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Thomas Lawson

Metro Pictures

Thomas Lawson is the theorist of the “Real Life” movement, which means to analyze the “ideological myths” that constitute the “fiction” of “real life.” More than that, it means to sabotage them; its art is a self-consciously “perverse provocation” which intends to expose the style of contemporary “realistic” representation as “the near-transparent tool of a repressive ideology.” (Unless rhetorical, quoted material is from “Too Good to be True,” by Thomas Lawson, *Real Life* magazine, Autumn 1981.) This style is the media-derived instrument of social belief. Thus those sentenced to “real life” are doomed to the peculiar emptiness that results from repression; “real life” stories are artificial social productions starring people repressed into hollowness, or abstracted—subtly alienated—from themselves by their expectation of a media destiny, their acceptance of a media-determined sense of the meaning and value of their lives.

The Real Lifers want to exploit the hollowing or abstracting effect of the media, the sign of its bad faith. They want to turn the effect back on itself, making it an instrument of social critique. Thus the Real Life movement is in bad faith with the system of representation that it uses itself—that we are all mired in. We can work our way out of the trap of “real life” by making its conventions into instruments of disbelief rather than belief in the social system they reinforce and partially reify. The stories the system tells to put us comfortably asleep are retold by the Real Lifers in such a way as to awaken us to the uncomfortable reality and antilife character of the system. The Real Lifers turn the fairy tale into the nightmare—show us that it is a monstrous misadventure from which we badly need to escape. It is an unreality which has taken possession and command of the reality of our lives. Thus Real Life images are knowingly “deceitful and insincere,” “fake concoctions” derived from “recognizable imagery, imagery with identifiable social meanings, but reproduced from memory so as to throw these meanings into confusion.” This strategy deconstructs already sensational images by making them *artistically* sensational, giving them “a suggestion of fantasy, the whiff of allegory.” Not “coalescing” as they should, they become absurd. It is the strategy of early Pop art, with a new vehemence.

Does Lawson succeed in his deconstruction of media charisma, free us from its claustrophobia in the very act of “creatively” mediating it? Does his art carry out the intentions of his theory, or is his theory simply an apologia for a preconceived art? Or is it the other way around, the art simply a weak illustration, an afterthought, for a dogmatic social critique? These questions indicate the doubts I have, not about the entire Real Life enterprise, but about how well it artistically realizes its critical goals. My uncertainty about it corresponds to the inconsistency I find between its critical theory and its artistic practice. I attribute this discrepancy not only to the unevenness of the various artists, but also to the difficulty of treating critically a dominant mode of visual representation—the difficulty of stripping of its dominance a style of representation that is regarded as universal and commonplace. In this situation the Real Life artist may unconsciously compromise his criticality in favor of the socially dominant media image, leaving its glamor intact (e.g., Walter Robinson); or, as in Lawson’s case, so successfully may he strip the media image of its seductiveness that we wonder what all the critical fuss was about in the first place. Lawson makes the essential banality and expressive emptiness of the media image transparent; how could we ever have fallen for it, been seduced by it? With this recognition the whole of Real Life theory is unexpectedly thrown into doubt; media imagery does not show itself as so psychologically all-encompassing, so depressingly repressive. Its very commonplaceness releases us from its hold; the media image becomes a minor pleasure which in no way seriously obscures or durably affects our sense of the “true” reality of our lives.

And there are problems with Lawson’s art as well as with his theory—problems which amplify those of his theory, with its exaggerated, almost hysterical sense of the determining power of the media. Lawson’s artistic deconstruction of the media image is too obvious in its methods, and thus peculiarly inept—unequal to the image he means to bring down. He divides his recognizable or popular image into a material snapshot—something like a snap judgment as to what reality is—and a less material (if far from immaterial) “atmosphere,” an abstracted expressivity articulated by his near-monochromatic, mucuslike color. All of this is done with a quasi-tacky “realistic” touch, as if to firmly locate the results in a never-never, politically neutral land of familiarity. The division, I think, means to exemplify the traditional T. S. Eliot model of self-alienation, the idea of the dissociation of sensibility or separation of thinking and feeling. This model of alienation is obsolete and was too facile to begin with; it is only barely analytic, and hardly critical. If it is a working hypothesis about alienation, it works too easily, which means it doesn’t work. In the same way, Lawson’s pictures work too easily—and so don’t work; one might say there’s not enough critical, analytic work in them.

