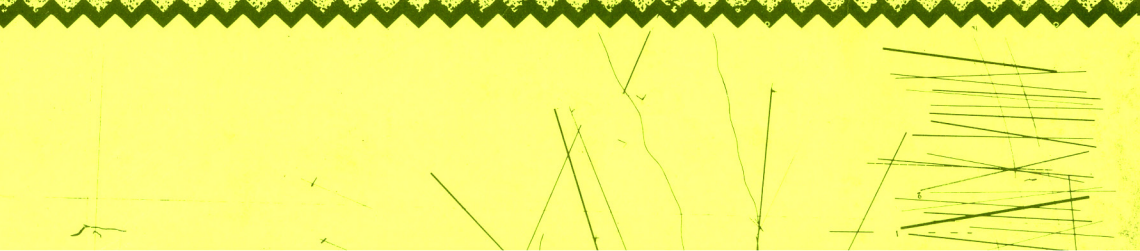


Contemporary Art in the Southeast

# ART PAPERERS

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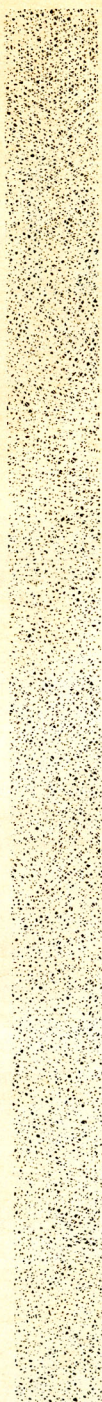
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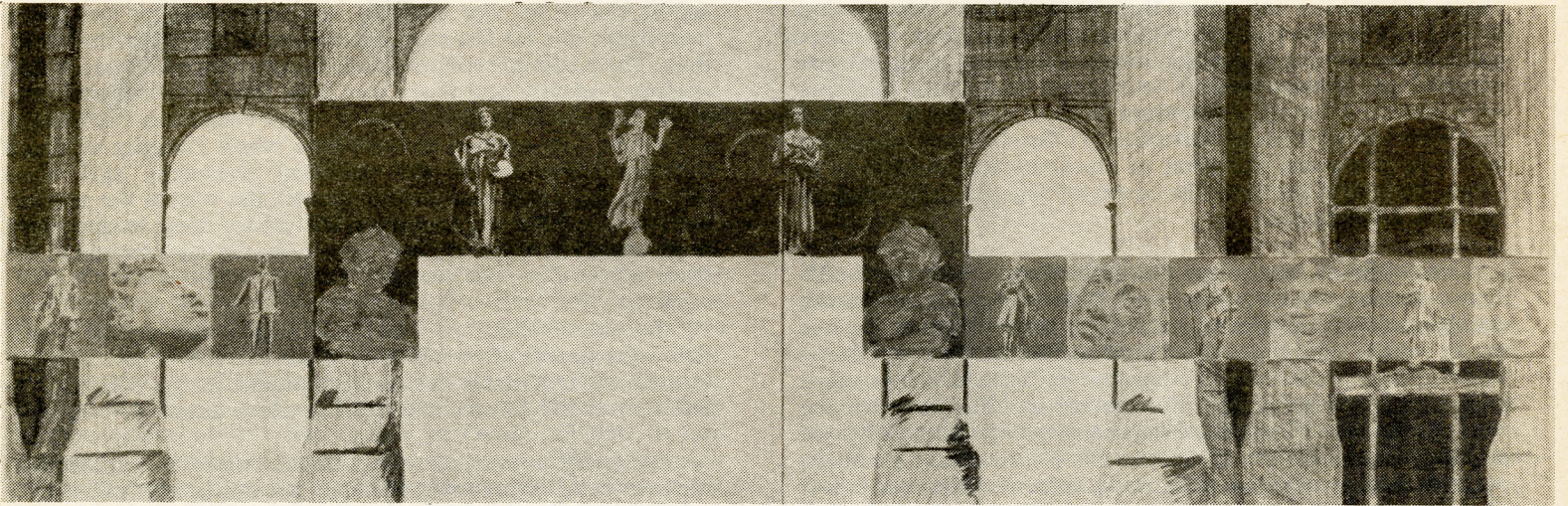
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# INTERVIEW THOMAS LAWSON

Critical Art Ensemble



Thomas Lawson, maquette of "Portrait of New York," Manhattan Municipal Building Project, front central section, pastel on board, 20" x 60", 1988 (photo courtesy of the artist).

