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Oral history interview with Thomas Lawson, 2018 August 9-10

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Thomas Lawson on August 9 and 10, 2018. The interview took place at Lawson's home in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Russell Ferguson for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Thomas Lawson has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Okay, this is Russell Ferguson. I'm Russell Ferguson with Tom Lawson. Tom will be the next voice you hear after mine. And it's August 9, 2018. This is our oral history interview for the Archives of American Art.

THOMAS LAWSON: And we're in Los Angeles.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yes, we're in Los Angeles. A hot day in Los Angeles. So Tom, let's start. The format is basically go through your things right from the beginning. So I was wondering if you could start by talking a little bit about your family, your family background, where you were born, all the circumstances of your early life. [00:02:02]

THOMAS LAWSON: Okay. Well, I was born in Glasgow, in Scotland, in 1951. And interestingly, just this summer, I came across a cache of letters that my mother wrote to her mother in the years leading up to that event, and a little after. Luckily enough, I know a little bit more about this question than I actually knew before. [Laughs.] My family has always been a little secretive. Nobody talked about family history when I was growing up. It was just—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: My family was the same. It just never came up.

THOMAS LAWSON: It just—yeah, didn't—it wasn't—and I didn't find it interesting to ask.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: So I don't quite know what that means. Maybe it's a Scottish thing, I don't know. [They laugh.] Anyways, both sides of my family are essentially rooted in Glasgow. My mother's family were tradespeople. And—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What kind of trade?

THOMAS LAWSON: Just a variety of things. My grandfather worked for a company called Gardner's [A. Gardner & Son] in Glasgow that was a furnishings—they have a famous building, or had. I mean, they no longer exist. But the building is still there. It's a cast-iron building on Jamaica Street, just near the river. My grandfather was in the carpets department, and made his way up from being a carpet layer to being, I think, a buyer. I don't think he was—he never—I can't imagine that he had the personality to be a seller. [They laugh.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: From what you remember about him?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, he was a grumpy old guy. [Laughs.] [00:04:00] On my grandmother's family, her brother was an accountant, and was married to a really powerful woman, who was a doctor and an early advocate for birth control. In the '20s, talking about birth control in Glasgow.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Very early on.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was really very—and I knew her growing up, and she was a fearsome, very strong, intelligent presence. So a bit of an outlier, because the rest of—I think she was the only person in the whole history of my family who went anywhere close to a college until my brother and I. So it's—you know.

And earlier—I mean, I know that a little further back in time, the family that I come from, in some way, were on the land. They had a croft or something.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: This is still your mother's side?

THOMAS LAWSON: This is mother's side. They had a croft south of Glasgow, in Ayrshire. And another branch, I

think more from the grandmother's side, had farm land in Aberdeenshire. At one point, someone there moved to Newfoundland, and then moved back. Apparently, it was too cold.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow. Must be cold there.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. So there was something about, he and his wife moved there to—new future life, big farm, all this kind of thing. And she was back within the year. He tried to keep it going for a bit longer, and just couldn't do it. [00:06:04] So anyways. So there's this fairly sort of—just, I think, a fairly typical Scottish family of moving from the country into the city, getting work that—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, becoming more urban.

THOMAS LAWSON: —over the generations, becomes a little higher status or something. But all that.

My father's side, his father also came from Glasgow, and was in kind of retail trade, and moved to Algiers, in the sort of 1910-ish time.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: To be in retail business there?

THOMAS LAWSON: To become a partner with a French guy in a grocery store.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Do you know what prompted that? You know, the move to Canada on the other side, I mean, that's—

THOMAS LAWSON: That seems normal.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —typically Scottish in a way. Moving to Algeria, with a partnership with a French guy and a retail business, that—

THOMAS LAWSON: It seems weird.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —seems very untypical.

THOMAS LAWSON: It sounds very strange, and I kind of wonder if—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: There's an untold story? [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Stories. Anyway, he moved there. He met a woman there whose family came from Derbyshire and had been blacksmiths. And they married and had four children, one of them being my dad. So my dad grew up in Algiers. Which, in the '20s and '30s, it sounded—when he did talk about it—that was one thing he talked about. It sounded idyllic. They lived in the city in the winter, and on the beach in the summer.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So it's a French colony then, and it's a little bit before the movement for independence?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. So—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So for white people living there, I assume—

THOMAS LAWSON: It was pretty nice, I guess. [00:08:02]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Pretty nice, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: So the war breaks out, 1939, and he immediately goes back to Britain to sign up for the war effort. His war experience was that the first years, he worked in intelligence, and he was posted in the Middle East. And he was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I'm sure as soon as they saw that he had been in North Africa—

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly. He was fluent in French, and he had some Arabic. He was a young man, but he had already started working, and he had been working for Anglo-Iranian Oil, which became BP later. So he had access to information, and so he spent several years in that Middle Eastern theater. You know, Iran and Iraq. I don't know what he was doing, but that's where he was doing it.

Then in the second part of the war, he was in the European theater, and he was in a light armored division, driving a tank. I believe he was involved in the Battle of Arnhem. I think evidence points to that, but I don't know for sure, and of course he's not around to ask. He was certainly involved in the Battle of Hamburg, which was in 1945. So '44, '45.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So the final battles of the war.

THOMAS LAWSON: The final battles of the war. He was in this tank corps, in the front lines.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Pretty intense.

THOMAS LAWSON: Intense.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I mean, driving a tank into the last—

THOMAS LAWSON: Super intense, yes.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —German defenses.

THOMAS LAWSON: And, I would imagine, one of the reasons he didn't really like talking much about the past, or about much of anything. [00:10:01] And certainly, he never drove a car.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's so interesting.

THOMAS LAWSON: In the Middle East, he had ridden a motorbike. I've seen pictures of him on this giant motorbike. And then he drove a tank. But he couldn't, or wouldn't, drive a car. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's so funny.

THOMAS LAWSON: So there's my dad, up to 1945. My mother grew up in Glasgow, this very kind of middling life. She seems to have been a bit of a jock: liked playing tennis, liked Scottish country dancing, and liked boys. [Laughs.] Seems to be her interests. In '44, she was called up to join the Women's Auxiliary, and spent the next two years also in the Netherlands sort of area.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Oh, okay. So she went overseas?

THOMAS LAWSON: She was overseas. She was behind the lines of these same battles.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, but not far behind the line.

THOMAS LAWSON: But not far behind. No, she was in Nijmegen, which is like 10 miles away from Arnhem. She was in Ghent on VE Day. So I mean, yeah, she was there. Her duty seems to have been about entertaining the lads who were coming back from being messed up by the fighting, and kind of trying to patch them together and put them back again. And in this process, one of these lads was my dad. In these letters, she mentions him, and they seem to have gone out several times. But she went out with lots of other guys too, and the war kept going, and they moved off in their different directions, and they lost touch. [00:12:02]

My dad went back to Algiers in 1945—or 1946, probably; I think probably demobbed in '46—to find, as you were saying, Algiers had changed. In '45, there was already significant unrest at Sétif, and they kept going. But he was back to look after his parents, who were not in good health, and he got his job back.

My mom went back to Glasgow, and clearly felt a little sort of unsettled or something, and so went down to London to get a job, and worked as a secretary in a company. That seems to have been a kind of head-hunting type of company. Reading her descriptions, it seems like they were putting together candidates for jobs overseas, working for companies like Anglo-Iranian Oil. In 1949, my dad was sent to London to do some work for the company, and I think that's—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Then they reconnected.

THOMAS LAWSON: Somehow, they reconnected. I don't know if they had stayed in touch, or if they met because of this job my mom had. But somehow they met, and they married the next year, 1950, in Algiers. And my mom moved to Algiers, and moved in with her mother-in-law. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow.

THOMAS LAWSON: And her—I mean, I think she found it really pretty different.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, for a young Scottish woman in that era—like '40s, early '50s—to move to North Africa without any background in Algeria or anywhere except wartime in Northern Europe, it must have been quite a—

THOMAS LAWSON: I think pretty dramatic. [00:14:08]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —change, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: At first [she was] living with her mother-in-law, who, by all accounts, was a very difficult woman, and had just lost her husband. It was funny, in these letters—it's really, I think, kind of fascinating. The whole time from '44—the letters continue to about '53—she talks about food nonstop. About what she's going to eat that night. I mean, these are daily letters that kind of—she writes 15 pages and then mails it. And then another 15. They go off at two or three-day intervals.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's quite a lot of writing.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's a lot of writing, but you realize it's sort of like social—it's like being in touch—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, it would be like being on Facebook or something.

THOMAS LAWSON: Facebook or texting or something. It's just staying in touch, you know?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And it's just everyday life.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's everyday life.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Like, "What are we having for dinner?" Did they try and eat British food, or did they eat Algerian food?

THOMAS LAWSON: I think there was a French influence. But not a—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: No hummus.[Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: No hummus, no. But the thing is, part of the sort of fascination with food is that they were rationing. There was rationing, and ration cards. So it's like: I have a card for an egg, and I have a friend who has another card for some bacon. And so—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So this was true in Algeria as well?

THOMAS LAWSON: No. So this is what's interesting. It's like, through the war, of course. But then she's writing back to her parents from Algiers. They're on rations, and she's not.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, I mean, food rationing continued in Britain for some years after the war.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, into the '50s. [00:16:00] Then there was kind of like the supplements. I remember drinking orange juice and cod liver oil and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Orange was—I remember, as a child myself, you would always get an orange in your Christmas stocking, and it wasn't that big of a deal to us as a child, but it was obviously a carryover from when getting an orange, a real orange, was a big deal.

THOMAS LAWSON: Did you get milk at school?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yes, we were given milk at school every day. Half a pint in the morning, and half a pint in the afternoon, I think. Little half-pint glass milk bottles.

THOMAS LAWSON: These little glass milk bottles, yeah, that froze in the winter. But there's also—I mean, we got orange juice and cod liver oil every—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: At school?

THOMAS LAWSON: No, at home. But it was delivered—I mean, it was a government thing, to keep us free of scurvy and rickets and so on [laughs] because they were still rationing.

So she's in this place where there's no rationing, but to—if she needed a chicken for dinner, she had to go to the market and buy a live chicken, and deal with that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I don't know, I'm imagining that they would have had servants.

THOMAS LAWSON: It seemed not. She doesn't talk about that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's interesting. So maybe that's just my misconception of how people would live.

THOMAS LAWSON: I mean, there may have been—I don't know, there may have been some kind of helpers, but

not live-in people.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So she would prepare the food herself?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And was trying to make proper food, Scottish food. [Laughs.] [00:18:00] So then when I was in the works, so to speak, they decided that it would be—because now—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You're the first child?

THOMAS LAWSON: I'm the first child. They're living in this place where on some level they expect to have a future, but on another level, that's beginning to seem unlikely. My mother, with me inside her, went back to Glasgow, so that I would be born in Glasgow. Then for the next three years, I had this amazing jet-setting life, that I flew—went back and forth. We took the train down to London, flew to Paris, to Algiers, or took ships from Algiers to Marseilles, and then ships to London or—just back and forth, back and forth, until '53.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But you don't, presumably, remember this?

THOMAS LAWSON: I don't remember it. My first memory of all of this travel around—so just at the very end of that, my dad was desperately trying to find other work, and because of his expertise, he kept being offered things in Aden, which are even worse than Algiers in some ways. He found, at one point, a gig in Dublin. So we moved to Dublin, but they didn't like it. It's curious to me why. Again, right in her letters, she sort of says how there's this terrible poverty and everything. And then—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So people could come from Glasgow—

THOMAS LAWSON: She actually—I mean, she's got self-consciousness enough to say, "I know this sounds funny, talking about that Dublin is worse than Glasgow, but it's worse than Glasgow." [They laugh.] [00:20:01] So they moved back to Glasgow in 1954. We lived with my grandparents for a while, and then they found a little house.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And they found work? Or your dad found work?

THOMAS LAWSON: My dad found work, but it wasn't in his area of expertise. So he had this—I always felt that he had a kind of disappointing career. He basically did office work for a variety of companies.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Whereas you can imagine another trajectory where he could have become a powerful oil company executive or something.

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, exactly. And oddly enough, in his final—in his 60s, he was contacted by some of these *Pied-Noir* French people who had now left Algiers for Marseilles, and had ended up in Paris, working at Total, the French oil company. They hired him in some fairly significant managerial position for his last five years of work, and they moved to London for those years. This is after I had left home, so it's sort of not part of my experience. But in an odd way, he kind of ended maybe where he should have, but had this kind of struggle to make ends meet all these years in Glasgow.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So who did he work for in Glasgow?

THOMAS LAWSON: It was some kind of accounting firm for the longest time, up until I would say 1963 or '64 or something. And then Rolls-Royce out in East Kilbride. [00:22:00] That coincided with me being a bratty teenager. He went to bed at nine o'clock, because he had to get up at five to get to this workplace. Just before nine o'clock, I would pick an argument with him every night about his backward-looking politics, as I saw them. [Laughs.] Then I would go and watch some amazing television, because '60s television in Britain—I mean, it was very limited, but BBC Two had amazing arts programming.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, I remember. BBC Two is responsible for a lot of my formation as—

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, exactly!

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Everything from, literally, John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*—I don't know whether that literally was on BBC Two, but it felt like it should be. And through film series they would run on French film, or Cuban film. I remember seeing—

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly. And there was a—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You know, with three channels, you were still seeing amazing stuff—

THOMAS LAWSON: You were seeing amazing stuff—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —almost every night.

THOMAS LAWSON: —in the evening hours, once my parents were gone to bed. It was fantastic. One thing I remember too, is they did—the Royal Shakespeare Company had a series about the Wars of the Roses plays, and it was eye-opening. I mean—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yes, I watched that one. [They laugh.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, very much, as you say, kind of formative material.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's an interesting moment, because in an era when there was a generation coming up that was eager for a broader horizon, and the place you were getting it actually, weirdly—considering we live in America now, and the state of American TV—but it was from the mainstream network television. [00:24:01] They also had amazing documentaries that would come on regularly about things all over the world, and great drama, and great historical things, films.

Okay, we're already kind of up to—

THOMAS LAWSON: Anyway, ask.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So you have a brother?

THOMAS LAWSON: I have a brother. We moved into this—I really loved my grandmother. She had this old tenement. I didn't love my grandfather. He was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: This is on your mother's side?

THOMAS LAWSON: My mother's parents, yeah. He was kind of grumpy and didn't really know what to do with kids, I think.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, yeah. That generation.

THOMAS LAWSON: But they lived in a fabulous old flat, one of those great Glasgow flats. It was the Southside of Glasgow. They were in Langside. I grew up in Cathcart, which is kind of next to it. Big hallway with a grandfather clock that ticks, heartbeat of the house. Huge kitchen with a big kitchen table, and a bed alcove, actually. You know, big—still had the cast-iron fire cooking stove area. And a living room, and a dining room that we only used at Christmas. [Laughs.] You know, it was that kind of—and so I spent a lot of time there, talking with my granny. As a little family, we got this little house, a brand-new house, in an area that had been a farm. As I was growing —

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Was it a development, like a—

THOMAS LAWSON: It was a little development.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —Wimpey house or a—

THOMAS LAWSON: Something like that, yeah. I don't know if it was Wimpey, but it was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But a developer who put up a lot of houses.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yes, it was a development of, I think, three streets. [00:26:00] I was just back there last summer, just to check it out, and discovered that the distance between the flat and the house was like five minutes. I remembered it being miles.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: A long way.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. [Laughs.] And the house was tiny. I mean, shockingly tiny. It had two bedrooms. It had one for the parents, and one for the kids. But I remember, when we moved there, how excited I was.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, of this whole house.

THOMAS LAWSON: Because it was our little house. I got a wheelbarrow for my birthday, a bright red wheelbarrow, and I helped my dad dig up the garden and paint the fence. You know, all that kind of thing. Then, a year later, my brother shows up. It was like—[gasps].

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, "What the hell?"

THOMAS LAWSON: What the hell? [They laugh.] I mean, we had this kind of idyllic little life. I remember playing

with—my brother and I shared a bedroom, but it was my room. [Laughs.] I had this—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: How much younger is he than you?

THOMAS LAWSON: He's four years.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Four years.

THOMAS LAWSON: I had this sort of thing laid out on the floor that was a kind of village train set battlefield, with—I used Meccano and miniBrix and different kind—which is a precursor to Lego—things to build up this little town, and played endlessly within this—I created my little domain. And he wasn't allowed to—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —touch one thing. Yeah, right. [00:27:57]

THOMAS LAWSON: [Laughs.] And the primary school that I went to, Holmlea Primary, which is—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What was the name of it?

THOMAS LAWSON: Holmlea, over on Cathcart Road. I had a neighborhood friend, and we used to walk to school. Which—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, another thing that wouldn't happen here.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. There were two ways to school. There was a river, the River Cart, in this neighborhood. We would walk to school in one direction, past this big factory called Weir's, and play marbles and things in the street. And then on the way home, we would come back on the other side of the river, really along the river, mucking around in this waterway, catching little fish and things like that. So again, it was kind of idyllic in some ways. You know?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Sounds like it.

THOMAS LAWSON: I didn't do very well at the beginning. I have memories of some really nasty teachers. The type with the ruler that thwacked you.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Crack your—yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

THOMAS LAWSON: I blame a Mrs. Runciman particularly, for my inability to do arithmetic—even today—because I just froze. But in the last couple of years, a young guy who I suspect was probably gay came on the scene, and—completely different attitude to teaching, and all about bringing out our creativity. [Mr. Gilfillan. –TL] He was great. He was fantastic. But also rigorous. We would spend hours doing spelling and grammar and kind of the basics of writing in the morning, and then in the afternoon we would do art. [00:29:59]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So was that the first time—and maybe you could say your environment, if I can call it that, that you created at home is an early kind of art-making—but was that the first time that you became interested in art, per se, at primary school? With this teacher?

THOMAS LAWSON: I think so. Yeah. I still have some watercolors and things that I did at that time. Some of them are—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So you would be like nine or ten years old?

THOMAS LAWSON: Probably. Some of them are observational. There's a picture of a thrush that's actually pretty good for, you know, that. But I also got interested through him in the kind of decorative letter forms of Celtic book illustrations, or illuminations. *Book of Kells*, things like that. So I kind of—more of a sense of the abstract formality of picture-making. Got a little boost from this guy.

Around that time too, I had started going to see things, actually with my granny. We would go to Kelvingrove. She was this tiny little woman. She was really dedicated to Glasgow. She loved Glasgow, and she loved to explore the city and see how it was changing.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Which was changing quite a lot in the early '60s.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was changing a lot. Yeah, yeah. We used to—first off, we would take trams. We would take the last tram rides in different lines as the trams were cutting down.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Did you put a penny on the track?

THOMAS LAWSON: Of course. [Laughs.] [00:31:58] And went to what's now called Tramway for the finale. There

was a day when all the trams—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That was it for trams.

THOMAS LAWSON: —paraded in to be the end of trams. So she took me to Kelvingrove. One of her interests was, Salvador Dalí had made this—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yes, *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*. I remember when I would go to Kelvingrove Art Galleries as well as a child. There were two paintings that really made a huge impact on me. One of them, the Dalí, which is a late Dalí, very religious, hyper-realistic.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's a very weird painting.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's an overhead view of the crucifixion. The other one was a Rembrandt.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, exactly! With a helmet. [Laughs.[

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Soldier and a helmet, yeah. [*A Man in Armour*.] Same two paintings, right?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, okay. [They laugh.]

THOMAS LAWSON: I mean, those are the paintings, right?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: That and the model ships, I think, are the [laughs]—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: The Kelvingrove, in those days, was a great sort of 19th-century model. Art was upstairs, as I recall, and downstairs were suits of armour and ship models from—shipbuilding being a huge thing in Glasgow. Also, working steam engine models. I believe there was a beehive that actually had bees that went through the window, and the bees flew in and out. I remember that.

So yeah, exactly the same experience, I guess. But it was an amazing museum in those days, because you had all these things that would attract children, but a lot of pretty decent art included there, too.

THOMAS LAWSON: And I'm no fan of Dalí, but—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: No.

THOMAS LAWSON: But this weird overhead view of a figure is sort of interesting. And—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's like a crucifixion seen from above.

THOMAS LAWSON: Seen from above. And then down below it, out of whack in terms of how he gets there, there's a little boat. [00:34:00] I think, actually, that there's some elements to that that have had some kind of residual influence in the way that I think about picture-making.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: How so?

THOMAS LAWSON: In terms of sort of isolating the figure, having the figure-ground relationship be in question in some way, and the relationship of different kinds of imagery on a picture plane that are not necessarily in a logical picture plane, but that there's some other kind of connection. I mean—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And a narrative element?

THOMAS LAWSON: Possibly, yeah. I don't know. I mean, I know that I didn't ever analyze the painting consciously, but I did look at it a lot, because my gran liked to look at it. [Laughs.] And so I would go with her.

