, spent some time in his studio on Houston Street, and became convinced I had to move to the city as soon as I could. I arrived back at JFK the following August, with a suitcase and a portfolio of drawings, and in September enrolled in the doctoral program in art history at the City University of New York.

The program had an emphasis on modern and contemporary art and criticism, and its student body included a range of older professionals as well as people in their twenties. During the time I attended classes the faculty included Rosalind Krauss, Linda Nochlin, Robert Pincus-Witten, and John Rewald. Milton Brown was the chair of the department and my first contact with the

place. He must have been in his early sixties, squat, a little beefy, with yellowed eyeballs and a thick cigar. I thought he had a gangster-type of accent but it was really just an old-style New York working-class accent. He had grown up on the Lower East Side and his area of specialty was 1930s political realist work from New York. Milton was a wonderful, supportive, smart person, who really knew how to run a program. He had people on the faculty like Rosalind as well as old-time art historians like William Gerdtz, and that created an interesting tension. Rosalind was my advisor. What can I say? I didn't finish. For about five years I was in the program. I passed all the tests, finished everything but the dissertation. The years that I worked with Rosalind, October was starting and she was rethinking her practice. She was in the midst of writing "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" and articulating her theories about photography, and she worked out many of these ideas in front of us. Some of the other students in the class were Douglas Crimp, Francis Naumann, Craig Owens, Sandra Phillips, and Susan Fillin Yeah, it was an amazing group of people and a wonderful introduction to high-level art discourse. It was what I wanted and I thrived on it.

I had been writing for years—writing's a central part of a Scottish education—but in New York quickly discovered that I had a useful facility with the written word. Doug helped get me started as a writer by introducing me to Betsy Baker at Art in America. Craig had a job as an editor for an arts-and-architecture newsletter and he encouraged me to write hard-hitting, negative reviews of group shows at museums, which were fun to do. In retrospect I realize that I was a little foolhardy, attacking a lot of curators at the Whitney and the Guggenheim. But Craig was very mischievous. He knew the reviews would cause waves.

My closest friend was Craig Bailey, who now lives up in Inverness, California, and doesn't really have anything to do with the art world. He's a smart guy who liked the idea of art but not the financial reality of it. His favored areas of research were American artists who had failed to reach beyond a certain competent variation on European styles.

When I first arrived in the city I had an apartment in the East Village, but Bailey convinced me I should get a loft space so I could paint. He helped me find a shared floor in what was not

quite yet Tribeca. A jewelry maker from Philadelphia had the lease on the floor, and I helped build walls and do the plumbing and some of the wiring to make it habitable. There I was, within about eight months of having moved to New York, living the Bohemian life in a raw loft, attending classes, painting at night, and then going out to an artists' bar called Barnabus Rex, a tiny little place with a great jukebox and a pool table, which for a brief moment was the coolest bar downtown. The reigning, supreme figure at Barnabus Rex was Richard Serra. At the time he must have been about forty and everybody else was in their mid-twenties and had just arrived in New York from art school somewhere. This was where I first met Susan Morgan, and where we met Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Mike Smith, and David Salle, who, hard to believe, hung out there for a little bit. It was quite near the Whitney program, so the program people came over from the studios on West Broadway.

For a couple of years Barnabus Rex was the place where people gathered and where many of us met for the first time. This continued until the Mudd Club and the Odeon opened, two early signs that after all New York was going to be ruled by money. In the mid- to late-seventies, New York was great. The city was bankrupt, so much of lower Manhattan had been abandoned. Many of the loft buildings in SoHo and Tribeca that had been used by small businesses or manufacturers were empty. The city was so dysfunctional that at one point no one at CUNY was being paid. So many downtown businesses had left or were in the process of leaving that the only tenants the landlords could find were artists. Most of the lofts were illegal because no one wanted to go through the procedure to make them legal. Since nobody cared, there was no reason to do it. There was this nice little economy associated with refurbishing spaces that made it possible to find work. I learned plumbing and did construction on friends' lofts. Someone got a lease and I would join a team and help them empty it out and make it minimally habitable.