Because of this, the paintings show the in adequacy, although not the complete in accuracy, of Lawson’s theory of “Real Life” representation. I would argue, in fact, that media representation does not work by means of dissociation of sensibility, but rather by overassociation of thinking and feeling—the confusing of them together in such a way that the critical distance necessary for analysis of either becomes almost impossible. The media destroy perspective; they saturate us in an abundance of ideas and feelings with predetermined meanings. They make all reality sticky with foreordained meaning, so that reality overcoalesces through over association of meaning. Everything that passes through the media comes out candy-coated with import, acquires the status of an allegorical symbol. This is why nothing in the media has reality, nothing is more than a story, a “representation,” an “allegation.” I am not sure that the dissociation of the media image itself can restore perspective.

Lawson, following Walter Benjamin, sees art in the age of mechanical reproduction as a species of politics rather than a form of ritual—as a social politics that can redeem itself by analyzing its own techniques and the social beliefs they represent. But his art neutralizes itself as much as it neutralizes the media. Lawson thinks that the media make us subtly meaningless and unbelievable to ourselves; he does not understand that the media supply us with the safety net of symbols over which we can perform our lives, the safety net which makes our lives "meaningful" and "believable." The media, in fact, offer us a kind of fullness—which may be regarded skeptically, like every premature totalization of real life, but which is far from vacuous, far from "just another story" of "manipulation and dominance." Law-son's obsessive insistence that "we are trapped within stories that we already know"—abstract societal representations that give us "real life"—is only the partial truth. The other part of the truth is that without these stories there is no life. We establish ourselves in critical, ambivalent relationship to these stories to change them; but the idea of life without a storyline is an unreal idea of life. The trouble with the stories we are told about our lives by the media is not that they are repressive, but that they don't fill our lives enough. This is particularly true of American lives, with their openness, their sense of possibility beyond tradition. I don't think Lawson, a European, understands this—he wants to tell us that we are as completely formed by the media stories we tell about ourselves as the Europeans are by their traditions, and as a picture is by the story that necessarily frames it "if it is to be visible." But neither European traditions nor the American media stories that are presumably their substitute completely form real life, nor are they expected and assumed to do so. Particularly in America, there is always a residue of expectant amorphousness beyond them, an amorphousness out of which possibility seems to be spontaneously generated—and which Lawson misreads as somnambulistic casualness.

Thus Lawson frames his informally given American subjects in the European, Suprematist square—a square whose controlling formality becomes a check on their reality, a way of saying it is shaped by abstract forces they are hardly aware of. I accept the reality of these forces, but surely Lawson is imposing his own abstract storyline on these lives—his own implicit commitment to the ritual of pure abstraction, to as obsolete a sense of art as the dissociation of sensibility is of alienation. Is it perverse of me to think this? Not if one notices the cumulative power of Law-son's pictures, however much each one individually lets one down. Not if one notices the artistic effectiveness of his repetitiveness, and the way it undermines the political effectiveness of his works. His art is implicitly regressive artistically, dubiously progressive theoretically and critically, and paradoxically it returns us to the religious idea of art in its modern version, i.e., to art as a personal rather than social ritual, a ritual by which we gain our sense of selfhood but not of any togetherness of selves. This is what the ideology of abstract art has become, and Lawson offers us a revisionist abstraction for which he could make the same formalist claims that Philip Pearlstein and Alex Katz make for their "realism." He needs a new theoretical base if he is to make his art as critically effective as he thinks it is—a more dialectical understanding of the subtleties of media representation of real life—and an understanding of his own strong formalist tendencies, which are far from incidental and which make us suspect that he is sleepwalking through these portraits in a way he is trying hard not to do in his theory.