Painter and critic Thomas Lawson came to New York City from Scotland in 1975. In 1981 he was one of the initial group of artists to show at the newly-established Metro Pictures. During this time, he began associating with a group of artists who all shared a common interest in an artistic critique of the media. This loosely-knit group included Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Jack Goldstein, Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, and James Welling— all of whom first gained critical attention after showing at Metro. Although the group has now drifted apart, Lawson continues to show at Metro Pictures, and also continues as the editor of *Real Life Magazine*, which was founded in 1978 as a forum for the group's ideas. Presently, Lawson is concentrating on producing public works to be shown at locations such as parks, public squares, building facades, etc.

Lawson's role as a critic began in 1978, when he reviewed shows for *Art in America* and then *Flash Art*. From 1980 to 1984, he was a regular contributor to *Artforum*. His essay "Last Exit: Painting," which appeared in *Artforum* in 1981, came to be a manifesto for a generation of artists.

This interview was conducted on September 10, 1988 in Tallahassee, Florida, the day after Thomas Lawson participated in the show *Frontier Production*, produced by CAE and reviewed in this issue.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** When did the death of painting aesthetic come to full fruition, or is it still being developed?

**Thomas Lawson:** The argument?

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Both the argument and the work derived from it.

**Lawson:** Painting had been declared dead by Ryman, and was out of the area of serious consideration by the late Seventies. It was not an area that any self-respecting artist would go near— basically it wasn't critical enough. Ironically, that is

what made it seem attractive to a generation that was coming into its own, and trying to figure out how to advance this argument about the suspect position of art. Art had obviously marginalized itself in the culture and part of that marginality had to do with the abandonment of painting in some way. The creation of deliberately obscure work, in deliberately obscure places, caused a public to be lost, and one of the benefits of the resurgence of painting in the Eighties has been that this audience has been regained; however, that audience seems to be somewhat naïve and uninformed. It's not clear that they get the impetus. I think that one of the criticisms that I have of the "Last Exit" position now is that it has provided a rationale for a conservative regurgitation of very simple expression as art making, and not the kind of more complex subterfuge that I was arguing for. It has also provided the basis for a kind of decorative abstraction as well.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Do you think that the sensualist tradition has died in other mediums as well?

**Lawson:** Sensualist?

**Critical Art Ensemble:** In other words, work with a lack of critical subterfuge—an art of immediate perception. Is the death of the sensualist tradition being faced in more mediums than just painting?

**Lawson:** I would assume so. You have to make clear that it's not that the thing died, because people continue doing it.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Death in terms of relevance to the discourse?

**Lawson:** In terms of relevance, it becomes ever more clearly self-indulgent. I think that it is present in other disciplines. I think that there has been a tendency to make art in this culture (as well as literature and music) into entertainment, and as entertainment, it is only meant to decorate a space for the moment or to make a room look nice or chic or look somehow acceptable. And music—like in rock and roll—has gone through a similar thing.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** In classical music too, there is a new resurgence of romantic music and a movement away from the experimentation of the Fifties and Sixties and early Seventies.

**Lawson:** One of the things that constantly shocks me (it's sort of minor but indicative) is the way that music that I grew up with—straightforward rock and roll—at least had some rebellious aspects (we like to think it had more than that and that's kind of romantic)—but there was at least some anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian position implicit in rock and roll. But throughout the Eighties, when you go to bars and clubs, the music that's played is either a disco kind of music or that same music, which has been completely defanged through nostalgic representation. The live rock that presumably continues never gets into the mainstream. I think that in the arts, the critical content of the art discourse has had a similar kind of fate. The critical dialogues have been shoved into corners and garages and various nooks and crannies where they are allowed to continue undisturbed, but also unimportant. Part of the impetus of trying to reinvent the notion of painting was that if art was to be an ambitious activity and mean something in the culture, it had to come in a format that was understood as being important and being significant. The choices at the time seemed to be film (which has the problem of money and how to deal with the business itself) or painting—a highly suspect but significantly charged medium. It could be presented as an important thing. But as I said, it has proved to be a much more complex issue than it seemed at first.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Is concept and appropriation still the starting point for your work?