One funny thing about Holmlea Primary that I also remember is that the King of Norway came to Scotland, and he and the Queen drove past our school on whatever the—wherever they were going. We all had to stand out in the street and wave little flags. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, I can remember doing that to the Queen too, when she drove past where I went to primary school. I don't remember the King of Norway, but I'm a little younger than you, so I might just not have got that part. But I remember seeing the Queen driving by, and we all had these miniature Union Jack flags to

wave. It could have been another visit.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, maybe another one. So that was that. Primary school. Then, 11-plus. The educational system [phone rings]— [00:36:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Sorry. I'll turn that off, actually.

THOMAS LAWSON: The education system then was that there was a major kind of examination cut-off at 11, that decided your life, basically. And—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Because after that, you were divided into kind of a higher and secondary school education, and a kind of lower level where you were not expected to—

THOMAS LAWSON: You were expected to learn a trade, basically. My friend Billy was not book-smart, and so he was packed off to trade school. And—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It seems amazing, in retrospect, that at the age of 10 or 11 you're given an examination to determine the entire future course of your life. But everybody did it at that time.

THOMAS LAWSON: Everybody did it. And so I never really saw him again, because he went there, and I performed well in that exam. My parents then decided that—this was the beginning of comprehensive education. The high schools, the big high schools, were getting bigger, and they were concerned about that. So they put me through a test to go to a selective grammar school, which was still a city-run school, but it had this selectivity and some kind of minor fee. The school that I went to was called the High School, the High School of Glasgow. It was in the city center.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Glasgow High, I think. That's what people—

THOMAS LAWSON: Glasgow High. Yeah, yeah. It was in the city center. It was on Holland Street, just down from the art school, just off Sauchiehall Street. [00:37:58] And so from the age of 12, I commuted to school. I took the train into the city, and then walked up from Central Station up to the school. It was an all-boys school. There was a girls' school a few blocks away. So we had interaction with the girls on the walk up from the station, but during the school day, we were kind of separate.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I can remember the kids in my neighborhood that went to Glasgow High. You know, they would come off the train. They also commuted into the center, and we would throw things at them—

THOMAS LAWSON: Of course.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —when they came back. [They laugh.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, because we had to wear a uniform.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: They had a fancy uniform, and it marked them out as—for other kids, you were marked out as a little bit elite, and therefore treated with hostility.

THOMAS LAWSON: And rightfully so. I mean, it's interesting, because again, this summer, just kind of looking through things, I came across some school magazines from my last few years. And I designed one. I was an editor and designer of the—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So magazine publishing began very early on.

THOMAS LAWSON: We'll get into magazine publishing. But the ones up until the one that I designed—it's so smug. I mean, the writing style is smug, a little precious. The boys are clearly all going to become lawyers and bankers. It's just horrifying. But my parents—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, of course. They were helping you, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: —rightly or wrongly thought that this was this thing. Then this becomes a theme. So in the first two years of this school, the curriculum was relatively open, and you could do a range of things. I mean, you were expected to do a range, from math and science through languages, to—including Latin—English, and history, and art. [00:40:06] I really loved the art, and actually had a fabulous couple of art rooms on the top of the building, with classic, sky-lit studio rooms. I really loved them and thrived there. But I also did well in the other things. And so, at that next step, which is, I guess, going into being 15 years old—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, for the O-levels, national exams.

THOMAS LAWSON: —there was another sort of decision, and the school said that I should drop art and concentrate on languages. I mean, what we would think of as liberal arts. And—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I had the exact same experience. I loved art. We had a great art teacher. You got to the point of the all-level things, and if you were going on the main academic track, art was no longer an option.

THOMAS LAWSON: So I protested, and said I didn't want to—that I wanted to do art. My parents went and talked to the headmaster, and I had to drop art. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. Not like today, where that's a conversation. It's interesting, because the basic assumption was, if you were intelligent enough to do the sort of mainstream academically oriented program, then you were not going to do art. It would have been like wanting to do home economics or woodwork or something.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly, it—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Those were then eliminated from—

THOMAS LAWSON: It was another version of this thing that had happened to my friend Billy, that art—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you're sifted out at each—

THOMAS LAWSON: Art would have been—art was seen as—even in this elite school, the less-performing kids would be pushed into art, and would then go to art school and learn textiles or something. [00:42:07] You know? [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, it was the exact same. It's for sort of more middle-class students. They come to the conclusion that you kind of lack academic aptitude, and then, well, you're going to do something, and it's—so if you like art, you can do art, go to art school, and either, like you said, do textiles in some way, or become an art teacher, which is what my assumption was. That's what people who went to art school did. They became high school art teachers.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. So anyway, it was clear that I was on a track for university. You know, I didn't love high school, but I didn't hate it. I had some teachers in the literature and language areas that were actually kind of great. And history too. I learned a lot. There was one teacher who had us reading fairly difficult 20th-century texts. You know, it was—and during one of those classes, I did research into Surrealism, and the—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Every high school student's favorite form of art.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly. And, you know, there was Dalí.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: We were told to go and do research, and near the high school there's the Mitchell Library, the city's main sort of research library. So I was sent over there to do research, and it turned out they have a collection of Surrealist magazines. [00:44:03] And so that was eye-opening. It's like, Oh, this is—I can be doing art. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, secretly.

THOMAS LAWSON: Secretly, in some way, and maybe there were other formats of thinking about art that publications and magazines and so on might actually provide some kind of thing. So there was that. I did pretty well in school, and I got my highers quickly. I mean, in the fifth year. But stayed for a sixth year, and in the sixth year, only did art. I sat out—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Because at that point, you had already got your university qualifications.

THOMAS LAWSON: I had the qualifications—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And you had one more year to do whatever you wanted, basically?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. I actually did some more advanced literature studies and things like that too, but basically I did art. That's when I worked on this magazine. Luckily, the teacher who was sort of supervising it was open-minded, so we changed the format of the magazine, and we expanded it. Instead of having the school crest on the cover, I designed a graphic. We lightened up the content a little bit. I mean, still pretty—I mean, it's not like they're anything that anybody would read, but there was a little something.

I quit the—I kind of left high school in that last year, around Easter time, because it was pointless and I had a place in university. The sort of disciplinary side of the school was beginning to chafe at me in some ways. [00:46:05] I just didn't—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Like uniform violations and—

THOMAS LAWSON: Uniform. Attendance things. I was actually—one of the shocking things, I think, about thinking back about Scottish education is the strap.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Oh, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: This sort of famous leather tool that teachers had up their sleeves. Over the course of my career in school, I had the strap several times. In this last year, I was disciplined because I couldn't stand what was going on. And I just refused to—I don't even remember what my infraction was, but I refused something, and I was hauled up to the same headmaster who had not allowed me to do art when I wanted to, and I really didn't like him. We had words, and his only way out was to give me the strap. I was just livid, and I just never went back. I mean, it was just like—you know. The—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I remember getting the strap in a studio art class for talking to the student next to me. I just turned to him and said something, and was belted with a leather belt six times on your hands for that.

THOMAS LAWSON: The hands crossed.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you have to hold out your hands, one above the other, and they would hit you, some of them as hard as they could, with a leather belt, six times. There was also a humiliating thing where they would offer you the alternative of writing lines, like, "I will not talk in class" a hundred times. But as a boy, it was socially unacceptable to take the lines offer, even though I would have preferred to. You had to take the strap. Yeah, it's amazing when you look back on it. [00:48:00] I mean, not to mention the fact that teachers would also just clip you around the ear, or just hit you spontaneously as well. That was all considered kind of okay.

THOMAS LAWSON: Our teachers wore their academic gowns.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, mine too. Well, some of them.

THOMAS LAWSON: Some of them, yeah. They would hide the belt—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: They would keep it up the sleeve, yeah. Ours did that too.

THOMAS LAWSON: Up that big—and then whack it on the desk sometimes.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Exactly the same. They must have taught that in teacher training college. [They laugh.]

THOMAS LAWSON: And what was it, Lochgelly or something? There's one place that made—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, they made the straps.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's unbelievable. So I left school, and for the next several months, worked as a—I worked for a small contractor.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: A building contractor?

THOMAS LAWSON: A building contractor in the south side of Glasgow. He had little jobs. I mean, they were kind of small, handyman-type jobs. He had a workforce that was—there was an old tradesman who was hilarious, and I learned a lot of bad language from, and who did the kind of plaster work and things like that. And a younger guy, and me. I became the driver, because I at this point had learned to drive. We would drive all over the city. Part of my job would be to placate the customers, because of course we were always not there. You know, it was like, "You were supposed to be here last week." [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Some things never change.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, never change. Then we would do a little work, and then be taken away again. Just make them feel happy, and keep going. But it was interesting, because I learned to—in terms of my later life in New York, I learned some useful skills. [00:50:01] You know, I learned some basic plumbing, and some basic sort of—how to nail boards together and things, you know. Things that I wouldn't necessarily have learned in the way that I grew up, because my parents weren't handy or anything.

So it was an interesting sort of moment of just learning how the world works. I mean, in terms of putting things

together, but also this kind of idea of how small businesses work, [laughs] and how you kind of negotiate through the conflicting desires of your customers and your workforce. I mean, it was all really kind of interesting. I can't remember the guy's name, but he had a sense of humor that was kind of fun.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And then you went to university?

THOMAS LAWSON: And then I went to university.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: How did you decide where to go and what to study?

THOMAS LAWSON: I went to—well, my decision was that I—by this time, I have to say, I kind of hated Glasgow. Glasgow, during these years, was very depressed, very dark, very black. Everything was covered in soot. Its industries were folding. During the '60s, the shipyards closed. There was sort of a final attempt to keep it open with—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, the occupation of the shipyards.

THOMAS LAWSON: With the occupation, and the workers taking it over. That didn't really work. The steel mills on the outskirts were closing down. It was just a very depressed area. Cathcart is on the south side, and between Cathcart and the city center lies the Gorbals. I used to wander around there. [00:52:02] It was part of where I explored, particularly once I got a bike. I could go around there. Then it was steadily destroyed. They just cleared it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Gorbals was widely considered one of the worst slums. But when people look back on it, it had a character that—then they basically demolished the entire thing and turned it into a wasteland.

THOMAS LAWSON: They just wasted it. It wasn't great, and there was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, they could have put plumbing and bathrooms in, instead of razing the entire neighborhood to the ground.

THOMAS LAWSON: And the sort of Modernist dream of building new high-rise developments on the outskirts of the city.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, that didn't work out too well.

THOMAS LAWSON: Which didn't work, yeah. Really bad.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Did you go to the Citizens Theater in the Gorbals?

THOMAS LAWSON: I did go to the—yes. I used to go there. That was one of my sort of moody teenage things. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, me too. I remember seeing *Waiting for Godot* there when I was a teenager, as well as a bit of Shakespeare, and *Danton's Death* was another one.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly. It was a great program. I could get there—I mean, I probably went on the bus, I think.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I think the director in those days had the fantastically theatrical name of Giles Havergal.

THOMAS LAWSON: Giles Havergal. Yes, right. He brought a lot of really interesting thinking.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, he was great. It was a theater that was in the middle of this so-called slum, but did a wonderful program.

THOMAS LAWSON: So my desire in going to college was to get as far away from Glasgow.—Glasgow itself, and my family—as I could imagine. It sounds pathetic now, but that was St. Andrews. [00:54:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, another Scottish [laughs] town about—

THOMAS LAWSON: But it's on the other side of the country. And at that time—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: New York hadn't occurred to you at that point.

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, no. New York was not—being part of a sort of elite group in an elite school, Oxbridge was talked about, but wasn't all that appealing.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Did some people from your school go there?

THOMAS LAWSON: I don't know if anyone did in the end.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: St. Andrews is, probably still, widely considered the best university in Scotland.

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, yes. It is and isn't.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: With Edinburgh, I suppose, and Glasgow.

THOMAS LAWSON: Certainly, it was the—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But it was the oldest.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's the oldest. It's in same age bracket as the Oxbridge Colleges is. But the thing is, in terms of distance, there was no motorway system at that point, and so getting to St. Andrews from Glasgow was actually quite a long trip. I mean, you couldn't even get out of Glasgow easily. You had to drive through all kinds of complicated systems, through the East End, to get to the dual carriageway that then went to the Kincardine Bridge, and then through Perthshire [laughs]—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But you didn't go up on the train, then?

THOMAS LAWSON: No, because the train had been closed. I mean, there was Leuchars, but Leuchars is a kind of bus trip away from St. Andrews. Well, here's the thing. My beloved granny, when I turned 17—at this point, we had moved house again, and we moved a little further away. [00:56:00] She offered to buy me a car, if I would learn to drive it and promise to bring her to our house every Friday evening for our tea, and any other trips that she needed.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Pretty good deal.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was a great deal. So I learned to drive, and we bought this second-hand car, a Hillman Minx. So I had a car. So I was able to drive to St. Andrews.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Quite unusual for even a university student to have a car in those days.

THOMAS LAWSON: And I didn't keep the car—I mean—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What year did you go to university?

THOMAS LAWSON: '69. 1969. Yeah, I didn't keep the car there, because that was going to be too expensive and difficult. But I was able to drive there and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: With all your stuff.

THOMAS LAWSON: Get my stuff and everything. I loved it at first. It was so romantic. You know, such an ancient city, with the ruined cathedral, the ruined castle. Down by the harbor, this great pier that sticks out into the North Sea that you can—when you're feeling moody, you can go for a walk at midnight and get blown about. It was great. I was studying English literature, because at that time—that seemed to be the area closest to my still—I was still harboring this idea that I wanted to study art. But it just wasn't clear—[00:58:04]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Of course, in those days, they did not offer studio art at a university.

THOMAS LAWSON: No, they didn't. During the whole kind of on-and-off business at high school, I took Saturday classes at the Art School [Glasgow School of Art]. I took sculpture classes, I took painting classes. They were all fine, but it was clear to me that there was no intellectual content to it. It was all about representational skills. It's a little harsh to say I just believed the Art School was dopey because—based on Saturday morning classes. But in the—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But it reflects that sort of generalized assumption that you went to art school if you weren't smart enough to go to university.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. And I was doing research, and I was reading magazines. In '67, '68, which is when I'm beginning to kind of become a conscious near-adult, there was this amazing magazine culture in Scotland and in Britain. There was *Oz* down in London, which was sort of psychedelic. Amazing. I mean, I still have some copies of it. Amazing sort of psychedelic design, and very radical politics. There was the schoolkids issue, which people my age had been asked to edit the magazine.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And for which the editors were prosecuted.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly, because these kids brought in all this pornographic imagery. [They laugh.] And wild politics that was sort of—so that was kind of eye-opening. [01:00:00] In Scotland, it was much more sober, but equally stimulating. There was a magazine called *Scottish International*, and it was a magazine dedicated to thinking about Scottish politics and Scottish culture, and sort of a beginning of an argument about independence of some kind.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: There was a sort of—alternative press, nationally in Britain and also in Scotland, was very big then. I remember there were some people around Dundee, where I moved shortly after that, who had gone up to the Highlands and founded the *West Highland Free Press*, which was a kind of left-wing but rural Highlands-based newspaper that sustained for many years, and built an audience there, partly in Gaelic as well as in English. It was a very interesting moment.

THOMAS LAWSON: The *Scottish International* was, I think, actually some of the same people, because the poets, particularly the Gaelic-speaking poets and things, they're all kind of in there. There was a whole series in the *Scottish International*, like in '68, '69, written by Cordelia Oliver, who was the art critic for the *Guardian*, with a specific kind of coverage of Scotland. It was like, "What's the matter with art schools?" I just read them again this summer. She really takes them down. That it was a kind of crony system, that they hired their own students. That all they were interested in was handing down skills that were no longer relevant. They weren't thinking about politics or content of any sort. There was no acknowledgement of the kind of work that Ricky Demarco was bringing to Scotland at that time. [01:02:01] The work from Dusseldorf, Joseph Beuys.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, Ricky Demarco—

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RUSSELL FERGUSON: What year did Ricky Demarco bring Joseph Beuys to Edinburgh?

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, '68.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Right around that time, yeah. But completely outside the art school context, of course.

THOMAS LAWSON: Outside of the Glasgow Art School context.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Maybe in Edinburgh, it was a little better.

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, reading in between the lines, he persuaded someone at the Edinburgh College to put on this show, but the people who actually worked at the college did all they could to actually destroy it. I mean, they would have the janitors clear things away. Then someone would have to come back and say, "Bring that back here!" So it was clear to me that going to Glasgow Art School wasn't going to be the thing that I wanted to do. So I pursued the university.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Which probably made your parents happier. You're kind of staying on the full academic track.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly. Right. The thing about Scottish education at that time—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And neither of your parents had been to university.

THOMAS LAWSON: They hadn't been at all, no.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So there's a lot of value attached—

THOMAS LAWSON: Absolutely.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —to going to St. Andrews.

THOMAS LAWSON: Actually, on my mother [and her family –TL]—we had a kind of emotional attachment to the East Fife. My grandfather actually died in St. Andrews. He was a big golfer, and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Playing golf? [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, he wasn't actually playing golf, but he was on a golfing holiday, and he had a heart attack. We used to go there for holidays and things. It wasn't too foreign for her to think of. Like, "He's leaving home, but it's somewhere I can imagine." [00:02:00] It was a curious moment, I think, because it was this period when youth culture was sort of expanding its interest. So St. Andrews had wild people, even though—the

university itself was a little hidebound, overly traditional, and the English department was a backwater. It just wasn't the greatest department. But surrounding it, there were all these kind of dope-smoking hippies. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. That's the first moment when going to university involved smoking dope. [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: So there was kind of a lively life at night of talking about big ideas and things. In the first year, you had to stay in one of the residence halls. That had its—that was fine. I actually—I really lucked out. I was assigned a corner room, a nice big corner room, with a roommate. This roommate was a divinity student from Kilmarnock, south of Glasgow. He and I would have these long conversations about sin.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow.

THOMAS LAWSON: In the first semester, he got increasingly agitated about sin and his own relationship to it, because it turned out he had a girlfriend who was in Dundee. They would see each other on the weekends.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And sin?

THOMAS LAWSON: And sin was filling their minds. He would want to talk to me about this. He just got more and more—and I would be kind of like, "What are you?"—it wasn't clear that they were doing anything more than lusting after each other, but not actually even touching maybe. [00:04:07] They got themselves into this sort of panic, where they became convinced that she was pregnant.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And you suspect they hadn't actually done anything that would—

THOMAS LAWSON: I know that they hadn't. [They laugh.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's another era. In some ways, it's like today. In other ways, it's another world.

THOMAS LAWSON: I mean, his innocence about—you know.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Lustful thoughts could make you pregnant.

THOMAS LAWSON: Lustful thoughts. They pressed against his pants. You know, it was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's enough. [They laugh.]

THOMAS LAWSON: But the brilliant outcome of that was that he took time off.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So you have the room to yourself?

THOMAS LAWSON: So I had this fabulous room to myself for the second half of the year, which was great. Then in the next years, I lived off-campus, in different kind of—in the little towns. There's a little town called Crail, another one called Anstruther. I lived in a country kind of farm house.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Like a cottage?

THOMAS LAWSON: It was grander than a cottage, but it was rooms above a—it was funny; I mean, this has nothing to do with anything, but it's hilarious. The house that this apartment was in was just recently for sale, and Susan, who we'll talk about coming up—Susan Morgan for the record [laughs]—discovered it online somewhere and said, "This is the place you lived in for a year, isn't it?" It's this beautiful Edwardian house on a hilltop above Tayport, with a view across to Dundee. [00:06:01] It was fabulous. It had a very idyllic view.

But the weird thing about it was that the people who actually owned the house, the landlords who lived there, were American. I would always describe them as being very right-wing, based on the conversations I had with them. They had this habit of reading Homer to their five-year-old children as bedtime reading. So then these bratty kids would attack us with their—they had their big broadswords, and they would challenge us to—[laughs] you know, they would be Achilles, or I don't know what. But it was a pretty weird scene. They weren't attached to [St. Andrews –TL]—I think they taught in the school system or something. They were clearly on the run in some way. They were from Maryland, and they had these terrible views about all kinds of stuff. So we only stayed there a year.

Anyway, talking to Susan about this—so the house had fallen apart, fallen to ruin, and it was for sale for not very much money just last year. So we were kind of talking about it, and [remembering this story. –TL] Through the conversation, actually, I remembered the names of this couple. So Susan got online, did her research magic, and found out that the woman's sister was married to the leader of the American Nazi party. [Laughs.] So they were in fact—[00:08:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow.

THOMAS LAWSON: Which is, I think, a curious aspect to—I don't know, I tend to think of Scotland as being a fairly benign place. Mostly progressive, mostly looking out for people, but there is, even there, this undercurrent of nasty.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well, especially those days, overwhelmingly white. I suppose people who like that would move there.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. So, four years in St. Andrews. I got involved in different cultural things. I created an art club. There was an old building on North Street that later became the center for art history, the St. Catherine Center. It had been a primary school, I think. At that time, the university had taken over but hadn't done anything with it. So I was allowed to use the gym for my art club. There was about maybe five of us. [Laughs.] But provided a studio, which was nice.