—*Donald Kuspit*

torch, although not exactly aloft. Meanwhile, the incomplete word "everlast" written across the waistband of his polka-dot shorts has more to do with a huckster's claim for the life span of the elastic than with the endurance of freedom.

These preliminaries absorbed, the plot thickens. While only one of the contenders wears the crown (literally), the loser is often saintly, boasting a halo—as, frequently, do skulls. To lose is to be holy is to be dead? Yet this is shadow boxing; that is, one's competition in Basquiat's ring of social Darwinism is oneself, and the desire to win ends in the destruction of that possibly nobler doppelgänger. Every victory is a betrayal, every survivor an arriviste. With views like these, Basquiat, like MacConnel, must feel some queasiness about his own notoriety. His story is nothing like that of "Jimmy Best on his/back to the sucker punch/of his childhood files," this three-line case history being provided by one of the framed image/poems that form a counterpoint to the large canvases.

This possible uneasiness may motivate the welter of ambiguities informing some of the other paintings. Although the word "milk" ends the string of poems—as though mother's milk were the natural, wholesome antidote to ersatz ("gold wood"), exploitation ("origin of cotton"), nouveau uppitiness ("ignorant Easter suit"), and so on—yet in *Arroz con Pollo* (sold prior to the exhibition but handily available on postcards) we have a more complicated development. Here a white scarified female form offers her breast while a black skeleton holds out a roasted chicken in the classic division of cooked vs. raw noted by Claude Levi-Strauss as a transcultural element in folktales. Yet the woman clutches a fork in one hand, and that symbol of middle-class prosperity, a chicken in every pot, is proffered by the black haloed devil/saint of radical revolt, who cradles in the palm of his hand the charred wreckage of a city.

Ambivalence? Or a simple statement of the reality of vicious circles? Maybe both. To a certain extent Basquiat does seem at odds with himself. The fact that these works look much better for real than in reproduction is telling; much of their impact comes from the large scale and the deftness of the paint handling, neither of which comes through in a photograph. What the camera doesn't lie about is the stick-figure primitivism. Basquiat is no untutored naive, and even if that style was once justified, he has outgrown it. There are many aimless markings, more than are needed to make a point or establish a mood, and occasionally an entire painting is put on hold. Oddly, the poems are most successful at making peace between Basquiat's technical sophistication and rude subject matter. The deluxe paper provides an elegant whole-wheat color/texture which lifts the black or red graffiti graphic out of itself, while the phrases themselves are about as evocative and precise a condensation of the vulgate as you could ask. Small and simple, they have none of the puffery of the more ambitious undertakings. There's obviously a head at work here, and a hand; if Basquiat can put them together so that one doesn't contradict the other, maybe he won't get ulcers while chewing the cud of success.

—JEANNE SILVERTHORNE

"Italian Art Now: An American Perspective," Guggenheim Museum:

This exhibition consisted of the work of seven artists: Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Nino Longobardi, Luigi Ontani, Giuseppe Penone, Vettor Pisani, and Gilberto Zorio. It provoked numerous questions, but furnished no answers or conclusions about the current Italian art scene. The choice of only seven artists seems to me excessively limited; the changes that took place in Italian art during the '70s, seen in the transition from Arte Povera to New Image painting (the two poles represented in this show), assumed numerous forms through a process both more subtle and more polemical than this show suggested. The catalogue introduction deals only with the differences among the individual artists and leaves unresolved the reasons behind the curator's choices. It is not sufficient to refer to the last fifty years of Italian art, singling out the legacies of Giorgio de Chirico and Filippo de Pisis, if one ignores the impact on today's developments of recent radical changes in the work of Mario Merz and Jannis Kounellis. (The catalogue text does touch on these artists, but not at length.) How can one take a position without considering the fundamental cultural reference points that have determined a specific situation? A true cross-section, which this show did not provide, would have required a more complete historical interpretation and a more profound critical framework.