**Lawson:** For me it is—yes, because what I'm interested in is participating in culture. It is the material of culture that I work

with. I'm using "culture" in a very broad sense: it's the pre-existing framework that intrigues me. That is what I look at and think about and mess with in some way, so it is inevitable that I have to use images that exist already. The idea of searching for some kind of original image through material is an absurdity to me. I can't imagine what these people who do that really think they're up to. I don't know how they can look at their work with a straight face after comparing it with all the work that precedes it that looks pretty much the same. That is one of the mysteries of the art world as far as I'm concerned.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** You said in an earlier interview that your choice of reinventing painting was a "perverse choice." Do you still see it as such?

**Lawson:** In the way I was just saying. It's a tricky choice and it's perverse to do something that you know is a hopeless task. Even then, we're not that blind to the problem of reinvesting the art market with an important meaning. That's playing with fire and so it's perverse to do that. Now since we've come to a point in the late Eighties where everything seems to be invested in the market, it seems to be completely impossible to talk about art and not the market.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** It is impossible, isn't it? In this interview we are already talking about it.

**Lawson:** We can talk around it though. We don't have to say this is good art because it's valued at auction, which has come pretty close to the general consensus of how you talk about art.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Price will always be a measure of aesthetic value for some people, and has always been one.

**Lawson:** It's always been one, but it didn't always function as one in the higher-minded art magazine world the way it does now. The kinds of work that get discussed in current years of *Flash Art* and *Artforum* have been the kinds of art that have been selling for a lot of money, and there has been very little interest in digging out the alternatives. The interest in art has become more one-dimensional. It's part of that funny flipping over, where popular culture has actually beaten the art world at its own game. Pop culture has completely resisted infiltration by artwork that promotes subversive ideas, and in fact it is we who have been subverted and turned into more or less successful entrepreneurs in Reagan's world.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Is there an inverted perversity in popular culture that is running parallel to your own perverse choice?

**Lawson:** Yes.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Is that in part what makes the *RealLife* position (art struggling against its own position) possible?

**Lawson:** Yes. This last year, doing these public projects (there is an equal kind of perversity in that), I am dealing with city bureaucracies and all kinds of rules and regulations and game playing that are very different from the kinds you have to deal with in the market arena, but they're parallel. Playing the game in one eliminates the game-playing of the other. You learn the basic kinds of trade-offs. If you want to get a work in a very public location, you have to make certain kinds of compromises, and you have to learn how to make those compromises sneakily enough that you get your message through. It was the same way with the paintings. You had to make paintings that looked like paintings and that passed as paintings, even though you were trying to say something antagonistic to the idea of painting. It is the same kind of concerns that rear their heads in different areas of working. Presumably that means I'll be able to mine this public activity for some time, and then get to the point where I'm too entangled in it. At that point, I'll have to rethink it once again and reorient myself to a different audience.



Thomas Lawson, "Civic Virtue/Civil Rights," mixed media, 122" x 228" x 36", City Hall Park, NY, 1988 (photo courtesy of Public Art Fund.).

**Critical Art Ensemble:** In terms of these parallels, you've done articles and paintings that flirt with touristic locations and monuments in particular— is this an example of that perversity at work?

**Lawson:** On a very basic level these works function as a very straightforward reflection of the life of the artist. It is the life of a touristic pariah— a life of standing on the edges and watching and traveling around— doing shows in different parts of the world, doing visiting-artist's gigs in different places. Constantly coming into contact with some kind of local culture, and addressing that culture and observing it, and coming away with a set of information which may not be very truthful, but which can be quite interesting.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** One of the roles for the artist is to observe cultural spectacle, reframe it, and redistribute it.