Then, I think it would have been in—yeah, my third and fourth years. In my third year, a group of students, mostly who were involved in theater, created a festival, St. Andrews Festival, that would happen in February. No, it would be my second—I started in the second year, and then there was a hiatus, and then my final year. [00:10:00] The first year was pretty traditional. They were reaching out to whoever they could manage. They got a few things to happen at the Byre Theater, which is a small, sort of non-affiliated theater, repertory theater, and they got some films. For St. Andrews, it was sort of exciting.

Then, in the following year, Eduardo Paolozzi came up. At this point, the beginnings of the art history department had taken place, and he was promising to give his *Krazy Kat Arkive*, which was all his toys and comic books, to the university. I got involved in being part of a student group that was helping or whatever. Really didn't like him. Found him to be a kind of pompous bully, actually.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But was Paolozzi the first professional artist you had come in contact with?

THOMAS LAWSON: I think so. I think probably.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And you didn't like him? [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: And I didn't like him. I didn't like him at all. He was supposedly Scottish, but he was so English. He lived in London all his professional life, and he sounded like a Londoner, with a slightly posh accent. Very dismissive of these—I don't know why he thought he would give it to a university, because he really didn't like students. [Laughs.] He didn't leave it there. He took it away and gave it then to the National Gallery, who has it now.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: In London or in—

THOMAS LAWSON: No, in Edinburgh.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, he liked to think of himself as Scottish despite—I mean, he was, in a way.

THOMAS LAWSON: He was from Leith, but he had grown out of that. Anyway, so there were sort of things happening. [00:12:01]

In my final year, there was another iteration of the festival. These happened in February, so it's the cold, dark months. In that iteration, I was the visual arts coordinator, and I organized an exhibition of the Scottish painter Pat Douthwaite, who's been forgotten, but an amazing kind of expressionist-figurative painter. A little bit influenced by Bacon or something like that, but feminist. I mean, really, it was about the issue of being a woman. These sort of eviscerated figures and screaming heads, and very intense color combinations. Mostly one or two figures against a ground.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So this is your first curatorial effort. A lot of things happening around this time.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, and I'm completely unsupported. I mean, nobody—I'm just doing this. I get this guy Douglas Hall—who was the Keeper of the National Gallery in Scotland, with responsibility for modern art—to write an essay for a mimeographed sheet. He wrote a nice little essay. Pat was well-considered at that moment. I hung the show in another building that the university had just recently taken over that was a large house on the cliff down the road from the castle. It was called Castle Cliff. So it was a domestic situation. I hung these giant paintings. [00:14:00] I had no idea what I was doing, so I got far too many paintings, and found a way to hang them all. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Did you borrow them from different private collections?

THOMAS LAWSON: Mostly from her. I contacted her directly. I don't even—I think she sent me—I don't even know—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: She sent a lot of paintings. Yeah, yeah, different world there, too, where you don't necessarily need a model of this space.

THOMAS LAWSON: So then Douglas Hall comes to the opening and tells me I've done a good job, but I've hung far too many paintings, and I really should—and it was like, "Well, thanks for telling me now"—kind of thing. [Laughs.] Where were you mentoring me before this? But Cordelia Oliver, who I just mentioned, wrote a really great review, even saying, "It's crowded, but it suits the work."

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Oh, God. Revenge.

THOMAS LAWSON: [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: All of this seems quite ambitious for an undergraduate student. Were you conscious that you were kind of reaching beyond what a typical student would do?

THOMAS LAWSON: No. I would have to say that part of my problem is that I think of things to do and do them without actually realizing that there's—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well, that's how things get done. If you knew how complicated it was going to be, you wouldn't do it in the first place, probably.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly. Right. I did this in the first place because I was fed up with the lack of visual arts at the university. The previous version of the festival had not included the visual arts, and so when it was announced that they were going to do another one, I just went and introduced myself and said, We need to do this. [00:16:02] So I did that.

I also organized an exhibition of a local Dundee artist who did kind of conceptual performance work, whose name I've now forgotten.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: There was a conceptual performance artist in Dundee in the late '60s, early '70s?

THOMAS LAWSON: Early '70s now, yeah.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. Right?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's news to me. [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. I'm still trying to dig into bits and pieces to see if I can dig up his name, but he's gone. So yeah, there were things happening. All this time, I would go down to Edinburgh fairly regularly to check out what was going on with Ricky Demarco.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, at that point, Ricky Demarco, I guess, was the figure in Scotland for what you would call avant-garde art. And he was connected in Europe, and he was connected with the Festival, Edinburgh Festival, and he was bringing people in.

THOMAS LAWSON: He was bringing people in. He had a multi-story building in the New Town, on Melville Crescent, that was like, I don't know, five stories high or something, that was all galleries and spaces. He nearly always seemed to have these very dark expressionist works from Poland. Kind of really psychologically penetrating things.

I have a memory of getting down there early in the morning on a weekend, because Hugh MacDiarmid was going to be—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: The poet.

THOMAS LAWSON: The poet. The great Marxist, nationalist poet. I was super excited, and I was determined to get there early because of course there would be hundreds of people there, because he was so famous and so important and all this. I get there, and I was the only one there. [00:18:02]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Oh, it's so sad.

THOMAS LAWSON: Even Ricky wasn't there. It was just—and so—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.] You mean it was literally just you and Hugh MacDiarmid?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yes.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Oh, my God.

THOMAS LAWSON: And Hugh MacDiarmid was a very old man at this point. The gallery had a cafe, so he and I, we went down and chatted in the cafe. Because I was in the literature department, I had actually read his poetry. [Laughs.] You know, *The Drunk Man Looks*—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: *The Drunk Man Talks to the Thistle.* [*The Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. And his sort of crazy polemics and things. I was able to have a real conversation with him. When you were asking about Paolozzi, MacDiarmid was another kind of—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And international—well—

THOMAS LAWSON: An international figure who had real ideas. I mean, they're crazy ideas—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: A professional.

THOMAS LAWSON: But a real professional. And unlike Paolozzi, he was willing—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, to talk to a student.

THOMAS LAWSON: To talk to a student. [Laughs.] And didn't even seem fazed that I was the only one there.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, it probably wasn't the first time it happened. [They laugh.] So sad, really.

THOMAS LAWSON: Sandy Moffat, who's a friend, who was a portrait painter and head of painting at Glasgow in the 1990s, was just recently—I just went—he has a book out about his portraits, and his portraits are all about the poets of Scotland, kind of the literary world. I was just recently at a book launch kind of thing for that, and he was talking about it, and he was talking about MacDiarmid. And that at one point, I think in the '60s, MacDiarmid ran for parliament. [00:20:04] He opposed Sir Alec Douglas-Home, who had given up his peerage to become a commoner, so that he could become an MP, so he could become prime minister. MacDiarmid stood against him as a Communist in Perthshire, which is like the most conservative part of Scotland. [They laugh.] Of course, it was a wipeout, and MacDiarmid got something like 120 votes. And apparently he demanded a recount.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Not because he thought he should have won or anything, but he couldn't believe that there were 120. [They laugh.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: People in Perthsire who would vote Communist, yeah. That's funny.

THOMAS LAWSON: But anyway. And in terms of magazines, there was also a magazine at St. Andrews called *Echoes*. That was the student magazine, literary magazine. It was an annual. Kind of like this festival, it was kind of dominated by literary and theatrical people. There was one issue, one year, that had an LSD-influenced aspect to it, dominated by a very egotistical guy with a fake French name, who kind of thought that he was, I don't know, the next iteration of Beat poetry or something. [00:22:03] Again, I've seen it recently, and it's just dreadful. I've tried to Google this guy, and it doesn't seem to appear. Who knows what ever happened.

But the following year, I designed the cover and had some editorial influence too. Again, I was sort of trying to find these different ways of doing things.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So at St. Andrews, you start meeting people who do this full-time, whether it's Paolozzi or MacDiarmid. You begin to organize and be a protagonist in some of these things.

THOMAS LAWSON: In some way.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Even at a student level. So presumably, after four years, you got your degree in English literature?

THOMAS LAWSON: Right.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What happens then?

THOMAS LAWSON: As I said, in that last maybe two years or one year, an art history department opened up.

There was this guy John Steer, who was the professor. He was a fairly dynamic and sort of force-for-good kind of character. So I discovered that there was this kind of academic way into art that—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Through art history.

THOMAS LAWSON: Through art history, that I didn't know about. He told me that there was a postgraduate program in Edinburgh that I should look into. So I went down to look at that, and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: At Edinburgh University?

THOMAS LAWSON: It was at Edinburgh University, but it had a connection to the art college. [00:24:00] It had been created by this guy Talbot Rice, who was a super interesting figure, friend of Herbert Read's, and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: The gallery, later, in Edinburgh, is named after—

THOMAS LAWSON: And the gallery was named after him. He and his wife had become—they had originally been interested in sort of Middle Eastern art, and then that transformed into an interest in Russian art, and eventually the Russian avant-garde. So it was kind of an interesting sort of background to that.

Talbot Rice had been the head of this department from the mid-'30s until 1970 or something. So he was no longer there, but his influence was big. The new head was a guy called Giles Robertson. Who does the portrait photographs? Is it Struth?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Thomas Struth, yeah. There's a great photograph of Giles Robertson and his wife, I think.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, exactly. So I went down to investigate this. It seemed promising. I applied, was interviewed. They seemed to like me. I got a place.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What degree would this offer, just a diploma? Or was there—

THOMAS LAWSON: At that time, it was called a postgraduate diploma, which translates into an M.A. I mean, the first degree I have is an M.A. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, because in Scotland, your first degree is an M.A. Yeah, of course.

THOMAS LAWSON: Honors. M.A. honors, please. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What class?

THOMAS LAWSON: Two-one.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Excellent.

THOMAS LAWSON: So I went down to Edinburgh for two years to do this. It was really interesting. My main advisor was a guy called Ivor Davies, who was an artist. [00:26:01] Part of the Destruction in Art movement. Liked to blow up things and set things on fire and everything. But also, academically, had an interest in the Russian avant-garde, and had been a student of Talbot Rice's. So that was that kind of thing.

There was this other teacher that I got on well with, Alistair Rowan, who was a specialist in 18th century and particularly architecture. With him, I discovered Robert Adam and the whole sort of Scottish enlightenment moment in arts and architecture, which was cool. I kind of enjoyed that. We did a lot of field trips and went to see country houses. I learned—Adam is a kind of amazing figure, because there's the formal, spatial arrangements of the volumetrics of his houses—the Palladian style with the central pavilion—and then the sort of outbuildings, and the way it all kind of masses together is very abstract and very pure. Then he loads them up with ridiculous amounts of interior decoration, with curlicues and chinoiserie and all kinds of crazy stuff. I found that really eye-opening. I just had never thought about country houses being anything but places that rich people live in. [Laughs.] To think of them as being potentially works of art in some way had some significance to me. And I liked the fact that they were Scottish, that he had gone down to Rome and to Spoleto and different places to study. [00:28:04] Really study. I mean, he made these books of his drawings, of pretty precise archeological drawings of Roman ruins, and the Diocletian baths and things. This was really fascinating.

Then Ivor was really supportive of the idea that contemporary art could be something to study. Toward the end of my first year, this became a bit of an issue, because the department itself was an art historian department, and I was a fish out of water. I wasn't interested in doing the kind of provenance type of work that some of them really expected. I was good at describing works and sort of exploring how they were put together and how they worked, but I could give a toss as to who had ordered them, or who bought them, or who bought them later. You know, just no interest to me. So both of these teachers stood up for me. Alistair on the side of, like, "Well, you're

a really interesting writer, and there's a voice developing here that—I don't get it, but I recognize it." And Ivor on the—you know, "It's, like, art." [Laughs.] Toward the end of the first year—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: How long was the program?

THOMAS LAWSON: It's a two-year program. To graduate, you had to write a thesis. Somewhere in that spring of the first year, I had a meeting with Ivor to discuss what my thesis would be. [00:30:00] We were having this back-and-forth, and it's like, I really don't want to do this art historical thing. He said, "No, you've got this interest in contemporary art. Maybe the way to finesse the problem in the department here is to create a primary document. Why don't you interview a living artist, someone that you find interesting, and make that the core of your thesis?"

I said, "That sounds interesting. How do I go about that?" He said, "Who are you interested in?" I had been spending a lot of time—I should say, the Talbot Rice at that time was not that much of a gallery, really. I mean, it had opened, but it was not clear what was going on with it. But next to it was the Playfair Library, which was this ornate, big, empty library that was available as a sort of study area. They got *Artforum* and *Studio International*, so I spent a lot of time in there, reading stuff. So I was reasonably well up on contemporary art for someone living in Scotland at that moment. I had become interested in Jasper Johns. So I said to Ivor, "Well, this guy Jasper Johns is interesting, I think." He said, "That would be interesting. It would be a challenge, but that would be good." [00:32:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: This is kind of early to mid-'70s?

THOMAS LAWSON: It would be early '74. Late '73, early '74. He said, "So why don't you do that?" I said, "How do I find him? Where is he? I don't know where he is." He said, "Well, look in the magazines that you've been looking at and see where he shows, and write to his gallery." So I did that. It's like, Oh, Leo Castelli, 420 West Broadway.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Name that meant nothing to you in those—

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, it only meant what it meant, but—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Was Castelli already on West Broadway?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yes, yes, yes, because I wrote a letter. Jasper Johns, care of Leo Castelli, 420 West Broadway. Within several weeks, I got a reply from Jasper. A handwritten note saying, "I would love to talk to you. I'm going to be in New York this summer. If you're here—if you find yourself here, give me a call. This number." Kind of amazing. [Laughs.] So I decided I better find a way to go to New York.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You had never been to America before?

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, so I have to backtrack a little bit here, on two scores. One is I had been to America before, in 1967, on some kind of exchange situation that I can't quite remember the details of. A friend of mine and I went to Crawfordsville, Indiana for several weeks in the summer and stayed with a family. We had a shockingly weird time. [00:34:00] It was quite a large family, and they lived in this small town, which is near Indianapolis. But it's a small town. The feature of the town is that it's the home of whoever the man is who wrote *Ben-Hur*. [. . . Lew Wallace. –TL] Anyway, it's this town, and it's a rural town. The highlight of our visit was the tractor pull. We were told that this was going to be the great thing. They take us to this place, and then there's these tractors doing a tug-of-war. It's like, What? [Laughs.] And, you know, we eat corn dogs, and have the giant Cokes that—never seen this much Coke with anywhere close to that quantity of ice. I mean, it was just like, Wow.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Scotland, in those days, if you got one ice cube, you were living pretty large.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, right. We were just finding it really bewildering. One of the first places they took us to is the fallout shelter in the high school, so that we would know where to go. We were like, we actually live down the river from—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: A nuclear base.

THOMAS LAWSON: A nuclear submarine base. And we don't think anything of this, and you're out here in the middle of nowhere, and you're panicking about—I mean, "What is wrong with you people?" Then they would drive us around town and show us the bad parts, which of course were the places where black people live. I mean, the racism was—we were beginning to think that we were in the South, but we were in—well, I guess—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I suppose it's the Midwest. [00:36:07]

THOMAS LAWSON: It's the Midwest. Anyway, it was a very bizarre thing. On the way home, we got one day in New York City, and saw the Empire State Building or something. A strange introduction to America, but something.

Then the other thing I need to fill in, in the family history, is that my father's elder brother stayed on in Algiers throughout the war, working for the British consulate. He was there until '63, until liberation. As a result of that, he was given a kind of easy posting, and he went to Paris. I got to visit him in Paris when I was 15, I think.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He worked for the embassy there?

THOMAS LAWSON: He worked for the embassy there. So I got to see—went to the Louvre and saw all that kind of thing. That was actually pretty significant in my education, I think, of seeing stuff. And then after Paris, he was posted to New York. He was in New York, and so I had a place to stay. [Laughs.] So all I needed to do was find an airfare. It was just at the point where there was a guy called Freddie Laker. Do you remember him?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: Who started one of the first bargain airlines. [00:38:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I think, when he went bankrupt, he left my mother and sister—

THOMAS LAWSON: Stranded somewhere?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well, not stranded, but they had paid him, and flight never happened. But one of the first of the budget airline entrepreneurs.

THOMAS LAWSON: So I was able to afford a flight to New York. And so went, in the middle of the summer, in 1974. Yeah, 1974. I had an amazing time. I mean, it was just eye-opening.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: How long did you stay there?

THOMAS LAWSON: Probably two weeks or something. I don't actually remember, but it would have been about that. I remember seeing things. I remember seeing a Frank Stella *Protractor* painting. I had seen them illustrated in these *Artforums*.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: In the black-and-white.

THOMAS LAWSON: Maybe even in color, but they just looked like a graphic. But when you see it as a huge—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Twelve feet wide and—

THOMAS LAWSON: —presence. It was like, Wow, that's what that is. And going to SoHo, which was just the 420 building and Paula Cooper. And then this sort of amazing, kind of forgotten part of the city. I mean, New York was New York, but SoHo was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, streets were empty.

THOMAS LAWSON: They were both empty and full. They had trucks parked across them. I mean, blocking the whole street as they unloaded, because there was no traffic.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So little traffic, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: There was the smell of spices and cheese. Just all these kind of weird smells. Then you would go up into these one or two buildings and see this art that's—it was just so exciting. [00:40:02]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, and this is the first time you've seen a real art community, with multiple artists, and an audience for it, and an infrastructure for it.

THOMAS LAWSON: And spaces commensurate to it. Not in someone's living room or—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. Big, raw, industrial spaces.

THOMAS LAWSON: Big, raw spaces, yeah. I mean, because the Demarco thing, it was the house. It was a big house, but it was a house, and the rooms were rooms. So yeah, it was eye-opening. And the Modern—I just loved them. It was the old Modern, when it was just the one little building, and it was amazing. I would go back. I just went over and over, to just soak it all up.

And called up Mr. Johns, and he—"Oh, yes, I remember." [Laughs.] He said, "I'm out at a place called Stony

Point. So what you'll need to do is get a bus to Nyack"—or somewhere— "and I'll pick you up." [Laughs.] So, you know, I figure that out. I go to the Port Authority, get—which is—everything in New York is mind-blowing, on every level. Being on 42nd Street at that time—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, it was '76, the first time I went there. It was very different than today, and it had that—I don't know. It was sort of raucous and dirty and incredibly exciting.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, street life was just colorful. [Laughs.] [00:42:00] So I get the bus up to wherever I had been told to get off. Jasper Johns comes to meet me. He's got a little Mercedes sports car. He asks if I've been here before or whatever. Of course, No. First, he took me to Bear Mountain, which is this park on a mountain, looking over the Hudson River. We looked at—it's kind of like a little animal enclosure. They have raccoons and things. He told me how he liked to come here because he and his friend Barnett Newman used to have lunch there. [Laughs.] So I was like, "Oh," you know. [Laughs.]

So then we go back to his place, which is his house and studio, and he makes me lunch. Grilled steak and corn. There's people in and out. We talk about some things. He asks if I have any knowledge or interest in mushrooming. I was like, No. [Laughs.] And we do an interview. Unlike this, it's not recorded.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you're scribbling notes?

THOMAS LAWSON: Scribbling notes and concentrating super hard.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Were you kind of in awe of him?

THOMAS LAWSON: No, he was a super—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Because he was so friendly, you were—

THOMAS LAWSON: He was super friendly, and he wasn't that old. He was like 40-ish or something, you know? And listened to the same—we were all listening to rock and roll at that time. [00:44:03] He was older, but he wasn't, like, old. He didn't seem—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He wasn't intimidating?

THOMAS LAWSON: He wasn't intimidating or nasty like Paolozzi, and he wasn't sort of ancient like MacDiarmid. He was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Just a bit older.

THOMAS LAWSON: Just a bit older. We had a long conversation, and then he said, "You know, you should probably stay over, and we can go to my studio in the morning, my studio in town, because there's a lot of stuff you should look at there." And I did that. Nothing weird or anything. It was just like—you know. But we drank wine and played mahjong or something, and talked more. It was just really great. Then in the morning, we drove into the city, where we stopped off in the Village first to deliver the mushrooms to John Cage, who came out and said hello. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Did you know who John Cage was?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. I mean, it's—you know. Then we go to his studio on Houston Street, which was this old bank building that he had—the reason he was no longer there was that someone had been killed on the doorstep several years before. But it was still his main studio. There I met Mark Lancaster, who was this English artist that had been a student of Richard Hamilton, who was Jasper's main assistant. Mark was very nice and very friendly. [00:46:00]

They had to go over to Castelli to do some business, and they took me down into the vault of the bank and said, "Here's some work. Why don't you look at this and see if there's anything you need photographs of, and we'll be back in a couple of hours." So they left me alone in the vault with Jasper Johns's entire oeuvre. One of my obsessions at that time was the painting *No*, with the dangling thing. And I was able to take it out of the racks and hold it, look at it, kind of shake it, and have the thing—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Look—let it—yeah. Yeah, amazing experience.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was just amazing. So they came back, and I had a list of the ones that I wanted pictures of. They said, "Well, if you come back to New York, stay in touch." It was kind of this amazing moment.