Again: did the exhibition mean to demonstrate a connecting thread, whether direct or not, among the seven artists? This seems clearly impossible to support. The artists shown here take widely divergent positions and emerge from various backgrounds and influences.

Penone and Zorio must be viewed within the framework of Arte Povera, a movement that appeared in the late '60s. Their concerns with natural processes and primary materials—earth, wood, water, light—are indicative of an involvement with the most organic aspects of art-making and of a dialogue with nature and the environment. Their work expresses a similar attitude to that of Minimal and Land Art in the United States during the same years. For these artists an artwork is engaged with its context, involving the observer through all the senses and eliciting a multitude of reactions and mental associations. The carved tree installed by Penone at the center of the spiral of the Guggenheim is a vivid example of these concerns. Both in terms of its relationship with tradition and in political terms, the innovative contribution of Arte Povera to the complex dialogue between art and life has been much more revolutionary than that of today's New Image painting.

Chia, Cucchi, and Longobardi represent the new generation of painters here, and for them the act of painting is meant to be provocative. They see the tradition of the 20th century as a territory to be invaded, explored, raided—with painting the only expressive means they will consider. They reintroduce the traditional painter/surface dialectic and more or less ignore the innovations and radical breaks that transformed the art world in the late '60s.

New Image painting compensates the spectator for past "difficult" art, offering "easy" iconic interpretation. It returns art viewing to the galleries and museums, and consolidates, with increasing force, the power of the art market. The desire to be provocative at all costs, in pictorial terms, is merely a pretext to hide what lies behind—a restoration of the artist/artwork/market/collector relationship, which in previous years had been politicized and deeply questioned. It was no accident, it seems to me, that Chia and Cucchi took center stage in this exhibition; it was a direct reflection of the current art market. And one must ask why Francesco Clemente was omitted from this trans-avantgarde circle. Was the Guggenheim afraid of the big bad wolf? Meanwhile the complex work of Pisani was sacrificed by its fragmented placement on two separate ramps, precluding the possibility of seeing the internal dialectic; Ontani's *Self Portrait of Gilded Paper Patterns* too was badly hung, and he was represented mainly by photographs of his relatively early body art works—there were few of his current watercolors and oils.

If one turns to the specific works on display, it cannot be denied that high curatorial standards were maintained. Many of these works are well-known, pleasing, and without doubt appealing. But the installation seemed unbalanced. If the Guggenheim wanted to fill the informational vacuum which for too long now (save in rare cases) has banished Italian art from the American scene, can one consider the choices here sufficient? Certainly an outside institution has the prerogative to remain apart from the debates and internal polemics of Italian culture, but the task of informing a heterogeneous public about an equally heterogeneous situation demands a broader selection. This narrow selection did not demonstrate the current diversity of Italian art: "Italian art now" is *not* Penone and Zorio, who represent a precise historical situation; Italian art now *is* Chia and Cucchi; but figures not even mentioned in the catalogue text could have been included by way of context. This was not a courageous selection. This was a limited view of the '70s which cannot be justified by relationships among the exhibited artists; nor can these individuals be sufficiently indicative of the current situation in the '80s.

And if this was not a historical show and was not a show of the current situation, the American viewpoint taken by the curator is merely acritical and avoids the risks of a more radical position.

—IDA PANICELLI

Translated from the Italian by Meg Shore

THOMAS LAWSON, Metro Pictures; ERIC FISCHL, Edward Thorp Gallery; ON KARAWA, Sperone Westwater Fischer:

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transparent tool of a repressive ideology." (Unless rhetorical, quoted material is from "Too Good to be True," by Thomas Lawson, *Real Life* magazine, Autumn 1981.) This style is the media-derived instrument of social belief. Thus those sentenced to "real life" are doomed to the peculiar emptiness that results from repression; "real life" stories are artificial social productions starring people repressed into hollowness, or abstracted—subtly alienated—from themselves by their expectation of a media destiny, their acceptance of a media-determined sense of the meaning and value of their lives.