**Lawson:** Create a parallel spectacle.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** So you do work at putting spectacle that parallels the touristic into your own shows and installations?

**Lawson:** Yes. One of the things I've become very interested in, during the course of traveling the States and going to different colleges and art centers, are the so-called naïve installations, such as this house in Houston that was covered with beer cans and bottle tops. It seems to me that that is also an unschooled but art-like reaction to mass culture and the pressures of mass culture, and is trying to create a parallel spectacle that incorporates mass cultural imagery and artifacts. But it is completely undigestible; no one can figure out how to address it. In some ways it's some of the best art produced in the States. It only exists for the lifetime of the person that made it, and then it's bulldozed over by the irate neighbors who have been waiting

to get it. I like the biological lifespan of it. It's not the super-ego manifestation of public art— someone like Richard Serra who thinks that his work should last forever. Serra's work is brilliant work, but it should be temporal. I see no reason why it should be permanent.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** By way of footnote: with the kinds of issues we are bringing up, and without putting you in the "clown suit of Marxism," you seem to be arguing for a post-situationist agenda. One thing that artists must look at and deal with through a plagiaristic aesthetic is the spectacle itself. The clash of images is one of our battle fronts.

**Lawson:** Right. It seems to me that that is our material. Artists are interested in images and the materials that make images. To be an artist working in the Eighties means dealing with the spectacle, because that is our visual reality, and even if you try to escape it by heading off to the wilderness, it's still there. Recognition of the wilderness comes from seeing it on television or from reading the brochures. The roads heading to the wilderness are littered with signs and adverts and neon motel signs. The whole thing is framed within the spectacle of consumerism. That is the subject.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Because of this subject matter, your work being conceptually driven, and your use of media, it seems that your work is always being equated with the popular theorist of the day. In the early Eighties you were deconstructing national monuments "in light of Derrida," by the mid-Eighties you were an "index of Baudrillard." Does this help or hurt your project?

**Lawson:** I don't know if it has any real import. It doesn't help me personally because I've either read the text in question or not, so I've either thought about it or not. Sometimes I'm linked with someone I really haven't dealt with. Other times there is

certainly someone in the background. I think that it is a journalistic tic, when you're writing about any phenomenon, to say it's like something else. I think it would be funny to do a survey and go through the literature from the Fifties to the Eighties and see the developing name-dropping.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Certainly, it's a perfect lexicon of the market—a great consumer index.

**Lawson:** When I was doing grad work, I was thinking about Jasper Johns. The texts written about Johns all talked about Wittgenstein, and who in the art world thinks about Wittgenstein anymore?

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Yes, he does only seem to survive in the analytic tradition in philosophy.

**Lawson:** In terms of the art discourse, it's over. Mention Wittgenstein to people who are up to their eyebrows in Baudrillard and they have no idea who you are talking about. It's just kind of funny. It points to a shallowness.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Would you say that the theoretical model you use is self-produced, in that it is not a translation of a single critical text, in the manner that Kuspit has brought Deconstruction to art?

**Lawson:** Yes, it's self-produced. There are several aspects to this answer. The Kuspit model is an academic model in which you pick your guy and build your life around him. I'm not an academic, and I'm probably not capable of doing that kind of thing, but I'm not interested in it either. In some respects, that has to do with where I come from. I come from a marginal cultural situation. I grew up in Glasgow, which at the time was a failing industrial city in a nation that is only partly a nation, Scotland having been subsumed in the English empire since 1707, and yet we still have some of the characteristics of a nation. Part of growing up there is learning that you are Scottish, not English. But when you look for the cultural proof of that, it is difficult to come by. The educational situation creates something provincial, and so it has these spurts of high energy and intense engagement with the world followed by a lethargic falling away and dismissal of the world. We grow up in a situation where in some areas we are completely current with the most advanced thinking, and then in other areas we are dealing with very regressive behavior. It actually takes the removal of expatriation to figure it out. To do it at home is also possible, but I think requires supreme character. There have been some literary figures in Scotland who have done that. That kind of dissonance throws you into a self-realization that you have to think things through using your own experience, because that is all there is to force the issues. And using a Parisian philosopher's model isn't going to help that much. It's partly useful, but not entirely so.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** In general terms, how necessary is it to produce theory oneself or take it from another in order to produce art?