Then, several days later, I'm back up in Midtown, and as we're saying, the street life was amazing. There's always these radios playing and everything, and music. And suddenly, the music stopped, and it went to the

news, and Nixon had resigned. [Laughs.] The street just erupted. I mean, people were just whooping! [They laugh.] It was kind of amazing. By this time, I had decided, I have to move here. [00:48:01] This is—I'm not—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Already on that trip, you had made the decision?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. I mean, there was another year in Edinburgh, and then after that, it was like, What am I going to do? I had been assuming that I would be going to London, but I had never had a great experience in London.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: At that time, were you thinking of being a kind of writer about art, or an art historian? Or were you thinking of being an artist?

THOMAS LAWSON: I was thinking of being an artist, but I didn't know what it meant. And I didn't know how to do it. One of the great things about—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Were you making works of art?

THOMAS LAWSON: I was making work, yeah.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What kind of things?

THOMAS LAWSON: I was making—I was painting on Masonite. It's interesting, because I was already doing what I do. I was painting images from the newspaper. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Oh, already?

THOMAS LAWSON: But I didn't know—I mean, I was just doing that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Early '70s, though. Interesting.

THOMAS LAWSON: That's what I was doing in St. Andrews. Then in Edinburgh, I got into a more abstract, spatial kind of thing. In part, I think, because I was thinking about these Robert Adam houses and things, that I began to see—I was trying to conceptualize space, but in a two-dimensional thing. And influenced by Rauschenberg, I was also doing kind of rubbings. These rubbings of street detritus would be kind of incorporated into these abstract shapes.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Were you doing rubbings from newspapers or magazines too, or only from—

THOMAS LAWSON: A little bit, yes, because—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Were you using lighter fluid?

THOMAS LAWSON: I read that that's what he did, so yes. [They laugh.] It was a combination of lighter fluid and straight-up crushed beer cans and things like that. [00:50:07] I made a few when I was in New York, because it was so exciting. So I had kind of New York bits and pieces in my work back in Scotland. There was a—it still is there—there's a printmaker's workshop in Edinburgh that I signed up for and did some printmaking, thinking that rubbing and print—you know, there was some kind of connection to that. Anyway, I'm thinking—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well, it's a moment where printmaking was very important for major artists. In a way that it is for some now, but it seemed more at the heart of what you would do as an artist then.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was more at the heart of things, and it was very much at the heart of Johns's—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Certainly Johns—it had been very important to him.

THOMAS LAWSON: Although I have to say, I never—I have a much clearer understanding of what the Johns obsession with printmaking is now than I had—I didn't quite get it.

So I was thinking that my future probably meant going down to London. My experiences in London as a young Scottish lad had not been that great. At that time, they still didn't accept our banknotes, and I on more than one occasion had forgotten to change my money into English notes. Then I would be in these embarrassing situations. "We're not taking that, son." And then of course there weren't bank machines then, so it was like you had—I just felt a kind of unease in London, as opposed to the excitement and energy of New York. So it's like, Huh. [00:52:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So the plan changed.

THOMAS LAWSON: So the plan changes. While I'm still there, there's this educational institute or something. I

can't remember the name of it. It's just across from the United Nations. And it's got a reading room that has catalogs of—or, at that time, had catalogs of university programs. So I went.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Looking for one?

THOMAS LAWSON: Looking for one. I found that you could study art history at the graduate level at this place called the Art Institute, or whatever it's called, at NYU.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Institute of Fine Art.

THOMAS LAWSON: The Institute of Fine Arts. Also at Columbia University, and also at City University Graduate Center, which was on 42nd Street. That program concentrated on contemporary art and criticism. So that seemed pretty interesting. The Institute didn't interest me, but the Columbia thing interested me, because I was interested also, at this point, in Duchamp. And Kynaston McShine had some affiliation with Columbia. I mean, I now realize probably as a visitor [laughs] or something, but—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But his name was there.

THOMAS LAWSON: But his name was there, and he was working on, or had worked on, the Duchamp show. So I thought, Oh, that might be something. Then the City University thing. I wrote off to them. I was accepted into both of them, but the Columbia thing didn't really come with money, and I didn't know that you had to ask for it [laughs] in the way that—I don't know. [Laughs.] [00:54:00] And the City University was $400. [Laughs.] And just seemed better anyway. But I was still running—kind of flying blind on it. I didn't really know what it meant. Anyway, so I accepted that position.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Was that a doctoral program?

THOMAS LAWSON: It was a doctoral program. But it was also—the way it worked, it turns out, is that a good number of the students enrolled were actually doing an M.A. You were accepted as a doctoral student, but you had to do—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But you could bail out after the—

THOMAS LAWSON: But you had to do the M.A. first. But they accepted my degree as an M.A. But other people in the class were kind of doing that whole thing, and so they were going to Hunter as well. They were taking classes at Hunter. So there's all that.

I need another little biographical thing in here that's just a kind of weird thing. So, you know, all through this, I'm a young man, right? But I'm not well. Somewhere—I actually forget when it happened, but at some point in my career at St. Andrews, I developed this big swelling in my neck, and went to the school doctor, who dismissed it as, "Oh, it's just mono." [Laughs.] You know, "I know what you've been doing."

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: And gave me some antibiotics or something. [00:56:00] It kind of never really went away. It never—I didn't have the fever or whatever, but it just didn't go away. In my last year, it was clearly something. I went to the hospital in Dundee, Ninewells, and they did a biopsy. There was some cancerous something or other. It was all very mysterious. But they took out the swelling, and it seemed like everything was fine, and said, "Just keep an eye on it."

So then graduated, moved to Edinburgh. Probably that Christmas, I got really super sick and feverish and everything. The doctor who saw me, who was this older country doctor—I was staying with a girlfriend's family for Christmas when this all happened. This, as it turns out, really great, sort of old style general practitioner knew exactly what it was and said, "You've"—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Dr. Finlay.

THOMAS LAWSON: Kind of. Yes, exactly. "You have to go to the Western General Hospital in Edinburgh. You have to go home now, and go there." The Western General is the cancer hospital in Edinburgh. So I go, "Oh, my God. Yeah, I'll go there." I'm admitted immediately, and this older doctor and a young guy, who kind of pull their chins, and they're looking very—and they're going to have to do all this, that, and the next thing. And they're going to have these tests, and they have to—it was all kind of fairly frightening, the series of things that they had to do. [00:58:13]

And all this time, they're not really telling me anything. At some point, I kind of got up and found the board at the foot of the bed, and kind of read this thing. It has this language in it. It's like, Oh, so I wonder what that is. I realized the words—it was that time in medical practice that they didn't think that you should know too much.

So I got my clothes, left the hospital, got on a bus up to the university. Up at Forest Road by the university, there used to be a medical bookstore, because medical school was a big thing. They don't have the medical bookstore anymore. I guess it's all online or something. But there was a medical bookstore. So I went into the bookstore and searched for an encyclopedia of stuff, with this thing. It was Hodgkin's disease. So I look it up, and it's like, cancer of the lymphatic system. Then it's got all this survival rates and—I mean, it was 70 percent survival, five-year survival.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: "Oh, thanks." [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: I was like, Oh, my God.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You must have been feeling almost faint.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, yeah. Yes, exactly. A little dizzy. I get back in the bus, and back to the hospital, and lie there. [01:00:01] The doctor had finally come back again. I said, "So, when were you going to tell me?" He's like, "We didn't think that you should"—you know.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. "It would only upset you."

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, right. Anyways, I have an operation to remove my spleen, and a dose of radiation, and a dose of chemotherapy.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So that really was the diagnosis?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. So through that second year of being in grad school, I'm also going through all this kind of crap.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Terrible. A lot of people would have dropped out, I think. But you're Scottish.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yes, exactly. [They laugh.] I had a mission. I wasn't going to let this—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you powered through it.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. So the treatments came to an end, let's say, something like June of '75. And I moved to New York in August.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow. So you had no qualms about your health and—

THOMAS LAWSON: I had qualms, but—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Did you believe you were cured?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. And I had, you know? [Laughs.] I believed that, and I also believed that if I stayed in Scotland, it would probably come back.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But if you went somewhere else, you might—

THOMAS LAWSON: If I went—I know this sounds kind of—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: No. It's how people think.

THOMAS LAWSON: I don't know if I was superstitious or something, but I felt that if I go on with my life in an upward trajectory, in the way that I want, leading the life I want to lead, then it will be okay. But if I kind of—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: If you linger—

THOMAS LAWSON: —linger and find that I'm having to go back and live with my parents or something—[01:02:03]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Then it will be back for sure. Yeah.

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THOMAS LAWSON: So I showed up in New York City with a suitcase, and I did it with kind of like a determination, in sort of late August 1975.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So in 1975, you're in New York. And you stayed in New York until you moved to California

—which was, what, 1990, '89?

THOMAS LAWSON: '91, yeah. January of '91. Should we talk about New York a little bit, the beginning?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. Now we're in New York.

THOMAS LAWSON: How are we doing?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's 12:30. Maybe pause? [Tape stops, restarts.] We're going again.

THOMAS LAWSON: I think we're started again.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Testing, testing.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, we're good.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Okay, so you're in the doctoral program at the Graduate Center.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. One thing about—I think finances is always interesting. Throughout my education in Scotland, I had a grant from the Scottish Education Department. Which was, I think, an amazingly farsighted thing.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, I've always thought that myself. Your generation and mine. It wasn't an issue to pursue education, because, basically, it wasn't costing you anything. You didn't go into debt, and it enabled a whole generation whose families had not had higher education to have it and not have anxiety about it.

THOMAS LAWSON: Tuition was covered, but also—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And living expenses.

THOMAS LAWSON: —living expenses. [01:59] Actually, as an undergrad, one year, I had a decent enough living expense paycheck or whatever that I was able to go to Rome and Florence, to look at things. Again, a sort of important part of, I think, the educational background of just being able to see stuff. That grant continued in Edinburgh. There was a version of it for postgrad study. I think you could have it maybe for a total of four years at that time, at postgrad level. So I was able to reapply and have it extended to cover my first couple of years in New York.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Really? They covered that?

THOMAS LAWSON: It was super complicated, and they were very reluctant, and it was a lot of—I remember there was a lot of paperwork difficulties, and the first check didn't come until November, and that kind of thing. Of course, also, it wasn't very much money. It had been enough in Scotland, but in New York it wasn't.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, a little different.

THOMAS LAWSON: I remember going down to some bank on Wall Street to pick up a check. There was all kinds of complications. But anyway, it did make it possible, and it made it possible to get the visa, because I could show that I had—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You could support—

THOMAS LAWSON: That I could support myself. I found a little apartment in the East Village—13th Street, Avenue A, top floor—and went up to register. The Grad Center at that time, it was on 42nd Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, across from the public library, in this building that had an open floor, that was an art gallery, or an art space of some kind. [04:15] The art history department was sort of halfway up the building, and on the top floor there was this really kind of fancy cafeteria, but students had a discount. It felt grander than any school cafeteria at Edinburgh or St. Andrews Universities. Anyway, I went and introduced myself.

The chair of the department at that time was Milton Brown, who was kind of the dean of American art history, and specialized in Depression era, '30s, social realist kind of work. Had written the, at that time, definitive book on that. He was a super great guy, but also, to me, something of a caricature. He was a little squat guy with rheumy eyes and a cigar, and this New York accent. Because he came from the Lower East Side. He was of that. He looked like a gangster. [Laughs.] I mean, a movie gang—he looked like Cagney or something. But he was really great and very welcoming. I think I might have been their first foreign student. They were a fairly new program, and I think I was their first foreign student. [06:00]

We hit it off, and he explained what I had to do and all this. The courses that—there was a variety of courses

that were kind of recommended, and one was Robert Pincus-Witten, who, at that time, was the voice of Post-Minimalism, and was also writing a kind of diary about his interactions with artists.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Was that in *Art News* at that time, or *Arts Magazine*?

THOMAS LAWSON: *Arts Magazine*. Yeah, *Arts Magazine*. And John Rewald, who was the great Post-Impressionist figure. Rewald was an older man, and was no longer teaching on campus. He was teaching in his Park Avenue apartment. You kind of had to take him. We would gather in his apartment up there, and he would regale us with stories. Read letters from people wanting things to be accredited and all this kind of thing. It wasn't rigorous, but it was another one of these things where you're actually learning how the world works in this way, and what the real thing is.

One of my classmates—I had a lot of really interesting classmates, but one there was Francis Naumann, who went on to become a dealer of Duchamp materials. [08:03] That's where he started collecting. Rewald was his—I don't know if actual mentor, but really helped him understand—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Introduced him to the market?

THOMAS LAWSON: Introduced him to the idea that the market—and Duchamp's market then was nonexistent, and so it was a bargain. Francis would use his student loans to buy stuff, and then finance his—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Isn't Francis's brother also an art dealer in—

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. Otto, yeah.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, Otto Naumann.

THOMAS LAWSON: An even more successful dealer. Or significantly more—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: More Old Master. So he must have known a little bit about the market or—but not the modern market.

THOMAS LAWSON: Not the modern one. And I mean, we were all 25 then or something, so how much do you know? [Laughs.] But anyway, that was a kind of interesting sort of thing. Then we would have these—there was this younger faculty member who wasn't quite on the faculty yet. She was on the faculty at Hunter. But highly recommended that we take classes with Rosalind Krauss. So there, you learned rigor. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, no kidding.

THOMAS LAWSON: My experience with higher education up to that point had been pretty lax, I have to say. You know, you read things, but maybe not all of them, and you think about them, but maybe not all the way through. Pincus-Witten was quirkier, but he and Rosalind—because Rosalind eventually moved into the Graduate Center faculty. [10:02] I mean, you really learned to think, and you really learned to do the research, and kind of make —

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I took classes with Rosalind Krauss at the Graduate Center too, and I remember it was very untypical of American teaching. Some student would say, "Don't you think that maybe blah, blah, blah, blah?" And she would just say, "No," and continue. It was exhilarating in a way.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was exhilarating. During the several years that I took courses with her, she was thinking through and writing about photography. She was doing S*culpture in the Expanded Field*. Our classes were where she was developing them. So it was really amazing. The other kind of very significant classmates that I had there were Doug Crimp and Craig Owens, who were equal to her on that level. And so it was a really great—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Amazing moment.

THOMAS LAWSON: Amazing moment.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens were already established as writers and—

THOMAS LAWSON: Craig was in the program when I got there, and was beginning to write. He had a dance thing, and was writing about dance. Doug came in the following year, but he had had a career as a curator. He had been at the Guggenheim and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I had the impression these were people who, in a way, were already established, but who had decided they wanted—

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, there was definitely—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —a doctorate to move into a more purely academic context. [12:01]

THOMAS LAWSON: That was definitely the case with Doug. Craig, I think, was more or less like me, just going through school. Maybe a little further advanced, but going through school. Also during that time—again, a slightly later addition to the faculty was Linda Nochlin, who I didn't find as rigorous, actually. People liked her a lot, but I found her a little—I found her politics a little soft, somehow. Was kind of—I don't know.

With Robert Pincus-Witten, some of—Doug and Craig were a little dismissive of Robert. They thought that he was —

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Not rigorous enough?

THOMAS LAWSON: Not rigorous enough. But because of my interests, I guess, I found him to be really helpful. He did a class once that was called Featurettes and Think Pieces, which is kind of a silly title, but it was about writing for art magazines. It was really the nuts and bolts of what art magazines published, and how you promote ideas to them so that they give you work. To me, it was a really helpful introduction to just exactly what that was.

As I was saying, I'm in this situation where I've come to New York to be an artist, but I still don't quite know what it is, and I have a writing ability. John Rewald sort of pointed it out in class, that I was the only one in the class who could write. [14:02] Pincus-Witten was sort of encouraging. There was this sense that, "Oh, writing is something that's available to me, in a way, in here." A couple of years later, Doug actually introduced me to Betsy Baker, who, at that time, was editor of *Art in America*. And that was where I got started writing for that kind of mainstream publication, doing reviews. That would have been late '76, '77 or something like that.

Craig also—he moved on from the dance thing. He got a gig working for this architectural outfit. The Institute for Urban Studies or something, I think it's called. They had an office on the other side of Bryant Park. They had a little magazine called *Skyline* that was actually sort of a newsletter. Craig was a little mischievous. He asked me to write reviews of museum group shows.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: For *Skyline*?

THOMAS LAWSON: For *Skyline*. He's like, "Say what—you know, just go for it." So I'm a hotheaded young guy. I'm saying, "This is crap, and blah, blah, blah," and later realized, Oh, I just ruined any possibility of a relationship with that curator. [They laugh.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, yeah, but it was a downside.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was very typical of Craig in some way to be—on the one hand, he's this very high-minded, very abstract thinker, but he also had this mischievous, playful side that was a little cruel, maybe. [16:05]

One of our classmates was this woman, Marjorie Thau, who had a big apartment on the Upper West Side. She would have dinner parties, regular kind of dinner parties, where the idea was to continue our conversations. They were kind of great. I mean, that we would talk about art and culture outside of the confines of the classroom. I was just thinking about it recently, and I was remembering just how poor I was. I would walk up. She was, like, on 104th or something, and I would walk up from the Village. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Save the subway fare.

THOMAS LAWSON: Just to save that—which was only 35 cents. You know? [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You can forget about these things, but they matter at the time.

THOMAS LAWSON: But they mattered at the time, and they had to do with basic living expenses. If I could save a little bit on subway, I could have a beer or something. My rent for this little apartment was 100 bucks.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow. Another world.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's a completely other world. But it was also a little scary. You know, a block east, and there were cars on fire.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, in those days. Nobody—well, obviously people did go over there, but a lot of people didn't.

THOMAS LAWSON: First Avenue was fine, but that was it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That was kind of it. You could go to A, but it was already a little—

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, it was beginning to get—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Unless you had some nefarious purpose in mind, you weren't going any further if you didn't live there. [18:06]

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. One of the classmates that I befriended was a guy called Craig Bailey, who was a bibliophile. It turned out he lived on Elizabeth Street, in a storefront. In the summertime, he would leave the door open to get some air, and people would wander in, thinking it was a bookstore, because he had so much. [Laughs.] He was interested in American abstraction, but kind of the forgotten stuff. Ilya Bolotowsky and John Ferren and people like that. He had a handle on various kind of employment possibilities. He had some kind of contract to—he was digitizing information. So I got to work for him, sort of in the evening hours, inputting data.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That must have been very early on in that.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, right. It was super cumbersome. Every space and every dash had to be precise, and they had to be in a particular order of things. It was a really boring job, but you could do it at midnight or something. It was kind of useful. I also had a job—first of all, I had a job, a campus job. The thing was that I was limited as a foreigner. I could only work—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, because of the immigration.

THOMAS LAWSON: I could only work on campus, except for these gigs like Craig could throw my way that were kind of under the table or something. So I worked on campus. I was a receptionist for one of the offices, the Office of Sponsored Research. [20:06] That was just answering the phones and things, but sitting in an air conditioned office was an interesting experience for me. I found it terrifyingly cold. I just had never been that kind of cold.

In doing that, I met this guy Ray Ring, who was the curator of this art space below, and also the person in charge of signage and the sort of aesthetics of the building. So he rescued me. He decided that I would be better off working for him. So I became his assistant, and helped installing the shows. We actually put together some grant proposals for exhibitions. I wouldn't say I co-curated, but I worked with him on that kind of thing. While also going all around the building, putting numbers on doors, and people's names. That was actually kind of an interesting gig for a while. I was able to do that for, I don't know, two or three years.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But at a certain point, you decided not to pursue the doctorate?

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. Yeah. I pursued it completely seriously, I would say, for three years. You know, full load of classwork. [22:00] And as I was saying, working through *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* with Rosalind, just amazingly vigorous and enlightening, and helped me understand what I was seeing as I was exploring New York. I began to think—you begin to think about a thesis and what that might be. I began to narrow that down to thinking about Joseph Cornell. I was interested in his connections to Surrealism, to language, the kind of collage appropriation—I mean, we didn't know about appropriation quite yet, but, you know, that whole thing appealed to me, along with the romanticism of it and the kind of whimsy of it.

I got a grant from the school to go to Houston, because there was a show at the Rice University galleries or something. So I was able to get a couple hundred bucks to go there. It was kind of crazy. I got down there, and I checked into a motel downtown, and it was this—I didn't quite understand it. It was really cold, the air conditioning was really pumped up, and there was only a sheet on the bed. It was wintertime, and I had come down from New York, so I had a big overcoat. So I slept on a—and I realized when I was checking out in the morning, it was a hooker hotel. [24:02] No one was supposed to spend the night. You're only supposed to spend an hour. [Laughs.]

Anyway, I saw the show, and I really kind of liked that. I actually did a little research at the Archives of American Art, because they have that, and I began to be unclear about the depth of my interest. He seemed a little too weird to me.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Cornell?