Today it's hard to imagine, but then the art world was in a big slump. The gallery scene at that point in New York was very small and not particularly sympathetic or interested in younger artists. Paula Cooper was doing great shows, people like Jonathan Borofsky, Jennifer Bartlett, and Michael Hurson, but her interests ended with her own generation. Castelli was doing

Castelli. Holly Solomon was someone who seemed like she might potentially be interested, but she had a pop sensibility that tended to favor a flashy kind of work, like Kim McConnell or Judy Pfaff. Artists Space was our refuge. Helene Winer was the director and an amazing person, very tough but very funny. It was fun to visit her at the gallery, to hear her talking about everything and everyone, to get her opinion about who was worthy of respect and who wasn't. If you showed up on a Friday afternoon other people would be there; it wasn't exactly a salon, but kind of a salon. After Susan Morgan, Paul McMahon had the quickest wit. Jack Goldstein, Matt Mullican, and Cindy Sherman were all regulars. David Salle and Barbara Bloom sometimes were there. Jenny Bolande came later.

Artforum and *Art in America* were still very much thinking about the postminimalist generation and didn't really have a mechanism for talking about newer art. *Flash Art* was beginning to expand its presence, and Giancarlo Politi and Helena Kontova would fly in from Milan and spend a few weeks selling ads and seeking young writers. But there was a lot of dissatisfaction on our part, wondering how to show our work and how to get it discussed. In the middle of the night, after some beers, people would say, "What we should do is have our own magazine." In the colder light of day, Susan and I thought we could make it happen and began planning and trying to find some seed money. We both had an interest in the language games of surrealism. We knew about the various Surrealist magazines so had a template that we could use. Artists Space channeled some money. Robert Longo had a patronage system in his native Buffalo, and he found us a designer and a printer who were willing to work for reduced wages. Robert applied for some funding but it turned out his organization wasn't properly set up for that. For the first round of grants I was actually able to get some assistance through CUNY; then we shifted to Artists Space.

Back then people needed information. There was no Internet. As a result, if you heard about new little magazines, you sent them a check. We very quickly developed a substantial subscription list. In March 1979 the first issue of *Real Life Magazine* came out with a work by Sherrie Levine on the cover. To launch it, we threw a party in another downtown bar. Curators from the Modern and art dealers came because it was the promise of new

information. Our idea was that we would publish artists writing about artists and about other aspects of visual culture that were important to them. We had Allan McCollum write the first long consideration of Matt Mullican's work. We had Barbara Kruger on TV game shows, Richard Prince on the dark side of pulp fiction. We began with our own peer group, but always intended to bring in older artists we felt were important but overlooked. In early issues Susan interviewed Bob Moskowitz and Michael Hurson. We never wanted to repeat ourselves and after a few years moved on to a younger cohort—Mark Dion, Group Material—and later broadened out to more politically driven artists like David Hammons and Adrian Piper. We were also looking much further afield than New York City and gave space to Los Angeles, Sydney, Cologne. We always kept it amateurish, but a moment came in 1982–83 when we realized that we could go to a new level and become professional. Neither Susan nor I wanted to do that. We liked the fact that we did what we did erratically, when we wanted to, with the people we wanted to do it with. To become more professional we would have had to set up an editorial board and hire staff, rent an office.

We moved to Los Angeles in early 1991 and tried to keep the magazine going. We did put out a couple of issues, but it was difficult for us to find content. We came to realize that *Real Life* was a New York magazine because so much of the content relied on chance encounters on the street. I think of it as an eighties magazine, although it extended a little back into the seventies and forward into the nineties. We had an international outlook, with contributions from Europe and Australia, as well as the West Coast, but its life was centered on New York in the eighties. Recently there's been revived interest in *Real Life Magazine*. There's an anthology out, published by Primary Information, and the curator Kate Fowle has organized a couple of shows based on our archive as part of the Backroom project, most recently seen at Artists Space. I didn't even know we had an archive, but when Kate asked I went down to the basement, looked around, and found boxes of stuff. There it was, an archive!

In the seventies I was still working out what I wanted to do with my paintings. I did a little room project at Artists Space and showed some paintings in a group show there. I was included in a group show at the Drawing Center and in another at Brooke

Alexander that included a group of artists who became associated with Metro Pictures. When Helene partnered with Janelle Reiring to open Metro Pictures, more or less at the same time as Mary Boone and Annina Nosei opened their spaces, it was an important moment because it announced that there was a new game, a whole new generation of artists. It also coincided with an uptake of interest in buying art.