**Lawson:** You have to have it. I remember in the classic period of *Artforum*-ese there was this somewhat romantic notion that art was a science, or that there was some correlation between the two. That's mostly hokum, but the one thing that is correct is that you posit a theory about visual matters and test it. The "Last Exit" argument was a theory that was tested, and proved to have some elements of usefulness and some elements not so useful. The theory becomes superseded by events and history catches up. Then you need to develop a theoretical response to that, to figure out how to advance and how to continue working in a meaningful way and not just standing still. One of the tragedies of the way art tends to be taught and thought about in the West is the persistence of an argument against any theoretical impetus. This position lays claim to a certain kind of immediacy or a certain kind of material immersion—a romantic thing that forgets that it too is a theory that has been superseded. This seems to have the effect of preventing a great

many artists from truly developing their ideas. A lot of people get to a stage where they have created a fruitful possibility. They force certain kinds of arguments and project them into the arena, and people pay attention to them. But then, because of this refusal to consider the theoretical framework, the work then stalls because they just feel happy repeating that one solution. And then several years later who really cares about it? You asked me earlier about Salle; that is his problem. He is someone who in the very early years made some of the most important work around—really foregrounded a number of significant issues—and he did it in a very stylish but brutal way. It really worked. But now, as far as I can see, he is really just repeating that, and eight years later we know it all, and there is no surprise and no advancement. It then becomes incumbent on another artist or a new generation of artists to pick up the argument, and that seems a very inefficient and somewhat stupid way of proceeding. Someone as smart and attuned as Salle should be able to reformulate his theoretical position and advance it.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Must the perception of artwork also be based in theory, making it better to have an educated audience?

**Lawson:** It ought to be better to have an educated audience, although I've had the experience of finding that in many cases the best responses I've had, the most thoughtful responses, have been from people who are uneducated in the art sense. They are clearly educated people, but they are not up on their Baudrillard, and in fact, would not know who he is. More than that specific academic information, there has to be an open-minded willingness to actively look at and think about what is being presented. Finding an audience like that is very difficult, because people tend to be intimidated. Partly that is our own fault. We talk in these high-falutin phrases that put people off. So in a way it serves us right. The ideal audience for me is made up of people who come out and look at and think about what the different possibilities are, not just what is there in front of them, but what might be there and the context it is in, and then begin to think about what it might mean for their life. That doesn't require a huge education: just willingness.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** We've talked about how theory has helped artists, but it can also be destructive, as the recent abuse of theory by the Simulationists demonstrates. How do we differentiate between when a theory is being tested and when it's used purely out of a profit motive?

**Lawson:** I don't know what the answer to that is. There is something very wrong in seeing Baudrillard's theories used to justify a market strategy. Yet his fatalism ultimately is so repressing that it's a fitting irony that it should have been picked up and used as part of a repressive mechanism. The work that is supposed to emanate from this theory has clearly no relationship to the theory. It's not a theoretical art; it's a packaged art. It's a very shrewd kind of market manipulation that can be encapsulated by the formula: If the market is saturated by representational painting, it inevitably will be ready to be captivated by abstract painting. That return can be facilitated if it can appear to be a tough-minded move rather than a cynical move. In addition it should appear to grab the coattail of some kind of moment in high modernism—in this case the Russians, or Barnett Newman. I find it infuriating, and take it somewhat personally in that it appears to use my argument. (Thankfully without acknowledgment, so I'm not directly implicated.) It is quite clearly an extension of the "Last Exit" argument to present these blank abstractions. They are more like last paintings than the image paintings are, or appear to be anyway. They appear to have a finality to them. But I don't think that that work is based in a theoretical position, so it will suffer the same fate of any other work that has no theoretical base—it will collapse into repetition.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** They will be recognized as poseurs.