THOMAS LAWSON: Cornell, yeah. So I began to have second thoughts about it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It hadn't occurred to you before that that he was a little on the weird side?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yes, but I didn't—the more I realized how much time I would have to spend with it—it's like—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You have to practically live with an artist.

THOMAS LAWSON: At the beginning, I'm thinking kind of more in the terms of, "Well, I'll write an essay." And that's okay. But no, it's a book.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's writing a book, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: And it's delving into a lot of detail that may or may not be as interesting as I think it is. I began to sort of lose interest. In the meantime, my friend Milton Brown—must have been in—I don't know which year it was, second or third year—maybe second year—called me into his office and said he had a proposal for me. One of the other students was working on this project and it wasn't working out, and he thought that I might be able to bring it to conclusion.

It was to be a survey show of paintings by Norman Lewis, in that gallery. Norman was an older African-American artist. [26:00] Had been a friend of Milton's for many, many years. This young woman had been working on this show, but had run afoul of Norman, and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He didn't want to work with her?

THOMAS LAWSON: —and of his wife. Running afoul of Norman was that Norman had a very ambivalent idea of what it meant to be a black artist. He was unapologetically black, and had created a number of art spaces that were in Harlem and for black artists and so on. But he himself wanted to be considered an artist, and this young woman was kind of an early thinker through identity, and wanted to—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: She wanted to position him as a black artist?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, and so they were having a back-and-forth. Then Norman had a younger wife, who I think also didn't feel comfortable with a young woman spending too much time with him. [They laugh.] So we kind of negotiated that I would take on this project.

Norman, at that time, had a studio loft down on Grand Street in SoHo, so I started hanging out with him, and interviewed him. Finally, I knew about a tape recorder. We talked, and talked through his explorations of—originally, of kind of a social realist thing, and then moving into abstract expressionist kind of format. And his friendship with Reinhardt, and what that meant to him, just sort of the intellectual rigor of that. And we did a show. [28:00] The nice little catalog, I have it—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And you were officially the curator of that?

THOMAS LAWSON: I was the curator, and I wrote the essay, which was a critical, historical introduction. It was the first museum—it wasn't exactly museum, of course, but sort of nonprofit—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Institutional—

THOMAS LAWSON: —institutional survey of Norman's work, and became—I mean, it's like the foundation of Norman Lewis studies. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Which is big now.

THOMAS LAWSON: Which is big now. It's funny. Later—we'll get talking about *REALLIFE Magazine* in a while, but Susan and I were at a party in the mid-'80s and fell to talking with this young African-American scholar, who was all excited because she had just come from doing something, and she was working on an exhibition about Norman Lewis. Susan said, "Well, my boyfriend did that," and Kellie was like—it was Kellie Jones.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Kellie said, "Is your boyfriend Tom Lawson?" She's like, Yeah. That led to Kellie doing an interview with David Hammons for *REALLIFE*, which was a super important—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, which was a landmark interview.

THOMAS LAWSON: The seed for that was really planted by Milton Brown asking me to curate this show.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's great.

THOMAS LAWSON: We had a gala opening, and Norman was really excited and happy. That space was always a little weird, because it was open to the street, but you could make it be an okay thing. [30:00] We got the lighting right, and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And it is in Midtown Manhattan. I mean, the [New York] Public Library is there, Bryant

Park, and—

THOMAS LAWSON: The visibility was extraordinary. So I did that. And I began experimenting with writing, publishing my opinions, for Craig and for *Art in America*. *Art in America* was about reviews, and that would be a negotiation. You know, it was like, I would go up to the office, and I had seen these shows, and they had seen these other shows, and I could do this one if you can also do that one. It began to get a little—this is moving forward into the late '70s.

It began to get a little tricky, because Betsy was such a kind of old-time journalist type of person that she was uncomfortable with me writing about people I knew. And I was increasingly interested in the people I knew. [Laughs.] It came to a head around Cindy Sherman. Cindy had her first show, and it was amazing, and I wanted to write about it, and Betsy wouldn't let me.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Because you knew—

THOMAS LAWSON: Because I knew her. It's not like I knew her that well, but still, I was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's interesting, because I respect it in a way, but you would have thought, in an earlier period, it would be even more the case that the reviewers would know the artist.

THOMAS LAWSON: I think in the earlier time, it was much more the—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But she was trying to sort of professionalize that in a journalistic way that you—

THOMAS LAWSON: I think so. In our first meetings, when she was telling me what she would expect about word length and all this, she also told me that her sense of her readership was that it was mostly well-educated people across the country—I mean, it's *Art in America*—many of whom only came to New York once or twice a year. [32:22] And so they wouldn't have seen the show.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So you had to describe it?

THOMAS LAWSON: And so part of the job was to describe it, and it had to be in clear—none of this jargon, you know. [Laughs.] I found her to be a very good editor, and very helpful.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's a legitimate position too.

THOMAS LAWSON: But it moved—I had got to a point where I was dissatisfied with that, and around that time had been contacted by Giancarlo Politi and Helena Kontova from *Flash Art*, who were beginning to consider expanding their operations.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And didn't care who you knew or—

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. Since they barely paid you, it wasn't—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It was like a volunteer activity anyway. [They laugh.]

THOMAS LAWSON: They gave you—when they were in town, you got some good dinners. [They laugh.] I never didn't get paid, but it just wasn't very much. But I began writing for them, and got to write longer pieces as well as reviews. So that was kind of—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, features.

THOMAS LAWSON: Featurettes, maybe. [Laughs.] Think pieces, definitely. That's where that all began to happen. I guess we need to kind of have a whole section on *REALLIFE Magazine*. But that's where the sort of genesis of that is also in that same moment that—[34:04]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Do your own magazine.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. It's like, the need for a certain amount of autonomy. So the '70s—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Let's finish up with the Graduate Center. Your activities are becoming increasingly dispersed from the pure academics, and there came a moment when you decided you're not going to write your dissertation on Cornell.

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, I did my exams. I did the—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So you're ABD at this time.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. So I did the exams. They were pretty alarming, because you're in this sort of small room with these fearsome characters. I knew when I had shown up that I never took a class with—but he was on my exam board—was Jack Flam. You know, he's pretty rigorous, too. [Laughs.] So you're in this room, and there's sort of the slide test, where they flash images and you're supposed to identify and talk about it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Just a panic.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. And all kinds of curveballs can come—you know.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Untypical works and—yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. And then sort of more discursive questioning. There was the language requirements. I was supposed to show proficiency in French and German.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: In those days, both.

THOMAS LAWSON: I was a little sketchy about that. It's funny, because the German—I kept up my French and felt relatively comfortable, but the German was like—I hadn't really looked at it since high school. I went to a couple of Fassbinder films as prep. [36:02]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: To catch up? [They laugh.]

THOMAS LAWSON: The test itself wasn't—I mean, it was translating small catalog entries. It's words like *kunst* and things.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you can get that.

THOMAS LAWSON: You can kind of get it. So I scraped through the language, but I passed the other stuff. I felt like, Okay, I'm there, but now I have to do what Pincus-Witten said was the big book report.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But that could be three years of work.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. He tried very hard to persuade me that I should do it. Rosalind was theoretically my advisor, but Robert was more actively kind of helpful. There was something about the idea of it being a book report even put me off. He was trying to make it sound doable, and it just sounded more and more boring. And as I was confronting it, it's like I was getting these—I was beginning to show work on a small level. I was publishing things. Things were opening up. I didn't see that—I mean, it's ironic—but I didn't see that a life in academia would be my future. [Laughs.] And so I didn't really see what a doctorate would—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, what that was going to—

THOMAS LAWSON: What it would do for me.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: The amount of work and the amount of time. The assumption is you're going to teach art history at the end of it, and I suppose if you're not convinced you are going to do that, it—

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. What I was beginning to think was that I wanted to see a life for myself that was this sort of hybrid form of being an artist who does writing, who puts on shows, who has more kind of things going on. [38:03]

There's another thing that happened, was that—this would be, I don't know, probably '77 or something. I guess we'll circle back to this already. I became part of a circle around Artists Space, around Helene Winer.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Just socially became—

THOMAS LAWSON: Socially. Yeah, yeah. I did a little project show at one of their little back rooms in 1977.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: As an artist?

THOMAS LAWSON: As an artist. That was kind of the first thing that I did.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: We should return to that.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, we'll come back. Through that, I befriended Paul McMahon, who was the gallery assistant in that time. It turned out that there was a kind of late Friday afternoon—people would show up and have a beer and talk. So I began to be part of that group. That sort of is the beginning of Metro Pictures there. Not everybody, but that's kind of what it was.

So through that, I met this curator from Chicago, Judith Kirshner. She was going to be taking some sort of sabbatical or something. She was working at the Chicago MOCA. She proposed that I be her substitute, replacement.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Another kind of odd thing.

THOMAS LAWSON: An odd thing! I went to Chicago to talk to her and other people. Met Susanne Ghez at that time. It was very flattering and sort of intriguing, but I realized that I didn't want that. [40:03] I didn't want to become a curator.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, that was the other option to being an academic.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. This notion I had of being some sort of artist was really kind of significant, and that I needed to just keep—even though I was living in pretty dire straits, actually.

By this point, I had moved downtown. My friend Craig had introduced me to a bar down in what was now called Tribeca, on Duane Street. It was called Barnabus Rex. It was a tiny little bar, about the size of this dining room. It was a really tiny little space. It had a small pool table and a jukebox and a bar. The people who went there were young artists, many of them from the Whitney program, which was nearby on Broadway. It was just a great location. I was super happy to find this place. They were my people. [Laughs.] You know? Almost everyone in the bar, the regulars, had also just arrived in New York within the last year or two. It opened up my mind to this whole area of these lofts and so on that were—already SoHo was sort of pricey, and there were more established artists who lived there.

This area was open, so I began to investigate possibilities, and I found a place on Thomas Street, between Church and West Broadway. [42:08] It was on the top floor of a loft building, and the lease holder was this jewelry maker whose name was Bob Natalini. He had come up from Philadelphia, and so he rented out the whole floor but wasn't going to use it. He was going to cut it in half. The half that he was not going to use was going to be cut in half. So I got one of those smaller spaces. Super raw. It was funky raw. You got splinters in your feet walking barefoot. I helped them build it. I helped them build the walls. I helped them do the plumbing. We put in toilet and shower and bathtub and all that kind of stuff.

So I moved down there. The place in the East Village was a nice little apartment, but it was small. So now I had a studio, and I could do bigger kinds of things. So that figuring in my mind, too, is that I finally got a studio. First time in my life, really, that I've got something with that kind of expansive wall. So I didn't really want to give that up. There was something else that I wanted to touch on. I can't remember what that was. Oh, I know.

In those first couple of years, I did stay in touch with Jasper Johns. [40:00] I visited him a couple times. It was great. I eventually stopped visiting him, because there were too many young guys vying for attentions in ways that—I realized I'm not interested in that, and it wasn't my scene. But the thing about Johns, in his conversation at that time, and in his writings, is that he talked a lot about what it means to be an artist. The basic observation he had was that you have to just stop thinking about wanting to be one, and acknowledge that you are one. He felt, in his own life, that had been an important moment. And so I was kind of process—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Having put it off for years, kind of, you were at that point where you had to cross that hurdle?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. It seemed like a very significant kind of decision. It was like, Yes.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But you were ready, then, to make that decision, commitment?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. I was already ready in moving to New York. Making that move was about that, but there was still uncertainty, and still a lot of possibilities. It was like, I could do this or that. But I would say certainly by '77, it was clear to me that the art is the thing, and these other things work into it in some form or another.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So having reached that decision within yourself, then you pulled the plug on the dissertation?

THOMAS LAWSON: I'm honestly not sure exactly when I did that. [46:03]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Probably wasn't quite as clear-cut as that.

THOMAS LAWSON: It wasn't quite as clear-cut. Plus—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You just stopped working on it?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, and I had this other issue, which was I had a student visa. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you didn't really want to give that up.

THOMAS LAWSON: I couldn't give that up. It was only costing me $400 a pop.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So, easy to keep.

THOMAS LAWSON: So it was relatively easy to keep it going. So I did keep it going, probably longer than I really should have or something.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But it was a kind of shadow thing, because you're not really pursuing writing the dissertation?

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. I had a realization at some point that, in my mind, the decision had been made in '78 or '79, but it turned out that the paperwork at City University says '81 or something. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's when the paperwork caught up with reality.

THOMAS LAWSON: I had a kind of come-to-realize moment one time coming back from Scotland, that the immigration guy sort of was looking at my paper and said, "You've been in school a long time."

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, warning shot.

THOMAS LAWSON: He just didn't say any more than that, but it was like [laughs]—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you can see what's coming. But then, whenever it was, between '77 and '80 or whatever, you've made that decision, and then you enter the next phase, which is to try and be an artist as your primary activity? [48:02]

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. And also, I'm beginning to feel like I belong.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, there's a community that—

THOMAS LAWSON: There's a community, a lot around this bar. It's where I met people like Sherrie Levine and David Salle and Julia Heyward, and many, many people. We would have long conversations into the night about art. And it's also where I met Susan.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's funny the way these things come back and forth. It's so interesting to see David Salle establishing himself now as a writer. It's like—

THOMAS LAWSON: But he was a writer then!

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, but you don't think of him as a writer until the last couple of years, where he's turned out to be, in some ways, a very perceptive writer about contemporary art, which, at a certain—you know. These things keep coming back, I suppose.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's an interesting observation about a career. We were friendly for a while. Susan and I would have dinner with him and various different wives of his. He's a really smart guy, and we would have a lot of really great conversations about stuff. We shared this idea of artists being intellectuals, and that one way that you showed that was that you wrote, and that it was part of our job as young artists to articulate our new ideas.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But beyond you and David Salle, it wasn't—that was a fairly widespread idea at that time, in a way that it just doesn't seem to be for young artists today.

THOMAS LAWSON: Anyway, what's interesting is that David began to get attention for his paintings, certainly sooner than I did. [50:02] I think there came a moment in his career where he realized that the writing was dangerous.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, because you can be called on what you say.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. And as I had already discovered, you say things, and that—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: People remember them years later.

THOMAS LAWSON: And so he backed off of that, and for a long time was only a painter. He was no longer even this sort of hybrid figure that the Pictures idea was supposed to be. It was like, He's a painter.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He was a painterly painter.

THOMAS LAWSON: I had a similar falling out with Eric Fischl on that. I loved his early paintings, because they were so bad.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: I mean, the point to me was how candid they were.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But at a certain point, he doesn't really want to hear that.

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, he didn't want to hear that. And I was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He was doing the best he could.

THOMAS LAWSON: I guess. Which is sort of—I don't know—too bad. To me, the intellectual edge to the work was located in an attempt rather than mastery.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That it wasn't about that brushstroke or the rendering of flesh or something. That it was about something else.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was kind of like this very angsty-driven kind of need to do something.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He found a series of motifs that just hadn't—they had maybe been done in literature, in Updike or Cheever or something, but they hadn't been done—

THOMAS LAWSON: But they would have been super boring if they had been well-done. You know? They would have been just plain old figurative painting. It was the idiosyncrasies of his paint-handling that made it interesting. But I couldn't persuade him on that. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: No, he didn't see it that way. [Laughs.] [52:00]

THOMAS LAWSON: I don't remember any kind of falling out with David particularly, but it was a similar kind of drifting apart. I continued to want to do more contextualizing and extra work—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He stopped that.

THOMAS LAWSON: And he stopped it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Maybe that's an okay place for us to stop now.

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THOMAS LAWSON: I think we're good.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Did you listen to the one yesterday?

THOMAS LAWSON: No. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Okay, it's August 10th. Second session, oral history interview. I'm Russell Ferguson, and the subject is Thomas Lawson. We're going to begin again now.

THOMAS LAWSON: Okay.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Where we left off, your career as a graduate student is slowly coming to an end, and you're starting to develop a range of other activities, including writing, but primarily you're seeing yourself now as an artist, and beginning to move in a community of artists. I think your first showing of your work in New York is at Artists Space, is that right?

THOMAS LAWSON: That's right. It was a small project space. At that point, they were on Hudson Street, and the main gallery was at the front, but down in the back, they had two or three—maybe two, I think—small rooms that were for projects. They were kind of a nice little spot for someone to try out something outside of the studio.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What did you show there?

THOMAS LAWSON: I showed something—I called it *In Camera*. It was a little box that was, I don't know, about a foot high, and maybe six inches around, with a sort of—inside the box, there was a little array of mirrors, and there was a hole and a little magnifying glass that you looked into that. [00:02:06] The box had a parchment

top, and there was a light, so that when you looked in, you saw—depending on how you looked, you either saw a lot of your eyeball back, or if you squinted off to the side, it was just this sort of abstract, kind of theatricalized, miniature space that had—it was like an infinity room. [They laugh.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow, how different things could be.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. Then, on the wall, I painted a kind of abstract rendition of this abstract space. So there was a thing that was on a pedestal. The eye hole was kind of at eye level, and then sort of an implication that there was this projection on the wall.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And so this is not figurative, then?

THOMAS LAWSON: It was not figurative. It's interesting to think through this. I think, the last tape, I talked a little bit about the first work that I was doing in New York having this abstract quality. There's a number of reasons. Part of it was that when I got to New York, kind of eyes wide open, the sort of exciting, cutting-edge thing that was most on view in the SoHo area—at places like 112 or around the city—was the sort of Post-Minimalist thing. It was very reduced materiality. Big chunks of wood and empty spaces. [00:04:01] It had an element of perception as to process, and of thinking about what you did to space to make it visible in some way. So as a young artist, good student, I absorbed that. I was kind of thinking, That's where we start.

Then another thing that was really important was that I met Susan, Susan Morgan, in the spring of 1976. And we really hit it off right away, because we had this shared interest in arcana like [Raymond] Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* and—so this—and Artaud. In terms of the downtown community of young artists, we had this interest in a certain kind of theatricality that was a little out of place in the art world. But it had a place in SoHo, because there were things like the Wooster Group; and Richard Foreman; and over in the East Village, Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theater. So there were a number of places to go to see work that was sort of breaking down text, breaking down popular culture, and re-presenting it in these spaces that had a very constructed quality.

For me, Richard Foreman was just eye-opening. I just couldn't get enough of it. [00:06:01] He had this theater space that was in his own loft, and it was like this long, narrow space, and the audience sat up at the back. The stage area was very deep, and actions took place at different levels. Characters would come out, almost like cutouts. There was this ridiculous text that was very fragmented. At different volumes, he would yell it, and then there would be whispers and things. I found it just really pretty amazing.

Actually, as a student, while I was still kind of being active as a student, I ran a lecture series, and I got Foreman to come to talk to the group. I also got Daniel Buren and Clement Greenberg. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Nice mix.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. And the Greenberg thing was great, because he was just a grumpy old man at this point, and was deep into his argument with Rosalind. So that was kind of fun to bring—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It seemed like, by that late stage, you had been kind of forced back on the argument that he had an eye, and—

THOMAS LAWSON: Yes, it was very. It was very much that. It was really interesting, because we were all in our hotshot-ness. And yes, he had completely withdrawn into a kind of connoisseurship. We were all kind of disappointed in a way, because we wanted a fight, and it was like, No—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: There's not even any point where it comes together enough to dispute.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. [00:07:59] But anyway, this thing about avant-garde theater in the SoHo area was part of my thinking. This little box—and I made a bunch of them, and also some big paintings—were attempts to sort of think through a version of this psychologized space. I wasn't unhappy with what I was doing, but it didn't feel like—obviously, I needed something else. I remember this night—I tended to work at night at that time. I had these big canvases on the wall. They were un-stretched. Really big. Maybe six feet high and eight across or something like that. With these abstract black-and-white forms sketched out. I was using a material called oil stick, which is like a big crayon, but it's oil paint, so it has a nice fatty quality to it. I had discovered it thanks to Richard Serra, who used it in his drawings, and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: When you say thanks to Serra, through seeing Serra's work or—

THOMAS LAWSON: Through seeing it, and through talking with him, because he was one of the few adults who went to this bar. [They laugh.] [00:09:59] He sat in the corner of the bar, and was always ready for an argument. That was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Shocking.

THOMAS LAWSON: Shocking, yeah, right. So one of the pleasures of going to this bar was, if you were up for it, you could go and sit with Richard and have a discussion about aesthetics. [Laughs.]

So I was using this material, and so there was this one night, and—quick flashback. My final summer in Edinburgh, I'm recovering from the treatments for my illness.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Just to close that: Which ended up being successful, right?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You've had no recurrence?

THOMAS LAWSON: No recurrence of it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So your policy of just getting on with your life actually—it worked out.

THOMAS LAWSON: Turned out to be okay, yeah. So that summer, sort of looking for something to do in the last little bit, I got involved in something called the Leith Arts Festival, which is down in the docklands.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Leith being the kind of old dock area.

