

Thomas Lawson

Thomas Lawson reflects on *East of Borneo*
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Left: Mural by Italian street artist Blu being painted over by LA MoCA workers in December 2010. This image was featured in an *East of Borneo* article by Thomas Lawson titled “Institutional Whitewash.” (Photo: Casey Caplowe). Right: A 1974 picture by Allan McCollum of Vija Celmins and her dog. McCollum posted several portraits from the ’70s on *East of Borneo*’s Facebook page.

Thomas Lawson is founder and editor in chief of [East of Borneo](#), a website that launched in fall 2010. With editor Stacey Allan, he envisioned a hybrid journal that combines commissioned essays and interviews with artists, alongside primary material such as photographs, video, sound, and ephemera uploaded by readers. Based at CalArts, East of Borneo focuses on presenting the untold stories of contemporary and historical art from Southern California.

I LIKE THE PRESENTNESS OF MAGAZINES, the way they allow for disparate voices, speaking in the here and now. There’s always a reason that we find something interesting today or this month, and I prefer to follow that rather than some arbitrary overarching theme. For *East of Borneo* I wanted a lively format that could engage readers as partners. I also wanted the site to be identified with a place: Los Angeles. With its sprawl and interconnectedness, the web of freeways, it’s a city of nodules, and *East of Borneo* is an ideal way for imagining it. The openness allows for different kinds of traffic jams.

This is the second time I have started a publication. In the late 1970s, Susan Morgan and I began publishing *REAL LIFE Magazine* to provide a voice for our generation, the people we knew and were interested in. We also wanted to contest the strong historical narrative of New York art and hear from members of the previous generation who had slipped out of view—not the Conceptualists, but people like Robert Moskowitz and Michael Hurson, who had been doing work that influenced, in part, the return to painting in the '80s. From the viewpoint of a person in his late twenties, *that* was history.

People stereotype Los Angeles as a place without a past, when in fact the city is rich with a twentieth-century history that is incompletely understood. What's always struck me about the art history of Los Angeles is that few people have contested the one tenuous narrative built around the Ferus Gallery. The open, hybrid structure of *East of Borneo* offers a way to collectively reexamine art in Southern California in the '50s, '60s, and '70s and build a more compelling theory of what was interesting, productive, and generative. When you open up a journal to a broader public, readers can accept or contest the editorial voice, add their own evidence. If one person writes about a particular performance, someone else can respond: "Wait a minute. I was there and it didn't take place like you say. It was like this, and I have a photograph that I took, or notes that I wrote." We may not create a consensus, but over the years something comprehensible and meaningful will accrue. The hybrid nature of *East of Borneo* means that our various complementary narratives can weave new patterns—or unravel old ones—to give a clearer picture of what really happened, more than any single historian could do.

As part of the "Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945–1980" exhibition initiative that will take over the city this fall, I'm developing a project for REDCAT with a class at CalArts. We have a plan to reexamine the networks and support structures of the emerging and experimental art practices of the '70s through a series of interviews, discussions, and dinner parties. REDCAT is a real space, but it's just a room, a project-oriented space, not a museum space, so we won't have art objects—just a computer or two in the middle of the room and a display of items. We hope to stir up a conversation. In a way it's a replication of the *East of Borneo* model but in real space and time, rather than Internet space. *East of Borneo* will function as an expanded exhibition catalogue, with essays and relevant archival material. As this plays out, we hope other institutions across the city will recognize that we can help them publish their material, particularly smaller organizations that can't afford publications.

— As told to [Christopher Howard](#)