Openings were always huge events. My first show was a series of black paintings with small red figures of murder scenes and murder victims. The second show was a series of monochrome squares featuring the faces of abused children. My interest at that time was in processing debased images derived from various forms of mass media and cross-pollinating them with ideas and quotations from my understanding of the history of painting. My much-anthologized essay, "Last Exit: Painting," comes from this time. It was written for the newly animated *Artforum*, which Ingrid Sischy was reinventing. Those years were very exciting. A new art world was opening up at the same time that the European connection was beginning to happen.

In 1980 Susan and I came out to Los Angeles for the first time. We have a friend who at the time lived in Canoga Park in a house with a swimming pool. We stayed for a couple of weeks and had a blast. Recently, while digging through that archive, I found the piece of paper we had brought along with numerous phone numbers on it. Brooke Alexander had given me some numbers. He told me to contact his brother Peter and we visited his amazing studio in Topanga. I spoke with John Baldessari on the phone but we didn't meet at that time; he was just leaving for Europe. We already knew Allan McCollum from New York, and he introduced us to Al Ruppertsberg; we all went out to dinner at Lucy's El Adobe. L.A. seemed like a social, friendly kind of place. The next time I came out, I gave a talk in John's class at CalArts and another that Richard Hertz arranged at Art Center.

During the eighties I had a steady teaching job at the School of Visual Arts in New York. I taught third-year students what was theoretically called a drawing class. The first time I did it I had no idea what I was supposed to do with the students, but as luck would have it Gregg Bordowitz, Mark Dion, and Andrea Fraser were in that class and it worked out. Later years were not always

as rewarding, and in time I became part of the fourth-year team. This was a more open-ended job and much more interesting. Students were more advanced and were working in their little studio cubicles. On certain days the teachers toured the building. There were no classes, only individual meetings. At the beginning and end of each semester, all of the faculty went round together and analyzed the work. During the decade I did a couple of semester-long gigs at Rhode Island School of Design and at CalArts. I came out to CalArts twice. The first time I was supposed to be teaching painting in CalArts fashion, which means a seminar and critique, not hands-on technique. CalArts has a long tradition of bringing visiting artists in to teach full-time for a semester or year. The idea is that they bring different information and perspectives but are not marginalized or glamorized as outsiders during their stay. In a way, their "other" information is normalized. The second time I taught was in the wake of the "Forest of Signs" show at MOCA, in which I had an installation. I remember at the opening Catherine Lord, who was dean, had said, "You should come out again. You could teach installation." So I did.

It was during that second visit to CalArts that they were searching for a new dean. I didn't know anything about it. I had no idea. I was merely a visitor enjoying the mild winter weather. Halfway through the semester, a group of faculty asked me if I would be interested in putting my name in. Susan and I talked about it, thought about it, and decided that we had nothing to lose. We were going back to Brooklyn, so I figured I would go through a few discussions and interviews and then return as planned to the East Coast. Instead, I got the job and found myself living in Los Angeles. Because of the friendships we had, it was difficult to leave New York. But in other ways it was easy—there's nothing quite like a steady paycheck and health insurance.

By the end of the eighties I had become disillusioned with the art market. At that moment I was doing a lot of public art and was out of the gallery system. Metro Pictures and I had drifted apart. They are not exactly an aggressive dealership and I am not exactly an aggressive self-promoter. There was a gap, a need that wasn't fulfilled for either them or me. That caused some bad feelings because I thought it was their job to promote their artists. Robert and Cindy never minded that Metro didn't always do such

a great job. They were okay with it, but as we know, it sure fueled Jack Goldstein's anger.

I began making temporary murals for public sites because I wanted to address a larger audience than the self-selecting group that goes to galleries. It seemed a good alternative to get work done, and as I was then interested in the rhetoric of power in public statuary, it was a good way to close the circle of my thinking. It returned my rethinking of these images to the public square. I soon realized that making public art could become very difficult because you have to talk with so many bureaucrats and so many local committees who really don't want art, who have different agendas and are coming to meetings to sink the project. My largest project was for the city of New York, a temporary wraparound billboard to mask construction while they renovated the Municipal Building on the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge. It was a good project but also at times discouraging. One of the site managers who I had to report to always described it as "your graphic" and was constantly fretting about the ways my colors would distract drivers on the bridge. A minor moment of triumph came when we had to take the project to the city's Landmarks Commission, something that terrorized the bureaucrats. Turns out that Robert Ryman was on the committee. We had a long engaged discussion about color, and they voted to approve. I had my work team and rented a separate studio. Once the approvals and budgets were in place we went into production, building structures and painting them, often out in the rain. Every week I was back in front of yet another city committee trying to explain myself. Yet out on the scaffolding I would become involved in fantastic conversations with people walking by.