THOMAS LAWSON: The dock area of Edinburgh, and very much a working-class neighborhood. There was this arts festival every summer, and it was a populist kind of festival. It wasn't art; it was arts. It was different kinds of performances that took place in pubs, or in—there's a big park there called the Links. I became attached to—they were kind of an arty circus act that did fire-breathing and various kinds of things in the pubs. I was their kind of manager or something for a month while we were doing this. [00:12:04] They were super nice people. They had come up from the south somewhere. I'm not really sure where anymore. But they were super encouraging and just—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What was the name of that group?

THOMAS LAWSON: The Salakta Balloon Band. [Laughs.] I don't remember the names of the people. There was half a dozen of them. It was just really great hanging out with them. Somehow, as we were doing that, just hanging out, we cut out little—I guess they had a table saw for some reason. We would cut out action figures from comics, to make little badges to give away to people. It was kind of like a little thing.

I kind of enjoyed doing that, and had brought a few of those with me to New York. Then, in New York, I collected some toy figures, some little sports figures and some—I guess, somehow along the line, I had some figures from a Scottish pipe band, with their kilts and their big bearskin hats and things.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Seen that in the work.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly! So one night, I added one of these figures to this thing, and thought, "Well, that is—what is that?"

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You hadn't thought of the kind of abstract environment up until you did that as a potential space in which figures would—as a kind of—I'm wondering, in some ways, it is a theatrical space. You're positioning it that way. But how much did you think of it as a space that could then be inhabited by figures, or was it just a spontaneous thing? [00:14:04]

THOMAS LAWSON: It was somewhat spontaneous. They were inhabited by a gesture. There was a kind of gesture—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But that's very different.

THOMAS LAWSON: Which is very different, but it indicated the human or something. But I was still thinking, at that particular moment, that figurativeness was not the most progressive thing to do.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But yet—I'm trying to get the chronology here. When you say that figurative was not the most progressive thing to do, was there already—were David Salle and Eric Fischl already kind of visible and active at that point? Who brought the figure very much—

THOMAS LAWSON: Very much back in, and that's sort of beginning to be part of the conversation.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's all right at that same moment.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's all part of—it's in the mix. Eric was in Canada, and I don't think he came into New York until after the *Pictures* show, which was fall of '77. David was around, and Sherrie was around, and Jack Goldstein. But actually, it was very—well, it was very young and uncertain what it was about. With Sherrie and Jack, it was about isolating photographic images. It wasn't about painting, per se. David is the kind of outlier there. So—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I'm sorry, but what about older figures who maybe were still in there, like Leon Golub, for example? Was that part of your horizon? [00:16:00]

THOMAS LAWSON: It's beginning to be, yes. Susan Caldwell Gallery, I think it was, showed Leon. I wrote a review of his work, but it would have been later than this. So I'm not—you know. One of my first reviews for *Art in America*—it is sort of '77-ish—was Nicolas Africano. They were little modeled figures on a blank ground. I was very intrigued by that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: They're good. I'm a little surprised that Nicolas Africano hasn't had more of a revival, because when I think about that work, it still seems quite interesting to me.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly. So it was a struggle. I had made figurative painting back in Scotland, but then as I became more oriented to New York, I was kind of thinking that wasn't cool, and that I needed to do something [laughs] less figurative. So then I got to New York and discovered exactly this, that maybe that was the previous generation's place, and that I needed to kind of—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And perhaps, in a way, it was inevitable that there would be some return to figuration after a long moment of Post-Minimalism and—

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, and equal—so we're now getting into the conversation about painting itself. Arriving in New York, I had no idea that there was any controversy about painting. Then joining a class that included Craig and Doug, suddenly—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Called it into question.

THOMAS LAWSON: —I'm right in the middle of the debate about whether it's even a viable thing. [00:18:00] For me, these years of '77, '78 are really the cauldron of when things are coming into focus about what my actual interests are. Doug was the curator of the *Pictures* show. Having him around and talking about his ideas about it was also a helpful kind of background to what I was thinking about in my studio. But I wasn't quite there yet, in that year. I would say that the sports figures and the Highland figures, the dancers and pipers, came into the work probably in the winter months, late '77 into early '78. I showed a series of drawings from that at The Drawing Center in 1978. That's kind of the first presentation of what I think of as the beginning. The Artists Space thing is the first public outing, but I'm still in process.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I think, in a way, it's been hard for people to place you historically, because you kind of didn't do one thing. [00:19:59] At that point, you did not bear down on artistic production, being a painter, whatever it was. Because it's at that time that you become increasingly visible and influential as a writer, at the same time. Can you talk a little—we could, in a way, separate these out as two things, but I'm not sure that's the right way to do it, because I have a feeling that, for you, these were aspects of the same project, in a way.

THOMAS LAWSON: They're all part of the same thing. I've always kind of thought of myself more project-oriented than medium-specific in any kind, or even thematically. My paintings—I work in series. I'm interested in a topic for a number of years, and then I move on to another topic, which is, I think, always related, but it's different. So yes, that causes some consternation.

So these—1978, it felt to me, and to these other characters that I was hanging around with, that we were all beginning to articulate something that was different from what was getting attention. There wasn't a lot of places for any attention to be given. I mean, the gallery situation was fairly limited.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I think that's one of the hard things for people who don't remember how few galleries there were, to understand how few galleries there were.

THOMAS LAWSON: I think there were maybe half a dozen galleries in SoHo.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And you could work for 10 years as an artist until you got a solo show. [00:22:00] The pace of things was so different.

THOMAS LAWSON: One of the kind of mythological things that was going on at that time, was that there was this mysterious, charismatic artist called Neil Jenney, who had moved from doing kind of earth art type of works to painting, and apparently dated everything to 1969, although everything seemed to be brand-new. His method

of showing was that you made an appointment, and you went to his loft, and he didn't tell you which floor it was. He told you to get into the elevator, and he brought you up. There was one painting in the lobby on view, and no sign of him. You were given I guess as long as you liked, 10 minutes or so, and then you went away again. Everybody was kind of abuzz about what a great idea that was.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: So part of what I began to think, and talking with friends like David, Mike Smith, Sherrie, different people—Barbara Kruger, even—we were beginning to feel that if there weren't going to be galleries, then maybe there could be a publication. *Artforum* was going through this very weird phase. The great moment of *Artforum* had fallen apart in acrimony, and this very serious, academic person called Joe Masheck had become editor. He was dedicated to pretty much straight-up formalist painting. [00:24:03] And so there was nothing there for younger artists.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: This, of course, is the moment when the journal *October* starts.

THOMAS LAWSON: *October* was starting.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But that also didn't feel—

THOMAS LAWSON: It felt vaguely sympathetic in terms of essays on allegory or something like that from Craig, but mostly it was an area where they talked about Richard Serra and Vito Acconci. You know, great artists, but, in our eyes, old. [They laugh.] Funny, speaking at this point, but you know, it did have that quality. Also, just super academic. I found it fascinating, but most of the people I knew didn't. It was just too much.

There had been a nice little thing called *Art-Rite* that had been put out by Edit DeAk and Walter Robinson, but they had run out of steam and didn't quite know what was going on in some way, and had lost—I guess maybe they had even lost their funding. I don't know, but it was kind of going. So we would have these conversations at the bar, or going to movies and things. The theme always was, "Well, we should make our own journal." But it was always the same—well, who's this we, and who's actually going to do it?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Who's going to do it. Everyone underestimates the amount of work involved.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. Ultimately, Susan and I figured out that, "Well, we're going to do it," because we actually have an interest. [00:26:02] I had been interested in magazines since high school, and Susan also had been interested in magazines, because she had been living in Nantucket, which, at that time, had a great bookstore, and all kinds of magazines were her lifeline to the greater world. So we had this idea that we could do that.

To me, it seemed like the thing that young artists, when they're coming together with shared ideas—it's one of the obvious things that you do, is that you start a publication to collectively disseminate your ideas. So the idea of the magazine was that it would be written by the artists. It would be essays by artists, or interviews with artists, and that it wouldn't be academic. That it would have that kind of focus. We called it *REALLIFE Magazine*, kind of with a tongue-in-cheek sort of thing about reality, but also looking to movies, or the kind of whole history of film.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I bet also, in a way, real life because—as opposed to academic life?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yes. Yeah, yeah. By this point, it was clear to me that the whole issue of media and its relationship to art was significant. That was something, I have to say, that I learned from my new friends in New York. It wasn't part of my—growing up, I don't think we had a television until I was about 15 or something, when I started watching the BBC Two stuff that we talked about. It wasn't part of my earlier life. [00:28:00]

So we put together this magazine, and Robert Longo introduced us to one of his friends from Buffalo, Deb DeStaffan who was a graphic designer, and she agreed to help us with that part of it—and Robert also put us in touch, for our first issue, with a printer up in Buffalo. So we put together our first issue in '78, and it was kind of —Artists Space had a little grant that they made available, that was like $200 for a project, that anyone could apply for. It was just something you could get. So I got the 200 bucks, and I couldn't really get anything else. Everybody said, "Well, I need to see what you've got." I had been told that Sol LeWitt was a really generous man, so I wrote him a letter, and I still have the copy of his reply. It's on squared paper, and handwritten, with a little square in the middle. But it's a regret, he couldn't do anything at this time.

So we just went ahead and did it, with this little amount of money. There's an image by Sherrie Levine on the cover, and I would guess the first article about her work, written by this very eccentric character called Valentin Tatransky—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I remember him.

THOMAS LAWSON: —who was another regular at the bar.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But also, I think, later became kind of a neo-Clement Greenbergian figure.

THOMAS LAWSON: He did, yes. [00:30:02] He kind of got caught up in—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You would ever expect him to be writing about Sherrie Levine and—

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, but it was—he knew her.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, yeah. It's enough.

THOMAS LAWSON: And actually enjoyed kind of getting into a debate with her in some way. Yes, he had very—he was a pretty eccentric character, and he was prone to making big statements about quality and all kinds of stuff like this. He wrote several pieces for us before he—he kind of disappeared.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I haven't heard him for a long time.

THOMAS LAWSON: No, I don't believe he's living any longer. I think something happened, and he—I think he also came from Buffalo, but not from the Longo circle, just independently.

So we got our first issue out, and then wrote—with that under our belts, we were able to write grants to the New York State Council on the Arts, and to the NEA. It was interesting. At first, heard from NYSCA, from New York State, with a very supportive response, and it turned out that they were looking for new art and for new venues. Publications were kind of like, "Oh, this is fantastic. New artists who are actually thinking creatively about how to get their work out." So we were able—from then, through the '80s, we were supported by these two groups. So that was kind of—it's a moment in cultural history that is long gone.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Doesn't seem to happen anymore. [00:32:03]

THOMAS LAWSON: It was just as well, because we tried, in our first few issues, to sell advertising, but neither Susan nor I are able to do that. We just couldn't. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's enough to edit it.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. But we published one or two issues a year. We ended up doing 22 issues, I think.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, and it became a very important—

THOMAS LAWSON: And it became—yeah. So in the first years, it was a vehicle for disseminating ideas, like with Sherrie, with David, with Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer. It was sort of that whole gamut. I saw my writing as—I wrote a lot for *REALLIFE*, but I also wrote for *Flash Art* in those years, and it was part of this polemical thing of creating a space to understand what was going on amongst this new generation.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Were you deliberately looking for a polemical position, in a way, in some of your writings?

THOMAS LAWSON: In a way, because I had read—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Or counter the received wisdom? You know, both in—well, I mean—well, let's talk about "Last Exit: Painting," which is in some ways a kind of counter-argument to what was being—in a way, the received wisdom that painting was kind of done. But there are also, later, things like "Hilton Kramer: An Appreciation." [00:34:00] Just the title alone is kind of like a slap in the face of conventional downtown wisdom.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, but then it's a sort of snarky little satire.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well, of course it's an attack on it, but titles are important, and it's kind of meant to have people say, "What?" You know.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was just part of—I found that that was the way that I wrote at that time. But also—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You were good at it. Not everybody can write that kind of direct, sort of punchy—

THOMAS LAWSON: It was punchy. Sometimes, I think, quite funny. Sometimes I could be serious. I think the thing with "Last Exit" that was successful was that I was able to absorb the political and theoretical arguments that animated the anti-painting, and kind of provide a different approach to it—kind of turn them around—and also do that in a more direct language that wasn't so academic.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Because it was, in a way, a defense of painting, or painting as an option, that didn't rely on the dismissal of all the alternatives to it.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. It didn't have to be that sort of huffing-puffing kind of thing.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. It wasn't like, "Well, obviously, photography has no value at all, so painting remains king." It wasn't that argument at all.

THOMAS LAWSON: No, it was more just an argument to say that painting had a place. Not that it—you know.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That turned out to be an extraordinarily influential piece of writing, maybe along with "Spies and Watchmen" from that period. When you were writing those, did you think, This is going to be the statement? [00:36:02] This is the one that will be anthologized for years to come and everyone will be quoting?

THOMAS LAWSON: No, I had no idea about that. But there was this—that was published in the fall of '81. And 1980 and '81—so I would say that '77, '78 were really exciting years in terms of beginning to think about something coherent, and really kind of getting a grip on ideas, and using the writing partly as a way of getting it clearer in my mind what I'm thinking about. And then feeling that part of the work would be publishing these ideas, so that doing *REALLIFE* was an important thing, and that finding ways to write about the larger context in which we were operating—I wrote about this Richard Gere film. I can't remember now what it was called, but he was a gigolo.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Was it called *American Gigolo*?

THOMAS LAWSON: [Yeah. –TL] It was very stylish, and a lot to do with style, and I was able to write something that was a more metaphoric approach to this problem. So there's kind of the polemic side, and then there's trying to get at it in a different sort of way. Two models in the back of my mind were Don Judd's early writing, which—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, in its directness. [00:38:00]

THOMAS LAWSON: In the directness of it, and in the clarity of, like, "This is what's important. This is what's not important."

RUSSELL FERGUSON: All his reviews are kind of like, "This is what's in the show," and a description of it, then a couple of paragraphs why it's important or not important. Very—

THOMAS LAWSON: They're very clear. That was one model, and then the more elaborate model is Smithson, who writes in these kind of giant, allegorical framework.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And elliptical.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. I was kind of interested in oscillating between those two kind of models. I guess somewhere—I'm not quite sure if it was—it would have been in late '80 or early '81, there was a change of direction at *Artforum*. I think possibly a change of ownership, but certainly a change of editors. They brought in this young woman, Ingrid Sischy, who was a downtown person and had been working at Printed Matter. Her remit was to revive *Artforum* and get it relevant again.

So she contacted me to see if I would join their roster of contributors, and I started writing reviews. They had a much more actively participant sort of version of review scheduling. The monthly deal was that we would have a meeting, a group of shows would be presented to me as, "This is your beat. Go and look at them," and I would be allowed to add other things that I might have seen. [00:40:03] Then, out of that, the idea was to write three to five reviews, as a kind of essay, so they were—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: All together in one piece.

THOMAS LAWSON: All together, yeah. So that was underway. Then Ingrid asked if I would write a longer piece. I don't think she suggested it, although I don't remember, so—anyway. I was certainly fired up about there's a whole painting debate, so it seems likely to me that I would have wanted to suggest it. And wrote it during the summer. I still have this very vivid memory of being in their office—the editorial office, which at that time was on Lafayette Street—over the San Gennaro Festival weekend. So it was like—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, madhouse.

THOMAS LAWSON: Madhouse out on the street. I'm in there with Ingrid, who goes line by line, word by word. I mean, she was excruciating [laughs] to work with, in a great way, but also just endlessly frustrating. She was just like, "What is it that you mean here? Is that what you mean? And if it is what you mean, then this next word,

what does that mean?" I mean, really detailed editing.

It was kind of amazing, because part of what was going on that weekend was that Rene Ricard was writing his essay about Jean Basquiat, and going through the same process. [Laughs.] So we were in kind of desks next to each other [laughs] writing these somewhat at-odds essays, with Ingrid breathing down our neck. [00:42:07]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Fascinating.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was really great. I mean, she was a pain in the neck in many ways, but she was a great editor, and really encouraged me to come up with that whole series of long essays that I did during those years. In a way, they're strange essays, because they're not—they're very elliptical. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. I mean, they do kind of combine the two people that you mentioned, because any given sentence is fairly direct, and certainly straightforward. You're never at any doubt about the meaning of a particular sentence, and it doesn't use jargon. Yet the argument is very often—I don't want to say rambling, but it kind of is discursive, at least.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's discursive and—in my mind, what I was trying to do was talk about the art world, although that wasn't necessarily always the topic. I was finding myself increasingly disillusioned, which is odd, because the early period of the '80s was a very good time to be a young artist associated with a gallery like Metro Pictures. So I was doing quite well, but I didn't like what I was seeing of the way that the collector class operated. [00:44:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Let's step back a little bit. You start showing—Metro Pictures, in a way, comes out of Artists Space.

THOMAS LAWSON: It grew directly out of these Friday evening, Friday afternoon, meetings that Helene presided over. As I said, at that time, the late '70s, there just weren't very many galleries available for younger artists. There was Holly Solomon, who had an interesting program, but it was somewhat lightweight in terms of its intellectual content. We were—this was a group of people who had intellectual ambitions. Not simply form and beauty, but something more critical. So there wasn't anywhere, really, to go. If you had a show at Artists Space—Artists Space had a program that was group shows, and once you had been in a group show, you couldn't return. The whole point of Artists Space was to show new people.

In '78, I had my group show. Helene asked me to do a show kind of focused around a group of us from Scotland, that I would curate it and include myself, but it would be these other young guys that I knew from Edinburgh. So that's where I showed my first sort of fully formed paintings. The Drawing Center show had been drawings, but the show at Artists Space was actually paintings, of these somewhat sentimental figures, the Scottish figures, and a dog, and a baby. [00:46:05] So there was kind of this thing going on. All against—kind of rendered in that oil stick, but then on a background that was a sort of Minimalist field of a more commercial kind of paint, radiator paint or different kinds of enamel paints that I would get in Canal Street stores. So there was sort of a dialogue going on between those Post-Minimalist process type of thinking and this new image-making.

So Helene partnered up with Janelle Reiring, who worked at Castelli, and decided to create this new gallery, and called it Metro Pictures, kind of trying to signal this idea of media influences. Around the same time, Mary Boone opened her space, and that became sort of the two nodes of competitiveness in the realm of where young artists were going to show, and how they were going to present themselves. Mary went for a more bombastic type of expressionism, with Julian Schnabel as her lead figure. But that's also where Eric Fischl showed.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: We can think of their two programs as quite different, yet at the same time, there's exceptions. Barbara Kruger is showing with Mary Boone, and—

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —you're a painter. [Laughs.] You're showing at—

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, and I was—in terms of the Metro Pictures, I mean, Jack Goldstein was the intellectual heart in some way, because he had a long relationship with Helene, and was older.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, and was also kind of someone who worked very assertively across media. Very spectacular paintings, but also in film and—

THOMAS LAWSON: But it's funny. The paintings were a little later. He was originally—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I guess when he started, it's more the films.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's the films and the records. When he decided to make paintings, which he did in part

because of the context of the gallery—but it's funny, because he came to my studio to ask—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: "How do you do it?"

THOMAS LAWSON: —how to do it. [They laugh.] Which is funny, because I didn't really know how to do it either.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Maybe he felt more comfortable asking you.

THOMAS LAWSON: [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Since you had obviously not—wouldn't find it a ridiculous question.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. So Metro Pictures became this sort of locus for that kind of work. It was Jack, it was Richard Prince, it was Sherrie, it was Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, me, and then a few others got added. It was a very exciting time.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. That's an amazing lineup Metro had at that time.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. Also fairly shortly, there were these significant group shows that were presented. Janet Kardon did *Image Scavengers* at ICA Philadelphia. Susanne Ghez did something at The Renaissance Society in Chicago. [00:50:01] And there was somebody in Milwaukee.

So there was a real momentum, a real kind of sense that something was happening, and that it was this way of thinking about art that didn't seem to be focused on any one type of presentational medium, but it was all about thinking about what to do with images culled from the mass media. My interest in that scope had mostly to do with sort of news type of images.

Part of what I was thinking about really had to do about the human condition. Life and death. [Laughs.] You know. The life part, I started off with a whole series of—there was little floating babies in these fields of painting, and then they kind of focused in on—there were square format paintings, monochromatic, and big heads, big baby heads. Then, sort of moving through that process, there was another series, which ended up being the first paintings I showed at Metro Pictures, which were based on crime photos. They were murder scenes. The format was a black painting, somewhat rectangular, vertical. Not square, but just a little off. [00:52:01] And heavy—again, the oil stick. A heavy, black surface matter. And then, in the middle of it, sort of bleeding through from below, a usually red image of someone who had been killed. It would usually be a gangster or something.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Were you thinking about Troy Brauntuch's work?

THOMAS LAWSON: He was part of the circle in some ways, but I never found Troy approachable.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So you didn't have a dialogue?