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are far from incidental and which make us suspect that he is sleepwalking through these portraits in a way he is trying hard not to do in his theory.

ERIC FISCHL

For me, Eric Fischl realizes the goal of the Real Life movement more successfully than Lawson. Fischl exposes the media fiction of eroticism by confronting it with its own implicit possibility of perversion. In comparison, Lawson's exposé of the social fiction of personal tragedy is tentative. One might say that Fischl's "casting" and sense of social texture, as reflected in his "lurid" handling as well as in his scenes, are more pointed than Lawson's. Lawson does not really grasp the sordidness of the American type; he doesn't have Fischl's flair for the sleazy and vicious, but rather a once fashionable European sense of the hollow man. There is nothing neutered about the nakedness, psychological as well as physical, of Fischl's visceral specimens. And Fischl throws off the controls of formalism, which he implicitly regards as conveying an obsolete sense of alienation. His work in this sense is much more realistic—powerfully realistic—than much so-called "realism." In Fischl's work real life is not alienated from itself by its abstraction into a story, but with relish takes to roles that show its full sociality. Indeed, the clichés of "real life" are made so dense in Fischl's demonstrations of them that they become positively insinuating, almost as though there was nothing ambivalent or nihilistic about them. Where Lawson shows us the abstraction inherent in images of "real life," Fischl shows us the concreteness, including concrete attitudes, they make visible. More crucially, Fischl demonstrates that unrepressed, passionate life is itself an ideological myth; the supposedly socially revolutionary ideal of the Real Life movement is itself a numinous fiction. Fischl shows us that the cultural representation of the life of the passions, however socialized as "free love"—in Fischl, ironically presented as potentially orgiastic—is paranoid, for it implies the potential for a misuse of others. By conveying a sense of lurking, unclarified, and unself-enlightened psychological reality underneath the Real Life representation, Fischl accomplishes the implicit goal of the Real Life movement: to show that the media image is really a dream image, a vector in which unconscious and conscious forces converge. The media image is a fulfilled wish: the realization of the dream or fiction is itself the satisfaction of desire. But Fischl deals with the very desire for fiction, the desire which can find true satisfaction only in images, in fantasy—in art.

I like Fischl for his freewheeling use of art history as a seductive realm of connotation. His pictures tempt us to art-historically free associate (rather than force us to do so, as do Julian Schnabel's); this adds to the voyeuristic appeal which is already a given, through their sexual content. (Is it the fictions that voyeurism creates or demands that is Fischl's ultimate subject matter?) The fickleness of his references to past art avoids the show-off irreverence and calculated iconoclasm of a Schnabel. There is mock tenebrism in *The Women* and *Over Night*, emotionally unhealthy Reginald Marsh–type *joie de vivre* in *The Catch* and *Digging Children*, a touch of Edward Hopper in *Beach Ball*, a near-allusion to Paul Cadmus in the homoerotic *Boy Oh Boy* and to the early rubbery figures of Max Beckmann in *Grief*. *Bad Boy* is a tour de force which evokes both porno and juvenile-delinquent/misguided-youth films. Fischl gives genre art a new lease on life. There is also a kind of psychological nostalgia for menace—the air of menace or apprehension is what perhaps most satisfies voyeurs, who are generally in search of a "dangerous" or threatening scene similar to one they saw before—which goes well with Fischl's art-history elusiveness. Indeed, Fischl rids us of the dead weight and inertia of art history by finding unexpected *psychological* rather than pictorial relevance in past art, which he scales down to suit the mood of his contemporary "real-life" images. It should also be noted that Fischl's use of off-center objects to focus the scene in some of his paintings—the ball in *Beach Ball*, the ice chest in *Boy Oh Boy*, the bowl of fruit in *Bad Boy*—reminds us of the material reality that "real-life" fiction does in fact refer to. This seemingly peripheral materiality becomes psychologically dominant, a sign of the hidden psychological center and truth of the work. Everything in the scene converges on these material objects, which acquire allegorical potential and at the same time throw us back into the real life that "real-life" imagery escaped from.