Part of the appeal of coming out to CalArts on a more permanent basis was the thought of getting off that seesaw. I would be paid for sitting around with interesting, lively students, for talking and thinking about art. Since I didn't have any experience in the area of administration, I was pretty naïve about what that might mean in terms of time and attention. If I had known more about it, I might not have taken the job. Certainly some people in New York who thought they did know what it meant to be an administrator were incredulous that I would do such a thing. But the truth is, I enjoy it. Working to sustain and strengthen one of the most innovative art schools in the country gives my life a dimension

way beyond the close focus of the studio. Everyone involved, the students, the faculty, and the staff, are all way more into it than the guys I had been working with at City Hall. In a way I think of the job as a durational public art piece, a drama in real time. It certainly felt that way in spring 1994, when after the Northridge earthquake, we had to temporarily move the entire school to a decommissioned Lockheed research facility in an unmarked canyon a few miles north of campus.

One of the things I like about the way we do things at CalArts is that while we're not by any means blind to the market, it's not our primary concern. We are constantly producing new artists, but because we encourage them to think in different kinds of ways, I believe more of them will have a satisfying experience as artists. Our students are not necessarily thinking that the only solution is to find representation and big sales. They can do that or they can do something else. At a certain point in the nineties I remember thinking that a handful of UCLA graduates seemed very successful, but in such a narrow band of success that there was no way it could be sustained. In the long run, most students can't expect that kind of success. In terms of the art market, the reality of art careers is that usually they last five to ten years. If you haven't thought through the rest of your life, or what to do with your life if you don't even get into the market, you're in trouble. We offer a broad enough base so that at least those other options can be pointed out.

The terrific thing about school is that it provides a formal structure in which to talk about art. Los Angeles has amazing resources, an astonishing number of good and different art schools. One consequence of all of these schools is that at the street level, in studios, at openings, when artists get together, art often gets talked about in a serious, productive kind of way. Earlier I played up the romantic myth of New York, the city that never sleeps, where people stay up all night in bars drinking and smoking and discussing philosophy. But it wasn't exactly like that. If you are up all night you probably can't remember much the next day because you were drinking. Even if you weren't, you were flirting or arguing or looking for a job or for a loft to rent. You probably weren't really talking that much about art.

In 1991, when I arrived in Los Angeles, there was not much going on in terms of the galleries. It was a pretty small scene and the most interesting places were very young, galleries like Blum and Poe, ACME, Mark Foxx. When you fly back to New York, you realize that comparatively speaking, L.A. is still a pretty small scene. But in terms of actual daily experience, it's way bigger, more professionalized, more savvy than before. And some of those young galleries have grown up in a big way.

Just before our move to Los Angeles I had a pretty large survey show at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow. It was my first return there in about twenty years (I had been back to Scotland often, but never to Glasgow). The place had been cleaned up, and in the process had shrunk and developed a burgeoning art scene. I met Douglas Gordon and Christine Borland then, Richard Wright a little later. At the time I was back and forth to Europe quite a bit, finishing off a variety of public projects. I wasn't painting so much. I was trying to understand a new city, my new job. I did finish one series, large photo-based paintings of houses on fire, but then felt I couldn't show them because I didn't want them to be interpreted as post-riot commentary. There was that earthquake, which as I said, became a project in itself. When reconstruction of the school was finished, I got into a period in which I did some weird, very psychological paintings. I showed them in London and could tell that most of the people who saw them there, as well as the few who saw them in my studio in Los Angeles, were thinking, "What's he doing? What's that about?" That phase came to an end, and for the past six or seven years I've been busy working on two or three series that come indirectly from a long-term research project I've been pursuing about radical politics in Scotland, and elsewhere, in the period of the French Revolution. These are not directly related to political events or to current events, but have some resonance with what's been going on in the world today.