**Lawson:** I think so. Although even recognized poseurs con-



Thomas Lawson, "Civic Virtue/Civil Rights," mixed media, 122" x 228" x 36", City Hall Park, NY, 1988 (courtesy Public Art Fund.).

tinue to have vast careers. I don't know what the recognition of the pose counts for, but in some measure the credibility that they have enjoyed will be damaged.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Do you think that they have to some degree opened the doors for the return of the formalists?

**Lawson:** They have. They haven't *maybe* done that; they *have* done that. It's been very interesting that in the last couple of seasons in New York there has been show after show of these so-called curated exhibitions that keep us informed of the cutting edge of art collection here in the U.S. These shows have a tremendous amount of work that has a definite edge of formalism, and are also clearly formulaic. It's work done by people who have figured out what it means, and what it looks like, to make work that is up to date. There is an overwhelming amount of work that claims to be postmodern, critical, Neo-simulationist, or whatever you want to call it, but in fact is simply a formalism in the simplest sense: working with shape, color, material, and then tacked on is a title that suggests heavy-duty thinking.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** It also suggests that there is a political level. Is that absent too?

**Lawson:** No, I think the political level is present, but that it is the opposite of what's claimed. I think that the politics is reactionary in that they make a claim for a critique of consumption, but the entire impetus of the work, its presentation, the desire for the work—the artist's desire and the consumer's desire—is one of buying, and selling, and raising prices. The excitement that the work generates is a market excitement, and so for these people to pretend that they are espousing some kind of leftist critique is absurd; they are espousing a rightist celebration of the status quo. In many ways it is very potent political work, but it's not our politics.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Why is politics an essential component of your work? I assume we can say that.

**Lawson:** Yes, we can. Again it comes back to the question of the work's ambition. If you want to make work that addresses the culture, that is a political ambition.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** But the work must have a specific agenda to be potent politically.

**Lawson:** Right, and the agenda comes from the theory formulation. If you develop a theory of culture, then you have an opinion about that culture, you like it or not, or want to change it or not. So there is an implicit development of politics right there. It may not lead to the extent of wanting to go out sloganeering. Occasionally I've done that, but most often I want to get at that political dimension through an interaction with the spectacle. It's an attempt to formulate something that provides an equal encounter between me and the spectator through the mediation of the work. The current piece at City Hall Park [NYC] is an example of that, in that the format has this billboard, noticeboard presentation—but it's not on a highway billboard up in the sky—authoritarian—kind of a major spectacle look; rather, it's human scale, on the ground, you can walk up to it, you could scrawl on it if you wanted to, so it has that direct engagement. It's for the public.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** There is an interesting paradox in your work in that it is directly engaging, and yet your work also seems to argue that camouflage is a necessary component of political art.

**Lawson:** Yes, I think that's true. Another contradiction that I work with is that there is a desire to communicate and engage, but there is an equal desire to say nothing and provide a blankness. The veiling and the use of the floating obstruc-

tions—the dots and blips and lights—that is about stopping the easy flow of interpretation. I don't think that means that there is no interpretation, it just prevents a whoosh—"oh, it's a picture of so-and-so." One of the things I heard over the passing years with the *Post* paintings was that it became very easy to say (and I saw it in print a number of times)—"oh, it's the *Post* pictures: it's the newspaper stuff." At first, these paintings got a lot of anxious engagement from the people—but this then got lost in the familiarity of them. There became a need to try to develop strategies to stop that. Of course, then the strategies themselves become recognizable channels through which the engagement can be smoothed through and lost. Then you have to rethink it again.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Have you come out with any new strategies—and could you use the mural that you are presently working on as an example?