Clearly, Fischl has a more complicated sense of social fiction than Lawson's theory allows for. He has a more ambivalent sense of the power of representation, which articulates, even "expresses," concrete reality as well as gives an inauthentic version of it. Lawson has a one-dimensional, negative sense of media representation; Fischl sees it as more tricky—dialectical. Lawson's theory is a dogmatic criticism of the immanence of conventional modes of representation in our collective memory; Fischl knows that, practically speaking, fiction is sometimes the only way we can embody our experience of our own subjectivity, the only way we can record the imprint of reality on our lives, and show it to be part of our concreteness.

ON KARAWA

After Lawson and Fischl, On Karawa looks dated, naively objective. His work also uses old strategies combining chance and seriality, as well as a Minimalist sense of environmental placement. Dates seemingly chosen at random—March 20, 1981, April 3, 1981, and May 26, 1981, in one series (three dates constitute a series)—are painted on canvas and arranged at regular intervals on the walls of an otherwise empty room, whose space is thus thrown into compelling relief. The pieces themselves—their color seems lovelier, more silken than usual for Karawa—become hypnotic despite being matter-of-fact (this is so even when we know that Karawa keeps "journals" of newspaper clippings of events occurring on the exhibited dates). A date seems to invite us to remember the day, which does nothing to undermine or complicate the date's abstractness as a neutral sign and the work's abstractness as a useless object. We would like the date to be the title of a historical text—to function dialectically—but it doesn't rest comfortably in this discursive role; we really don't get beyond its self-presentation. Its simplicity drifts toward complexity, but never arrives.

This ambiguity heightens the work's appeal; it becomes more stimulating by being given an unclear conceptual focus. Thus, like all good conceptual art, it attempts to force the spectator to deconstruct his own consciousness of the art. But the ambiguity cannot be sustained, the work collapses into corpse-like facticity. This is not a subterfuge, as it might be in Lawson or Fischl, but rather, unexpectedly, a display of artistic "presence." Karawa's art ends up making us esthetically happy. We are stuck with that antiseptic old eternal presence of art, making us feel good all over with admiration and absorption. The tension between the eternal and the temporal implicit in Karawa's art of "broken" or implied series is discharged in the tensionless presence each work acquires the moment we experience it as disinterested art.

Karawa has too much trust, not enough resentment of art—which is what Lawson and Fischl have, and what continues to be needed. Such resentment was a major source of Modernism, which distrusted art's "representation" of itself as well as all conventions of representation. On Karawa has too much good faith, for all his irony. (The assumption that irony is inherent to art is another way of keeping it pure, for it does not begin to touch on the idea of artistic fiction as a purge of social "representation," a small lie to free us from the big lie.) We need more bad faith in art and more art that is in bad faith—that toys with our belief systems, our social and psychological as well as artistic expectations. The dissolution of civil society and individuality are of more import than the dissolution of art into a concept—unless the latter signals the former. As the waters of "real life" close over our heads, we need an art that preserves life, not one that lets us drown with our heads held high and a stiff intellectual lip.

—DONALD B. KUSPIT

ALEX GREY, "Space Invaders," P.S.1:

Recently it seems that antinuclear art has been proliferating at a rate surpassed only by the megatons of destruction that occasion it. This is as it should be. There can be no such thing as media overkill on this subject, the dangers of media sensationalism and trivialization notwithstanding. But those dangers do exist, and if such work is to avoid them it must cut through the dulling layers of packaged metaphors and images produced by the mass media.

Though it was part of a show entitled "Space Invaders," there was no futurist fantasy involved in the subject matter of Alex Grey's installation at P.S.1. On one wall of the room Grey hung a large oil painting of Christ crucified on a mushroom cloud, while below him the seemingly miniature cities of the earth are engulfed in conflagration. The painting seems to radiate a fiery orange light which takes on a sickly quality in the graphic glow of Christ's face. His huge figure is executed in painstaking detail (Grey has worked at times as a medical