The first manifestation of this new direction was a large wall-painting of a map of the world, accompanied by a description of the worldwide travel of a revolutionary figure from the 1790s. The show opened in a small space in Edinburgh the first week of September 2001. I've continued painting maps, investigating perception and distortion, although I like to think that there's some relationship to politics in them. I painted a series of a

hundred portraits of individuals connected with the worldwide republican-revolutionary movement of the late eighteenth century, which to me has some relevance to current issues like terror networks and so on. More recently I came to a point where I thought I had to address what is happening in the Middle East more directly. I began working on a series of decapitations that are sometimes a little gruesome, although I try to paint them in a way that is not so gruesome. I've also been riffing on details of decapitations in baroque painting. It's such symbolic murder. The subject allows me a way to work with different paintings styles and methods.

The art market is a topic that seems to make many people oddly confused. Some like to think that art is of such transcendent value to the culture at large that the mere mention of a price tag introduces a vulgarity of some kind. Others get positively giddy at the sight of rising prices and see them as a talisman against difficult thinking. But between these two extremes, the fact is that every artist hopes to see a decent return on the work done and fears the dread emptiness of lack of interest. The current art market boom has been so expansive that it seems to have changed perspectives. Money makes things possible like making a living as an artist, paying tuition at private art schools, selling ads to support art criticism. I've lived through a boom and a bust, so I tend to be somewhat wary of what's going on now, but I can't deny the benefits it brings to many young artists in their first years out of school, including the real chance of sales and a broader range of interesting jobs in creative fields. These days I don't see many people learning basic plumbing to get by.

I read the art journals but I find my interest swings wildly. Some months there will be an interesting article somewhere, and other months they're all bewilderingly boring. The magazine I read the most thoroughly is the *New Yorker*, for its mix of current politics and broader cultural issues. I try to read more generally, in particular fiction and history. For the last ten years, for my project, I've been reading a lot about the French Revolution.

Regarding criticism, L.A. does need to get itself better organized. It's a chicken-and-egg thing. What we've seen with the rise and fall of *Art Issues* and *Art and Text* is how difficult it is to pull it off. Even though there's a much bigger gallery scene here, there's

still not enough of a consensus that publications are something that people should be supporting. A lot of the galleries don't want to advertise in a small local publication. If they are going to advertise, they want to put an ad in *Artforum*. You can't blame them for that, because they're getting more visibility for their money, but they're not helping to develop the kind of density of local critical writing that would probably give them more bang for their buck in the long term. Having said that, there does seem to be a renewal of interest in some sort of magazine culture. *X-Tra* is doing well, with a redesign and big plans. There are many art blogs and bloglike publications, like *Artillery* and *Art Ltd*. Of course there is *Afterall*, with which I'm involved. This was originally a London-based journal that came out twice a year. A few years ago Mark Lewis, one of the editors, was spending a semester at CalArts. Before he left he proposed that we become co-publishers with Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, with me joining Mark and Chas Esche as a third editor. The international aspect of this project is exciting but also very complicated and challenging in terms of business and content. We're often squabbling over something. The journal suffers from coming out only twice a year. It's just not as visible as it should be. We're working on that problem, developing distribution deals. We're also starting a Web site with local writing, writing that won't happen in the journal. I'm hoping the Web site will encourage more writers to come forward and say, "Yes, I'd like to do some reviewing." The next couple of years will be a crucial test to see if this model for an art journal can work.

Recently I went to the redesigned MOMA and had a moment of insight. When I first moved to New York in 1973 I was completely in love with the idea of Dada and Duchamp. I even traveled down to Philadelphia to see the Duchamps in the Arensberg Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The whole idea of reimagining what art might be struck a chord and seemed important. Although I continued to paint, I kept thinking about the issues that problematized painting. The theorizing in my early writing, about whether painting was dead or not, all came out of that confrontation with Dada and Duchamp. To me, it seemed a vital discussion that animated a lot of the work I did. When I went back to the Modern after the reopening, they had rethought the hang. Back in the seventies they didn't put Dada

forward very much. It was Picasso, Picasso, Matisse; Picasso, Picasso, Matisse. Then, in a small room under a staircase, was the other stuff. Now it's almost the reverse and there are rooms and rooms of Surrealist objects—broken legs and arms and helmets, and lots of little boxes. I found it irritating, sophomoric, and I didn't want to have any more to do with it. I spent the entire visit looking at Picasso. The Duchamp method has become the mainstream and is no longer an irritant, it's become the conventional way of thinking. Perpetually wanting to be on the other side, I'm not into it any more. At this point, the individual, moment-by-moment decision-making process that painters follow seems a lot more interesting and vital and difficult to pull off.