**Lawson:** That is an attempt to do something different. What it is: it's a municipal building and there is scaffolding surrounding the building from about 10 feet up. Because it's a municipal building, I'm going to make a portrait of the city using the city's own public representations—public sculptures—as the source material. I am doing that to point out the prevalence and preeminence of white male activity over other kinds of actions. There is a variety of politicians and scientists and a few poets who have been given monuments in the city. Women tend to be relegated to being allegorical figures, and minorities tend to be auxiliary decor to white heroes. Lincoln has a little black boy on his knee. A leading abolitionist has a little black girl looking up to him. So one is left with no uncertain understanding about where power lies. Coming up with an arrangement of details and rhythms of these images to point this out is part of the package. The males will be presented in full figure. A lot of them have their arms raised or hands in their pockets so there will be a humorous recognition of the familiarity of the gestures of power. These will be punctuated with details of the lost ones—full size faces of the children and whatever minority people I can find. It's reclaiming territory. One device will be the colors used—ones normally associated with house interiors rather than exterior of public buildings—"What's that bedroom pink doing up there?" The other device is the scale. If the piece happens as planned, it will be something like a quarter mile in length. It's a vast canvas of possibilities. It won't have any of the usual blockage devices. There is one section that will have arches of neon light that will have that function.

It wasn't a gig that I sought. I was asked if I would like to compete for it, and thinking about it, I realized yes I would be. Then I made the proposal, and to my surprise I won the commission. There is an element of luck. After this year I am doing another show at Metro Pictures and I'm finding it much more difficult to concentrate on a simple gallery show because that space is circumscribed: one-dimensional in its content—we all know what an art gallery is and what it stands for, and there is not much more that can be said about it. I can make some individual pieces that I hope will add up to something, but it's much more interesting to think about this work that is in a much more awkward and real situation. A situation that has a meaning beyond art. It is the seat of city government—so it has a meaning, a real tangible meaning. It's where people get married, it's where the Building Department is—real decisions are made that affect the lives of people.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** There is a real originality in your criticism—how much of it comes from your denial of the division of labor by being a participant in what you critique?

**Lawson:** There is something to it, because as a participant I fail to see the mystique—I'm not bamboozled by another artist's mastery of material because I know how one acquires that mastery—and it's no big deal. Obviously some people are more or less skillful with different kinds of materials, but it's not some kind of magic. I think that a lot of professional critics, who are not artists and who do subscribe to the division, fall for the notion that artists have some magical substance in their

fingertips that allows them to do things that ordinary people can't do. That immediately sets my criticism apart.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Does it work in the opposite way too? Since you are not intimidated by critical models, you can use them more easily in art production.

**Lawson:** Yes, precisely.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Do you think there is any legitimacy to specialist critics yelling "conflict of interest!" at you?

**Lawson:** I think that's an absurdity. Mostly because I've been fairly scrupulous not to get involved in a blatant conflict of interest. The art world is small, and everyone knows everyone. There are relationships everywhere that are routinely worked. I don't think there is a critic anywhere who can claim no conflict of interest. There are notorious cases of people promoting girlfriends, boyfriends, wives, or husbands. As far as I know, I don't think that I could be accused of unfairly aiding anybody that I'm close to, so it's a cheap shot to discount my criticism for that. It's equivalent to the argument that you can't be two things at once: "He's a better writer than painter," or "He's a better painter than writer." It's just sour grapes—it's not really serious.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Do you think that as the conceptual realm of art expands, that it is going to become incumbent upon artists to express themselves critically in other ways besides their chosen medium?

**Lawson:** I think that they should be able to defend their activity, and not rely on someone else to do it. For one thing, if you allow someone else to defend your work, you give your meaning over to that person. In the *Collected Judd* there was a letter to the editor that consists of one sentence that says "Robert Smithson is not my spokesman." I think that is the attitude artists should have—you can't allow someone else to be your spokesman. If you mean your work, you have to be willing to defend it and present it. I don't think that that means everyone must be a brilliant writer. There are ways around that.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Is this part of the reason for *Real Life Magazine*—to give artists a place to publish, and to accustom the public to reading criticism by artists?

**Lawson:** Absolutely. Part of the intention is that you can write for it and not be held to the highest standards. *Real Life* is not *October*. It's not going to be scrutinized for perfection. You can get away with a certain amount of clumsiness and sloppiness.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** For what other reasons did you start *Real Life*?