THOMAS LAWSON: So I didn't really have a dialogue with him. He was a very—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But he also made these very dark paintings, both—

THOMAS LAWSON: He made very dark paintings.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —literally and in terms of subject matter.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly. Although they were more print—they were kind of silk-screened or—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Smoother in some ways.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's funny, because I've talked with him in more recent years, and he's a perfectly nice guy. But back then, he was very withdrawn, with a big attitude, like, "Don't talk to me." So I didn't. In a certain way, I'm too straightforward to be bothered with if someone—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: If someone sends you that message—

THOMAS LAWSON: It's like, Okay, that's the message. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you're not going to work through it.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. But it was certainly part of the atmosphere of digging into darkness in some way. Part of it, to me, also was that I was still going up to the Grad Center, which is on 42nd Street, and the way to get there is through Times Square. [00:54:00] There were the news agents on all the corners, with these amazing selections of magazines that ranged from all kinds of pornography to all kinds of these cheesy crime magazines.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And then you start making paintings that—

THOMAS LAWSON: That are related to that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —are more directly from that source material.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. Also, it's interesting to—this morning, I was looking at something on the web. There's a new book out about mass murders, and the '70s were sort of like—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, I mean it's the Son of Sam year.

THOMAS LAWSON: So there's the Son of Sam. There was Ted Bundy. There was all this stuff going on.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Sort of the golden age of the serial killer. [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: But it meant it was sort of in the air. The Son of Sam—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Son of Sam—I mean, New York was—

THOMAS LAWSON: It was terrifying.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —terrorized by that guy for a long time.

THOMAS LAWSON: So there's different layers to this sort of interest in darkness. I think another aspect to it, that influenced the way that I was thinking about painting, was this was the era of CBGB's and bands like the Ramones. What was fabulous about them was the simple speed at high volume, just crashing into you, and "I'm an idiot," or "I'm fucked up." That—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's funny, because—this is a little off-topic, but I was just in London a couple of weeks ago and I saw a Ramones cover band called the Ranomes. They had the look and the sound perfectly, but the lead singer—I guess would that be Joey Ranome?—had an English accent. [00:56:07] So it was a little bit like, [demonstrates accent] "Beat on the brat." So basically, I saw the Ramones two weeks ago.

THOMAS LAWSON: That's funny. I didn't really like them that much, but my takeaway—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well, they weren't the most intellectual of the bands that were around.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. But my takeaway from them was that you could make really compelling work with really limited means, if you cranked up the volume in some way.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And in a way, that's what you were doing with your paintings.

THOMAS LAWSON: In a way, I was doing that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You took something crude from the streets and cranked up the volume with—yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: And didn't fuss over the correct way to make it happen. It was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You're still using oil stick?

THOMAS LAWSON: I was still using oil stick. I found oil stick really great, in part because of that—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You still use oil stick, don't you?

THOMAS LAWSON: From time to time, yeah. It's very direct medium, and it allows you to work very fast. I tended to make these paintings, as I said, late at night, sort of in the midnight hours, with music cranked up. I would lay out one one night, and then finish it the next.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It was kind of interesting, because traditionally in painting, there's this cult of the natural light. You know, you need some north light. So it's interesting to hear you describe painting in the middle of the night with, I guess, only an electric lightbulb, or—

THOMAS LAWSON: Fluorescent light, actually. Because it was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Fluorescent light. Which is the antithesis of everything you're supposed to require to make a painting.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. And by this time, I moved out of the loft on Thomas Street, probably around '77, '78—

I'm not quite sure—and moved further downtown to John Street, in the Financial District, to a place that I had on my own. [00:58:11] It was not as classic a loft space, but it was a commercial space, and kind of funky and everything. It was in a building that had nobody in it at night, so I could—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you could do whatever you wanted.

THOMAS LAWSON: I could be as loud as I wanted. That became–there was the front area, where there was a window, had a desk and a chair, and that was the *REALLIFE Magazine* office. [Laughs.] And the back part was my studio.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Where you didn't need any light. [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, exactly. And it was just this harsh florescence if I was working. It's funny, because—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But it's interesting, you have a physical space that actually reflects the two aspects of your work. It's actually bifurcated into a kind of writing-publishing space and a painting space.

THOMAS LAWSON: But it's in the same space also.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: No, but it's not—so it's—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: There's no wall in between it.

THOMAS LAWSON: There isn't a wall.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's just two ends of the same space.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. There's a separation, but the separation is my kitchen-dining area. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So you would have a sandwich, and move from one to the other.

THOMAS LAWSON: To the next, yeah.

So where are we going now? I'll tell you another thing. To keep going with this polemical business—because for me, it was an important part of it, and I felt that part of what I was willing to do, able to do, and actually quite good at doing, was also kind of explaining and contextualizing other people's work. [01:00:06] That it wasn't just about me. That it was kind of this other thing. The polemical thing took on this other sort of aspect, and because of *REALLIFE*—you know, *REALLIFE Magazine* had a tremendous circulation. Back in that time, before the Internet, if you were interested in art, you had to subscribe to little magazines. The word-of-mouth went very quickly, and so—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: How big was the circulation?

THOMAS LAWSON: We had about 2,000, which—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's 2,000 people.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's 2,000 people. A readership as big—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Probably 1,500 of them pretty engaged with contemporary artwork.

THOMAS LAWSON: And they ranged—I mean, Jasper Johns was one of the first subscribers. Kynaston McShine. It was influence—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yes, influential.

THOMAS LAWSON: Influential. And it was international. Nigel Greenwood in London ran a little bookstore out of his gallery. So he had it, and contacted me and asked if I would like to do a show, curate a show. We did a *REALLIFE Magazine Presents* show at his space in Sloane Square. It was the first time that the—I think Pincus-Witten called it "Real Lifestyle" or something. It was the first time that there had been collective groupings of that, because Fischl and Salle were included, as well as Prince and Levine and—[01:02:04]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So it—

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RUSSELL FERGUSON: —overlaps with what now we call the Pictures Generation. But also, in some ways, a broader reach.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's a broader view of the Pictures thing than Pictures.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Let's just talk about that. Now, for better or for worse, we have a big show at the Met, *The Pictures Generation*. Broadly, the group of artists you're talking about are, no doubt very much against the will of many of you, subsumed into this category of Pictures Generation. How do you feel about that now?

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, I mean, it's complicated. The curator—his name is Doug Eklund—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, at the Met.

THOMAS LAWSON: —at the Met—didn't do as complex a job as I would have liked. He had it kind of split into two factions. There was the kind of CalArts group, and the Buffalo group. So it's Jack Goldstein and David Salle on one side, and Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman, and then their satellites or something. I mean, he included others. He included me, he included Sherrie, and so on. But his narrative doesn't really explain—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And Richard Prince doesn't quite fit in with these groups either.

THOMAS LAWSON: To me, it was a bit of a missed opportunity, that there could have been a more thoughtful and probing analysis of what this moment was about, and why it was—what was driving it. [00:02:02] Because I think it was international. It wasn't just in America. I mean, in London, there was John Stezaker, who we featured in *REALLIFE*.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, if Stezaker had been in New York, he would always be included in this group.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, exactly. And the sculptor Bill Woodrow. There was different aspects to it that you could make, I think, quite an interesting case. But kind of bringing it down to some idea that it's a first TV generation or something doesn't do it for me. I do think what it was was this kind of coming out of however we were thinking it. Coming out of conceptual art, or Post-Minimalist art, sort of—kinds of art that have to do with thinking through processes, whether they're intellectual or material.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But I guess also the idea that—the recognition that, in a way that was just not true for previous generations, you're surrounded by images.

THOMAS LAWSON: And that we're surrounded by images.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You're in a sea of images all the time. And the taking that on board as the traditional role of the artist is to be an image-maker, but we're now in a world where we're breathing images all day long, and "How does art renegotiate its relationship to the image?" I think is key to that generation.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's key to it, but we're also, in a way, thinking about—weirdly enough, I think we were thinking in a way similar to the way that Kosuth or Weiner were thinking, but it was—but exactly that. [00:04:00] It was like, Well, wait a minute, we can't do it so abstractly. We have to face this ocean of images and make sense of that. And that the rhetoric of the image, which is part of Western art, is something that we shouldn't turn our backs to. Let's incorporate it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Representational images. But that raises a broader question. The other term that's used, kind of indiscriminately, for this whole group is appropriation. Clearly on one level, yeah, you're appropriating an image from the daily news, let's say, but you're not doing appropriation in the same way that, say, Sherrie Levine is doing appropriation or that Koons was doing early on. Appropriation covers an awful lot of ground, and what Richard Prince is doing, et cetera. How do you feel about that category, and how relevant is that to what you were doing at that time?

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, I think, for me, Sherrie's version of it, the sort of extreme, basically straight-up theft [laughs] of Walker Evans was so shocking that it was kind of liberating.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I remember when I first—I heard about them before I saw them, and I remember—that's the word I would use. I was just shocked [laughs] that anyone would do that. The shock probably has dissipated over the years now. "Well, yeah, did that." But at the time, it really was shocking.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was shocking, but from the perspective of an art-maker, it was also really liberating. It was like, Oh, well if she can do that, then I can do all kinds of things. [00:06:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That clears all kinds of space out.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. So there's that. Then the other thing, from my understanding of art history, from studying it and looking at paintings forever, was that art was always about quotation. The way that you kind of make meaning was by incorporating previous meaning—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: John Baldessari often says that, that all art comes out of art.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. I also was beginning to feel—one of the ideas that was current at that time, this sort of Postmodern idea, was that we had come to the end of ideas. That everything had been done already, and that we were in a world of endless repetition, and things like this. My more hopeful, less nihilistic take on that was that, yes, we now had permission to actually return to all of these amazing discoveries made throughout the 20th century and reconsider them. I really liked the work that Michael Hurson was doing, because he was rethinking Cubism. That seemed pretty bold, because Cubism just seems so—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Old. [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Old, and kind of a dead end, but to think that maybe there's life in it was kind of like, Oh, maybe there's other things that can be worked on and looked at. So my idea of appropriation was partly just matter-of-fact. If you're going to deal with the world of images, then you've got to use them. [Laughs.] But also, maybe you can rethink how they're processed and how they come into the world in your work. [00:08:07]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Obviously, from the mid-'70s on, your primary interlocutor is Susan. Are there other people that we haven't talked about that were important relationships for you at this time?

THOMAS LAWSON: I think we've touched everyone. There was the serious intellectuals around Rosalind Krauss. At some point, Benjamin Buchloh shows up too. There's an irritant.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: I mean, it's like—you know. I mean, he's just wrong. [They laugh.] On so much. But very—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But very informed and confident.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, and very able to present an argument.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I find his interviews with Gerhard Richter—

THOMAS LAWSON: Oh, they're hilarious.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —among the great documents of contemporary art. These two people just—

THOMAS LAWSON: Talking past each other.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —butting heads, in a way. I'm surprised that Buchloh, in some ways more than others of that group, has shown a continued openness to contemporary art.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's true.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Buchloh writes about Raymond Pettibon, and that's not necessarily something you would have anticipated: he would be the one that would be more engaged with the next generation of artists, and something which—

THOMAS LAWSON: He can be really perceptive. I actually ran into him once—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Gabriel Orozco, he writes about too.

THOMAS LAWSON: I ran into him once in the street. We were talking, and he was asking what I was up to. [00:10:00] I was in the middle of putting together an issue of *REALLIFE*, and we had—I forget exactly the details, but anyway, he was saying, "That's so interesting. How did that happen?" I was saying, "Well, one of the editorial principles is Susan and I follow up ideas based on conversations we have with people that we run into." He said, "Oh, yes, of course. You're following that tradition of aleatory publishing." I thought, "Oh, my God, what's that big word?" Then I go back, and it's exactly right. It's the Surrealist taking a walk.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Allowing chance to enter into the—

THOMAS LAWSON: It was completely correct. We had a set of directives at the back of our mind, but then much of it had to do with—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What drifts into your path.

THOMAS LAWSON: One of the things with the magazine that happened is that after the first three or four years, we had given voice to our generation. We had given everybody kind of space. Allan McCollum wrote his great piece on Matt Mullican, and Jeff Wall wrote—we had this like—and it was like, Now what?

We had also grown to a point. It was like, we could buckle down and make this a real, full-on project, and kind of become a magazine, [laughs] like *BOMB* or something. We talked about it and realized we really didn't want to do that, nor did we want to be repeating ourselves. We didn't want to become the explanations forever of this group. [00:12:05] And so we started looking for a younger generation.

I had been asked—in the *Artforum* thing, I had been given an assignment to review a show by this young group called Group Material. It was a little project in the East Village, where they got people in their neighborhood to give them objects. I went to see the show and to meet with them, and I met Tim Rollins, who was this amazing character, in a red—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Super charismatic.

THOMAS LAWSON: Super charismatic. He was wearing a red jumpsuit. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, he had many eras of his look. That was the red jumpsuit era.

THOMAS LAWSON: And super smart.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And not that long out of Maine at that point.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. He might still have been in school, actually.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He studied with Kosuth.

THOMAS LAWSON: Kosuth. I knew Joseph a little bit, so we had something in common to talk about. We struck up a friendship with Tim, and then with Julie Ault. That became sort of part of the context. At around the same time, I had my first teaching job. That was at SVA. We can come back to talking about school at some point. SVA was really a kind of corrupt organization, and there was no real method to how people got hired.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, it was a crony system.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was cronies and visibility. So after "Last Exit" was published—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You became visible enough to be offered a—

THOMAS LAWSON: Jeanne Siegel, who was the chair of the department, called me up and said, "Oh!" [00:14:03]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: "You should be teaching at SVA"?

THOMAS LAWSON: "Would you like to"—and I was given a—it was officially a drawing class, but it was, like, whatever. I was very flattered and excited to get a job. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But you're also different from a lot of people in that you had really never been to art school. You hadn't been a student in an art class.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. So I walk into this studio class with a bunch of easels, and think, What the hell am I going to do with this? But I was really, really lucky that this first class that I had, with all these eager little faces wondering what this new teacher is going to do, included Mark Dion, Gregg Bordowitz, and Andrea Fraser.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Unbelievable.

THOMAS LAWSON: Unbelievable. It was a gift from heaven. They helped me understand what I could do. We had these amazing conversations. Andrea at the time was still a painter—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: —but a very fearsome intellect, nonetheless. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, from day one.

THOMAS LAWSON: Gregg was struggling with his identity and who he was. Again, super intense and thoughtful. Mark was charming and curious. So we would have these great conversations, and bring in things to read to each other, and talk about work. It's like, Oh, this is what a class could be. Later classes turned out to be a little harder than that. [They laugh.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well, it's the key to teaching a good class, is having good students in it. If you can have exceptional students, you might have an exceptional class. [00:16:02] That's an amazing story. You were lucky in your classmates at the Grad Center, and then in your students.

THOMAS LAWSON: On some level, I felt, throughout those years, up until the mid-'80s, that New York was enchanted. Things happened. I met all kinds of interesting people. It was clearly a place where ideas were the currency. People liked to talk.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And then it stopped being that?

THOMAS LAWSON: I began to feel it stop being that. With the magazine, we more focused on the younger generation. It became a bit more political. Because now we were in the Reagan years, and that's part of it too, I think.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, and the AIDS epidemic—

THOMAS LAWSON: And the AIDS epidemic.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —has come, and Reagan is the president. It is a different environment.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's a different environment. But the gallery scene had also exploded. What had started off as —

RUSSELL FERGUSON: There's a simultaneous huge expansion of the market.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. It started off—it was Metro Pictures and Mary Boone and maybe Annina Nosei to the side, showing work of exciting young artists, and getting some support for them for that. Then within a couple of years, it's this massive market, and it's—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It just changed. I remember, at one point, if you went to an artist's opening, you might go for a drink with them afterwards, and then suddenly you're at dinner in a fancy restaurant for 200 people.

THOMAS LAWSON: One of the things that happened was—yes, at the beginning, openings were: everybody came and there was a big, celebratory party. [00:18:01] I remember, at a certain point—Metro Pictures started off on Mercer Street, in a fairly small gallery, and then two or three—maybe two years—I mean, it was pretty quickly—moved over to Greene Street, in a much larger space. With that move came restrictions, and you couldn't come to the opening unless you had been invited. Getting into the gallery would be this sort of awkward moment, because there would be people standing at the door, saying, "Can I come in with you?" It was like, "I'm sorry, but no. I can't." [Laughs.]

So yeah, the sort of atmosphere changed. As I said, there was this kind of weird collector class that was driving it, the art consultants. They were much more with an eye to market. It wasn't about ideas. It was about who's up and who's down. There was this shift, also very quickly, to yet another generation, sort of the neo-geo thing, with Koons and Halley and Bickerton. They were the hot young artists, quickly scooped up from—by this point, there was a whole little gallery scene over in the East Village that was sort of an alternative, but those three were scooped up by Sonnabend, and kind of elevated very quickly. It wasn't clear that their ideas were that compelling, but—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well, speaking about turning up the volume, I remember Ashley Bickerton actually had a meter, like a taxi meter, running on the work.

THOMAS LAWSON: On the work. Same—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: With the value going up constantly.

THOMAS LAWSON: But I always wondered if it had a reverse for when it was—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: What is that work? [00:20:00] What does the meter say now? Yeah, you're really throwing all your cards on the table with that, because if it's not going up, it's going down.

THOMAS LAWSON: I think my most successful year was in '83 with Metro Pictures. I had a show of large paintings that were partly architectural, some buildings and cityscapes, and partly landscapes. They had sort of developed—I had to move again, and I had moved to Brooklyn. Everything was hotting up, and so the real estate market was also hotting up, and Lower Manhattan was no longer viable for me. The Lower East Side was potential, but was still really sketchy. A lot of really bad drug stuff going on there, and I just didn't really want to get into that.

So I found a little building just over the Manhattan Bridge, in the sort of edge of downtown Brooklyn. Oddly enough, given later cultural history, right next to the Marcy Projects, the Marcy Houses, which is where Jay Z comes from. [Laughs.] I actually do remember—I mean, not him, but I remember in the later' 80s there were always kids out dancing and rapping on the streets.

So I found this building, and I was able to get a net lease, which meant that I paid for the whole building and was responsible for it, and so had to find tenants. [00:22:05] Most of the time that we stayed there, it was a good deal. I had a studio floor and a floor to live in. And we had, over the years, different tenants, including Julie Ault and Andres.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, Andres Serrano.

THOMAS LAWSON: Andres Serrano. So we had this nice little community at some point.

Anyway, when I first moved to Brooklyn, as is my wont, I went exploring with a camera. And I found in downtown Brooklyn all these amazing war memorials and buildings and things. I began to think that I maybe wanted to expand my image repertoire away from the newspaper, crime magazine kind of thing, and think about the city and the architectural frame. There's a way in which that also had reopened my memories of grad school in Edinburgh, where I had looked at Scottish neoclassicism. Because the buildings in Brooklyn were also neoclassical. [Laughs.] Sort of thinking about how different forms of wealth and power and civic-ness get represented, again, through a kind of appropriated repertoire of tropes. To me, it was all kind of part of a logic.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But that also—it's not just a matter of a change in your image repertoire. [00:24:03] This is the point at which you start doing larger-scale public—

THOMAS LAWSON: Not yet. These were large-scale paintings. They were kind of—yeah, they were big paintings. So they were about the city in some way. That process played out over two or three years.

I would say, in 1986, Ray Ring, who had been my boss in the space at the Graduate Center when I was a student there, contacted me and asked if I would like to do a show in that space. I said yes, even though it's a weird space. I also knew how to work with it in some way. I decided that I would like to do not exactly a retrospective, but I would like to rethink some work, [as well as –TL] including some of the more recent work. So I created a show that had—I built these freestanding structures for the center of the area, and painted them in these sort of bright bedroom colors, like pale pinks and yellows. Then on top of them, wrote out—I had done this series of paintings that had to do with headlines from the *New York Post*. They were big portrait heads of mostly young people who had mostly been murdered. The titles of the paintings came from the headlines, which were, "Murdered Child" or something. [00:26:06] It was that period when the *New York Post* had the famous "Headless Body in Topless Bar." I didn't use that one, but there was a lot of similarly gory headlines. So I wrote out all of these headline titles on the structure. Andrea was actually my studio assistant at the time, and so she and Susan helped me do that. Then I hung the paintings on top of that, so it was more clear what was going on.

When I had first shown the paintings at Metro, and then when they were shown again later in these*Image Scavenger* shows and things, there was always this—it felt like it was just a little too unclear what was going on. So by revisiting and adding this backdrop of gruesome slogans, I was thinking that it would maybe make it more relevant to the location on 42nd Street. So doing that show made me think more about the city as a location. Just like, what one could do from that.

The following year, I got—again, to me, out of the blue, but I think maybe as a result of this—a call from the Public Art Fund to see if I would be interested in doing something on a site, a temporary site, that they had at City Hall Park, downtown, in front of the City Hall. [00:28:00] So that seemed an interesting project. I did some research into the park, and it had this really interesting history of public statuary, that kind of, in a way, told the history of New York. There was a Nathan Hale, with his hands tied behind his back, sort of, "Give me liberty or give me death." There was Horace Greeley telling people to "Go West, young man." He had been publisher of one of the newspapers or something. Then there was this lawn with nothing on it. But in my researches I discovered there had once been this very elaborate, Baroque kind of public fountain. It had been called [*Civic Virtue*. –TL] And—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I guess at some point, they just have to take that down.

