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Thomas Lawson

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WE ARE TALKING WITH THOMAS LAWSON.

TME: Have you found the continuous turnover of styles in the last few years irritating?

TL: The turnover, per se, is neither here nor there. I don't see that it's much of a turnover. Much of it looks the same to me.

The point I'm sorry about is a kind of formal tendency on the part of an awful lot of art writers to follow this art-historical method which means that the work is discussed in this one particular way only, and the other parts of the work are left untouched. For me, the other parts of the work tend to be the more lively and interesting parts. I mean, I'd like to hear more about why someone makes work now, you know, what their real overwhelming motivation is. Everyone obviously works off previous generations. This is a different—what seems to be going on now is a very small calculation about, Well, if everyone is thinking about not working out of a neo-Minimalism, say, then Earth art is going to be the thing that's considered next. That's what I hear in the street. People are thinking about Earth art.

IS: Neo-Earth art? Or—

TL: Perhaps, but it's so superficial, it's mind-blowing that they are thinking on those predictable lines—you know, there was this and then there was that, and then there was this, which reacts against that, and so on. And anyway, this whole seesaw is all Pop art.

TME: In a nutshell, how would you put the message of your 1981 article in this magazine, "Last Exit: Painting"?

TL: It was partly an argument for the return of painting, presenting it as a conceptual or neo-Conceptual strategy—the idea that after a decade of so-called deadness in painting, it was possible to consider reviving it again.

LS: You were calling for a revival after it had already been created in the studios?

TL: I wasn't calling for it. I was describing a fact. We'd actually been making this work for three or four years, and I was trying to provide a way of thinking about it. I talked about some of the European people, Clemente in particular, and some of the American stuff, Schnabel and Salle, and sort of tried to make differentiations between their different strategies. And then I also talked about the continuation of antipainting strategies in people using photography, like Sherrie Levine, as basically a version of the same thing, but with the reintroduction of pictures.

TME: So what did the title mean, "Last Exit," colon, "Painting"? Did it mean this was the last chance to bail out?

TL: Hubert Selby's novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn* was where the title came from. There is a romanticism implicit in the title.

IS: With the reference to the subways, it also suggests you've got to go back, too. It's not one-way.

TL: That's true, but I always thought the reference was to freeways. Freeways you can only exit, you can't back up.

LS: Death, too?

TL: Well, there was necrophilia. We were starting with dead paintings. It's funny, it was one of those pieces that wrote itself in many ways.

TL: I think this is all going to be an age of Pop. I think it's understood as an age of Pop. I think that we're really still thinking about a lot of the same ideas, that these things weren't resolved in the '60s.

LS: Oh.

TL: Things that were dropped, in some cases, and things that were sort of left dangling. We seem to be just picking them up and reworking them, or going over them again. I don't see that necessarily as a terrible problem. A lot of good things come out of that. There's a certain kind of maturity involved in that. But there's also—

IS: Be careful you don't sound like Hilton Kramer yourself.

TL: I mean, there is the chance that it all just repeats itself endlessly, and gets less and less interesting. This isn't on the larger '60s-to-'80s repeat; I just feel that a lot of the later '80s are really repeating stuff from the earlier '80s. The boredom I have is a more localized time thing.

TME: From this room you can see New Jersey. You can actually see land. You can see earth. Not exactly at night, but all afternoon there's been a very thin strip of earth that you can see.

TL: What you can see now is sky.

LS: You can see Guglielmi painting on the roof.

IS: Who?

LS: What am I talking to, people who don't know their art history? [laughter]

TL: I don't know. When you called me about this subject "age" the other day, I was sort of flummoxed.

LS: Flummoxed? What a nice word.

TL: It's a Scottish word. Age wasn't something I was thinking about. So the first thing that came to my mind is new age. And then, of course, if you think new age you think old age. So I wondered if we were going to talk about the kind of nonsensical hysteria that is synonymous with new-age thinking, and I wondered if that kind of wishful thinking has a correlative in the art world.

IS: By new-age thinking are you referring to all this starry cosmic spiritualism that seems to be reaching for a way through today?

TL: You know, crystals. And what was it—the something convergence, the harmonic convergence, that happened this year. Yes, that's what I mean. It's often dressed up as progressive, but I think it's really about looking for some ancient meanings. In some unexpected, probably unintentioned way, it can also be aligned with *New Criterion* wishful thinking that the clock can be stopped at some time.

LS: Fundamentalism instead of formalism?

IL: It's very peculiar, this wishing for some bucolic no-place, no-time and no-place, where everything would be simple.

LS: A fair field. And a portable one.

TL: And then it would be interesting to place that fair field next to Rosalind Krauss's expanded field.

LS: Has the gloom and doom around depotentized you?

TL: I don't know. I mean, if I'm identified as a doomsayer, the old Oh, it's him again, then I suppose yes, to a degree. But I don't think I'm gloomy at all.

LS: You are this minute.

IS: He's a dour Scot.

TL: Yeah, but I'm happy as a lark. Let's get back to Lucas' castration question. I think that in this stage of the '80s everything has been compartmentalized again. Art has become identified with pictures again—with paintings, and with the sale of all kinds of paintings— because that's a nice easy way to categorize what's been going on and to keep it in its place. In the same way, avant-garde theater has become something that people associate with what happens at the Brooklyn Academy of Music once a year. Before, you could just sort of spontaneously see what was going on—it wasn't going to cost you very much money, or much effort in terms of planning. You could just walk down the street and say. Oh, I feel like going to see something, and just go and see. it. Now it seems that you have to make reservations or have money or clout enough to spend an evening in a nightclub. There's tons of stuff still, but the stuff that gets a chance seems just to be on the level of "interesting." I'm missing the stuff that doesn't mind if it fails, and no one has invested enough money in it to care. I mean, everyone may care, but it's not \$2 million, you know.

To go back to what you were asking me at the beginning about doom and gloom, about whether this was a repressive or a liberating thing, that sense that tomorrow isn't necessarily one whit better I think could be useful. At the same time, I think it's also realistic to think, Well, the sun is going to rise tomorrow.

Thomas Lawson, thirty-six, is an artist and critic. The editor of REAL LIFE Magazine, he has written for a number of publications. His art was most recently exhibited at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, in October 1987.

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