**Lawson:** Initially, back in '78, there was no way of talking about the issue of media spectacle and its relationship to art—we had no access to the magazines and galleries. The magazines and alternative spaces were still engaged in Post-Minimalist activity. There wasn't a tremendous urge to find new blood. We were just these younger artists, and we should just shut up and wait until we got older or something. While sitting around bars and complaining about this, we realized that the modern solution has always been to start a magazine. Why wait for your elders to give you credit? You just do it yourself. The editorship fell to me, I think because I was more comfortable with language than the others, and maybe less intimidated by the idea of getting grants. The title was Sherrie Levine's. For months we sat around bars drinking beer saying "What about this, what about that." The titles ranged from cute to hopeless to anarchic. Finally one night Sherrie said what about *Real Life Magazine*? It seemed perfect, and that was it.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Has funding for *Real Life* stabilized?

**Lawson:** You can never be sure if it's stabilized, because we are





Thomas Lawson, "Self Evident Truth," cibachrome, 40" x 40", edition of 3, 1987 (photo courtesy of Metro Pictures).

funded year by year, but we're funded again this year. NYSCA never stopped, we were always funded by them. The New York State Council is a fairly progressive organization—in the visual arts department at least. It's a forward thinking and sympathetic organization—so we never had any trouble with them. NEA, that's a different kettle of fish. It has changed dramatically during the Reagan years—so there is no telling what that means for the future. They've tightened up a lot of regulations that make it increasingly difficult for small organizations like *Real Life* to continue. There are more bureaucratic requirements.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** Do you see that as institutionalized censorship?

**Lawson:** In effect, because a magazine like this is a two-person operation: there is me and Susan [Morgan]. If suddenly we have to do all this extra record-keeping, it's an extra burden, an extra reason to not want to do it. There are plenty of stumbling blocks both economic and temporal, so to be given all this extra work makes you think about getting out of it. Passing it along, or reinvesting it with some kind of different activity—a new format to give it a new charge. I think that as it approaches its tenth year, it definitely is due for some kind of reconsideration. One thing that would be interesting is to do more presenting. We've done three or four *Real Life* exhibitions over the years which have been quite successful. We've shown people early in their careers, or ones who were getting little attention, have continued to do good work, proved themselves, and now get attention. It might be good to do more of that kind of activity, but that requires a different kind of bureaucratic meddling—it means finding space. One possibility is that we could revitalize the thinking behind the Clocktower and P.S. 1, and find abandoned or temporarily empty buildings and get permission to use them.

**Critical Art Ensemble:** In summary, since we've talked about

the Simulationists, the Reagan years, censors, etc.,—who is the party over for?

**Lawson:** Well, when I did that piece I was hoping it was going to be a requiem for the yuppie artist. The tuxedoed figure is the first image in the work. It was about overbloating, becoming useless, and therefore irrelevant. It was about getting back to business and moving on. I still think that will eventually happen. As far as I can see, the exciting thing in the art world now is located in activities like Critical Art Ensemble's. Activities by those who are currently out of the mainstream, and working in the real world—doing stuff away from the center, but addressing the culture in a direct way. That energy will work to dislodge the formalism of Simulationism and Neo-expressionism. It's inevitable, because they are so static and so limited in their content possibilities that they have to be revolutionized. If art just becomes this endless manipulation of "isms," participating in just the appearance of life, it will lose the attention of the best minds. This vast market machinery is of course going to continue on its own volition for quite a while. But the more interesting artists and thinkers are going to lose interest in the mainstream work in the cultural centers, and go somewhere else. I suspect this will lead to more activity similar to what CAE is doing. More participatory—political in a participatory way—and more off-center.

*Critical Art Ensemble is a collective of five artists who are committed to establishing an alternative political and aesthetic critique in areas outside the main cultural centers by producing art, shows, and criticism for an expanding Southeastern audience. CAE's members are Steve Kurtz, Steve Barnes, Dorian Burr, Hope Kurtz, and Rick Dominguez.*