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, it had been made by this very successful American artist in the Beaux-Arts period called Frederick MacMonnies. He had studied at Paris, late 19th century, early 20th century, completely oblivious to any modernity, and did these elaborate allegorical figures. This one, it turned out, it was a big, naked chunk of a guy, with a club over his shoulder, standing on the necks of two naked women. [They laugh.] One being corruption and the other vice, or something like this. It had been outrageous from the beginning. As soon as it had been installed in 1910 or whatever, people had said, "You've got to be kidding." [00:30:00]

Eventually it had been moved, but where it got moved to was the Queens County Courthouse. Just at that time, when I'm discovering this, the Queens County Courthouse came into the news as the latest cesspool of corruption, and the county—it's not the supervisor. I forget the title, but anyway, the leader of the council there was a man called Donald Manes, and he committed suicide by stabbing himself in his car on the parkway. It was kind of crazy. There were all kind of seedy stories of sex and money and parking meter theft and all kinds of really petty ante stuff, but built up to something.

So I went out to the Queens County Courthouse, and here is this genuinely horrifying thing, right on the steps to the courthouse. I mean, it was kind of amazing. So I took a bunch of photographs, and built this freestanding structure that was partly painted panels, partly photographic panels, one of them transparent or see-through. It was a kind of—I was thinking a little bit about Russian avant-garde signage stuff, those kind of structures that they made to broadcast revolutionary slogans and things that had multiple facades to them. It was something like that. [00:32:00] I installed it in this park, right in front of City Hall.

It was really quite successful. It was a kind of odd combination of being—it had text in it as well, about corruption. It moved between being kind of quite polemical and direct, and in other facets of it, quite poetic and mysterious. Anyway, I liked it, and it was up for, I think, three months during the summertime. Inadvertently, it made it into the *New York Times*. There was a photograph of a—it was sort of beginning of homelessness being a visible urban problem, so there were people camped out around it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, there it was.

THOMAS LAWSON: There it was, this piece about corruption as a backdrop to homeless people. So that was kind of interesting.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Was that a way of getting away from the market for you as well? I know they came to you with the idea of working in public, but did it appeal to you partly for that reason?

THOMAS LAWSON: It absolutely did. Again, we need to focus on this around this time, but at this time, I had also—I think it was the year before this happened—I got a call from Doug Huebler, asking me if I was interested in coming out for a semester to teach at CalArts. Doug was hilarious. He said, "You know, I used to run this program, and in the past, this would have been it, if you said yes, you were coming. [00:34:02] But now we have to have a discussion, and I'll get back to you." [Laughs.] They got back to me and said, "So can you come?" So I went for a semester.

While there, I got a call from Anthony Reynolds, who has a gallery in London, and he wanted to know if I would be interested in showing with him. So my discontent with the New York thing was being answered by these different things, that I was getting to go to CalArts, which turned out to be this amazing community of people who actually loved talking, and talking about ideas, and just going wherever that went. One of my fellow visiting artists at that time was Mike Kelley. We would hang out in the cafeteria and complain.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So this is opening up a whole different world.

THOMAS LAWSON: This is a fabulous—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Kelley was barely known in New York at that time.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, right. And going back to Britain. I hadn't really been much in Britain, so having a show in London was exciting. Anthony is an eccentric gallerist, with a really interesting roster that included Gerard Hemsworth and Amikam Toren. Will Wilkins. There was a lot of people who were kind of thinking about these issues of where painting as a formal exercise encounters painting as an expressive enterprise, and where figuration fits. [00:36:02] So, in a way, it was a more sympathetic environment for where I was thinking than New York was in some way. Because New York had become very manufactured.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And very market-driven.

THOMAS LAWSON: Very market-driven. All the work that was being feted was being made by fabricators. The question of the hand was no longer of interest. And I'm very interested in that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: In a weird way, in California, which is sort of in some ways thought of in New York as Finish Fetish territory, the hand was actually still a live thing.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. So there's these different kinds of opportunities opening up. Also, speaking of California, following the gig at CalArts, Ron Onorato, who was a curator at the time at La Jolla—which is now San Diego, but at that time it was only in La Jolla—offered me a show.

So in '87, I did a show there that was—again, it was sort of a combination of things. It was a show of existing

paintings, and then I did two new works for the museum specifically. One was on a back wall. I painted the whole wall, and there was some kind of graphic, two arrows pointing in different directions. And then, on top of that, a mounted black-and-white photograph of a classicizing piece of architecture, kind of a dome thing. [00:38:14] At the other end of the array of galleries—I had three galleries, I think—there was a room there that looked out over the ocean. I built another freestanding object, a bit like the one I had done in the City Hall Park, but it was with two photographic panels: one, a cityscape, and the other, two glasses of martinis, sort of classic martinis. Both of them had fluorescent light circles attached to them. It was kind of billboard-y, but not, because the lighting, in fact, obscured the image rather than illuminate it. But in both cases, I was beginning to think how I could possibly move past the easel painting, per se, to some kind of thing.

With the show with Anthony, I did the same thing, that I painted patterns on the wall behind the paintings, sort of vaguely abstractions of a tartan pattern that came out of a—it actually came from some kind of packaging. It was very abstracted, but it was diagonal lines, occasionally crossed. So I was trying to think of this idea of expanding the area for painting beyond the stretched canvas, without giving up the stretched canvas. [00:40:04] I was kind of wanting to do that. So I'm sort of expanding where the work is being shown, and also how I'm making it, how I'm thinking about it.

When I got back to New York after all of that, I learned of a potential commission. The city of New York was planning to do a major renovation of the municipal building, the Manhattan Municipal Building, at the end of Chambers Street. They were going to clean the building or something like this. What was going to be the site was this scaffolding parapet that would run all the way around the building. It was, I think, about a third of a mile in length. They were looking for proposals to do this. The competition was being run by the Fine Arts Commission, which is very kind of high-end.

So I came up with a proposal for that, that called for making a visual essay about public statuary in New York. I drove all over the city. One of the great things about moving to Brooklyn was that I could have a car, because I had lived on this—this building that I rented was on this little street that was right behind a police station, and so although it had "No parking any time" signs, the cops used it to park their private cars. [00:42:03] So I realized that I could park a private car, because if they tried to do anything, I could just make this huge stink, and then they would lose their parking. So it was kind of like this funny little standoff.

So I had a car, so I drove around the city, researching all the public statuary. I mean, it's no surprise, but what I discovered was that women were only represented as allegorical figures, from liberty to justice, to—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: To corruption and vice.

THOMAS LAWSON: To corruption and vice, or the Columbia *Alma Mater*. I mean, it's just that. There was one actual woman, Golda Meir. [They laugh.] Otherwise, allegorical figures. Then black people were only represented as thankful slaves being liberated by important white men, so they were always in supplicating kind of poses. And then the men represented the political classes of different periods, and also, interestingly, the immigration waves. So there was the original Founding Fathers of the country and all that, but then there would be a mass of Irish ones, or a mass of German ones, or Italian ones, and they were all in these poses, with basically a right hand extended forward, and a left hand in a breast pocket or something. [00:44:03] So this kind of rhetorical pose of speech. It was just extraordinary.

So I made this proposal to do this large ribbon painting that would incorporate this sort of discovery. There would be the repetition of the white men, and then as punctuation, in different kind of ways, of the women and minority figures. And I won the competition. It was great. One of the most satisfying moments was I had to make a presentation to the Fine Arts Commission, who met in City Hall. It was the great and the good, these sort of wealthy—mostly these important, powerful women. But the artist was Robert Ryman. [Laughs.] He and I got into this really fabulous conversation about colorfastness. His concern was—because I was proposing something in fairly bright colors, and it was like, So what's going to happen?

Luckily, I had actually done research into this. I was still working at SVA, and I had a student there who lived up in New Haven and came down for his classes, and he was a sign painter. He gave me all this information about paint, and that the paint that sign painters use is lightfast for a period of years. I mean, it's not forever, but this was a temporary project. [00:46:00] The longest it was likely to be up was five years, and the paint would last that—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, it's always good in a way when they ask you a difficult technical question and you know the answer.

THOMAS LAWSON: And you know the answer. I know, it's like—he recognized immediately that I was trustworthy in some way. So I got to do this project. It took quite a few months to do it. I hired this guy. His name was Russell Rainbolt, which is a great name. And he was amazing. Super hardworking. I could give him a small 8x10 drawing, and he could blow it up to billboard size. He was just amazing. And fearless.

He stood on—I rented a separate studio to do this in Williamsburg, in an area that, at that time, was sort of industrial Williamsburg, and it was really actually pretty sketchy, but now, I think, amazingly gentrified. So I had a big studio for this, because this was a lot of big sheets of plywood. There were sheets that were 10 feet high. They were four or five feet broad. Then we painted them in the studio, and then took them on site, screwed them up, and retouched and finished on site. It was an amazing, kind of intense project, which I began to—I think it must have been about a year of working, and working with the contractors, and working with the General Services bureaucrats.

There were always problems. At one point, there was a problem that there was—someone in the traffic department had thought that it might be a distraction for people driving across the Brooklyn Bridge. [00:48:11] That it was so bright that it would cause an accident.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: This is in New York City.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, I know, it's ridiculous. I was living on the other side of the bridge. I would walk across. It was like, you can barely see it. [Laughs.] Up close, it's very bright, but across the bridge it's not. But I began to think that actually this might be a way forward, that maybe doing public art—it was like being a certain kind of small businessman, running interference with all these different city departments, and dealing with tradespeople and with these different kinds of materials that had a different kind of toxic level than oil paint. It was all kind of interesting. So I kind of explored that further.

I did a show with Declan McGonagle at his gallery, Orchard Gallery, in Derry. That was a kind of site-specific interior mural, that had to do with another kind of ridiculous, early 20th-century fountain monument thing that's in the center of Derry. It's a kind of colonial thing about the end of the war. It's another one of these things that's kind of appalling, but in this case, what's appalling is that it's this big monument of British soldiers with their guns drawn, in the middle of this Irish market town. [00:50:04] I mean, it's just [laughs]—it was a fairly clear statement of what the British government thought of Londonderry at that time.

Anyway, so I did a project with Declan, and that, in turn, led to a bigger project. He was the commissioner for—I don't know how many times they did it, but it was a big—it was going to be a biannual or tri-annual show in Gateshead, near Newcastle. It was on the site of a Garden Festival or something like this. It was a kind of whole range of site-specific works that were to be done, and he asked if I would be interested in doing something. I went to visit the site, and one of the—just slightly off-site, but very much part of it, was this abandoned building that had been a soap factory. It was a big, blocky, concrete building, also from the beginning of the 20th century. And it was available in some way.

So I proposed a huge billboard painting on the outside of that. I developed a range of images that had to do with public statuary in Newcastle. *George and the Dragon* kind of images. Russell made it for me. He went and spent several weeks in an industrial complex [laughs] at the outskirts of Gateshead to paint this thing, and then it was installed. [00:52:01] Actually a pretty amazing piece. Unlike the problem with the Brooklyn Bridge, this one really was visible for miles, and you could see it from the train—the London to Edinburgh train—from like a mile away or something. It was this really kind of great thing.

Then there was one final piece in this trajectory, that I was included in a show in Madrid that was organized by a curator called Mar Villeaspesa. It was in a strange, kind of art society building called the Círculo de Bellas Artes that had a kind of sketchy history from the Franco period and was being rehabilitated as an okay place. I made a sculptural piece for this that was based on a sculpture of a fallen angel that was in the Parque del Retiro. I got someone from the Academy in Madrid [Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando]to build this over-scale version of the wing of this angel, and it was placed at the bottom of this big spiral staircase, in a circle of fluorescent light, red light, so it was like falling into this pit. That kind of became the period of time in which I did public art that related to public statuary in some way. [00:54:01]

Around the same time, I did a show with Anthony again, that had paintings that had light fixtures in them. So working from that piece from La Jolla, but there were—the photographic side didn't really interest me going forward, but I did like the idea of the light. So they were paintings, but they had lightbulbs.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He's a painter that's never associated with the group that you're associated with, but some of that work, I remember at the time, reminded me in a weird way of Alex Katz's painting. Were you looking at Katz at that time?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. It's interesting, because he is really interesting. I just met him a couple years ago.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He's a big personality.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, he was great. We were in a little show together at the Metropolitan Opera. [Laughs.] There was a reception, and we chatted. But yeah, he's—and yeah, I think the simplification of the figure—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, often a kind of flat—

THOMAS LAWSON: And the flatness.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —colored background.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. Really, I think—certainly part of the background of thinking about it. I don't know—I wouldn't say that I consciously—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I remember he did a public project in Times Square, actually, that was kind of like big panels of—I don't know which reminded me of which, but I saw some kind of connection. But—

THOMAS LAWSON: The public thing, part of—so that first one in City Hall got to be in the *New York Times*. [00:56:00] More excitingly, the Municipal Building one got to be in *Law and Order*. [They laugh.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's good.

THOMAS LAWSON: You know, the lawyers walked past it or something.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, fantastic. But anyway, we get to the end of the '80s. You've been sort of teaching in California. You're starting to show more internationally. You've moved into public art. Then there's really a big change when you move to California. What prompted that?

THOMAS LAWSON: There's one more thing that, in a way, brings the decade to an end, which is that I was offered a survey show in Glasgow at what was then called the Third Eye Centre. It's now called CCA. The curator was Andrew Nairne. He was a young, very enthusiastic young guy. We did a real survey. It was everything from about 1980 to that moment. I did a new work for them. That partly continued the idea of painting on the wall, and at that point, I actually did do a tartan. [Laughs.] And it came with a catalog. So there was kind of a sense in which a chapter of work was coming to some kind of—not necessarily—I don't know if it meant an end, but it's something.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Survey shows always have this impact, usually, on artists, unless they're one of those people who has them every two years, but it makes you think about what you've done and what you want to do. [00:58:04]

THOMAS LAWSON: Anthony was very helpful in putting together the catalog. He helped as the editor, basically. It was designed by this very interesting and tragically short-lived designer called Tony Arefin, who was sort of the designer for the art world for a few years at that time. His company was called Arefin and Arefin, except it was just him. [They laugh.] And Jeanne Silverthorne, the artist Jeanne Silverthorne, wrote the essay. We put together an illustrated biographical timeline that was able to talk about some of the things that we've been discussing—sort of the essays and the *REALLIFE Magazine*—and tried to kind of make it more than just painting.

That was nice, and it was really the first time that I had been back in Glasgow since I left to go to St. Andrews, because I think I mentioned that my dad got a job in London shortly after I went away, so they had moved down to London, and then he had retired, and they moved to Fife, outside of St. Andrews. Then they both died in the late '80s, just around this time that I'm doing all this new public art stuff. So I really had not been back to Glasgow. So going back to Glasgow, and it was a year that Glasgow was the European City of Culture, and so there was a lot of art going on, and a lot of things. And they had cleaned up. They had washed the buildings. [Laughs.] [01:00:00] They were turning it—they were beginning—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: The new Glasgow.

THOMAS LAWSON: The new Glasgow. Visually, it was just shocking to me. I barely recognized it. I met this new generation of young kids who were just finishing off at Glasgow Art School: Douglas Gordon, Christine Borland, Ross Sinclair, Craig Richardson. I mean, I couldn't believe it. Suddenly, there was this—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: In Scotland, nonetheless.

THOMAS LAWSON: In Scotland. A group of really advanced artists.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Ross Sinclair really committed to your project.

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, I mean, he came out to CalArts and got the "REAL LIFE" tattoo. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, a huge tattoo of "REAL LIFE."

THOMAS LAWSON: It opened my eyes to the possibility that Scotland might not be as backwards as I had it in

my mind. Because my parents had both died, I inherited a little bit of money—not very much, but a little bit—and decided to buy a little flat in Edinburgh at that time, too. Curiously, we buy a flat, and then, within the year, we've moved to California. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Making it much harder to go—

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. So if we're going to start talking about California, can we take a little break?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. [Tape stops, restarts.]

THOMAS LAWSON: Okay, I guess we're on again. So yeah, I wanted to just return quickly to the idea of creating exhibitions as part of what I did. [01:02:04]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah.

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THOMAS LAWSON: I mentioned the show with Nigel Greenwood, but there was another one that followed that, which was a kind of interesting situation. I had written one of my negative reviews of something at PS1. And in what I thought was a really savvy kind of response, Alanna Heiss, who was the director, invited me over for coffee, and sat me down and said, "That was tough. But what I would like you to do is do a show for us." [Laughs.] Which I think was a really smart cooptation of some kind.

So I got to do a show that was part of a bigger show, that was kind of a catch-all of what's going on in New York right now. I did a painting show. It was continuing with the idea of the "Last Exit" notion. It included people like Fischl and Salle, and Walter Robinson, I think, and some others. But also a couple of odder characters, who are not part of the accepted canon that was developing. I was trying to be more expansive and thinking a little bit outside of the box of that.

Following that, I got to do a couple more shows with that organization. [00:02:00] Karen Marta and Brian Wallis, I think, were part of this. It was something to do with Pop art, and the reconsideration of the independent—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: *This is Tomorrow*?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, the *This is Tomorrow* show. I wrote a catalog essay for that, and then there was a kind of follow-up show that was a contemporary response or something like this. I included Jenny Bolande and Richard Prince, and maybe some others. I forget. Maybe Jessica Diamond. I was finding a way to keep doing this sort of—I mean, it's kind of like further magazine thinking, but in the space rather than on the page.

As we're now going to start talking about the '90s, that's a good prelude to that, because some of my work in the '90s had to do with exhibitions. So now we're heading into the '90s.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And you become the dean at CalArts.

THOMAS LAWSON: And I'm becoming dean at CalArts. The prelude to that is my teaching in the '80s was always somewhat—it was in the adjunct line. I had this gig at SVA, until I didn't. The original job at SVA came to an end in '86, because I left the country to go to Sydney. [00:04:01] I was in the Sydney Biennale. To go to the opening, I had to leave before the semester ended, and Jeanne Siegel told me not to come back.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: And I guess, you know, given my opinion of what she was about, that simply means that I wasn't any longer fascinating enough, that she probably replaced me with Peter Halley or something. [They laugh.]

But anyways, I then had some teaching at RISD, and that was curious, because I was hired there specifically to teach a graduate seminar that would be across departments, because they were so rigorously separate. And of course it made no sense anymore, really, at least at the MFA level, to be like that. So I had this seminar, and my job was basically to bring New York information and theory to this group. It was exhausting, but kind of great. I would take the train in the morning from Penn Station, eight o'clock train or something, get in at midday, have lunch, teach the class, and get the six o'clock train home again. [Laughs.] But like my beginning at SVA, I had a great—my students included Janine Antoni, and Paul Ramirez Jonas, and Spencer Finch. So another pretty great group of kids who were really interested in hearing this, but were also remarkably suspicious of it. [00:06:12] It was like, "What? People are reading this? Why are they reading that?" You know?

And I had this habit of running around town with my camera and taking pictures of shows, and then—there was a photo place called Duggal on 19th or 20th Street, and they were open 24 hours. So you could get your slides

processed within a matter of hours. It was one of my teaching tools, that I would do this. So I'm doing the SVA thing—after being fired from SVA, I then got rehired to do their fourth year, which was more of a crit. You kind of wandered the studios on a regular basis. So I was doing SVA and RISD, and then I did the CalArts thing, and then I got invited back, in '89, to CalArts. This time, the other person teaching was Felix Gonzalez Torres.

While I was there—and this is the time I'm also kind of doing these public projects, so I'm always sort of leaving to do something. So it was a very hectic semester, but it turned out—I didn't know it at the time, but it turned out that they were looking for a new dean. [00:08:03] That there had been this political upset, and Catherine Lord was in the process of leaving. So Millie Wilson and a couple of other faculty took me to lunch and said, "We would like you to apply for this." And I said, "Apply for what?" [Laughs.] So we talked, and it was like, Really? Why? But you know, the more I thought about it, it seemed like, Well, why not? My professional life was going through these upheavals, and maybe it was a time.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Is that around—you were still working with Metro Pictures then?

THOMAS LAWSON: I was still working with Metro Pictures, but my last show there had not done well, and they were not at all interested in my public artwork. They just didn't give a shit, basically. It just wasn't in their realm. So we were kind of falling apart. We never had a blowout, but it just wasn't feeling like that was necessarily the future for me. New York was a tough town, and I was approaching 40. I was getting to that point where I hadn't become a market darling, and so the chances were that my livelihood might be compromised in some way. [00:10:01] As I said, I was thinking about, Well, maybe I sort of follow the path of becoming a professional public artist, but that involved—it became clear, doing it, that it really involved a level of political commitment that's not of the sort that artists are used to, but genuine nitty-gritty politics of glad-handing and speaking to communities about their interests—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And more and more public art became like a negotiated thing, where the artist is expected to go and have meetings in whatever is defined as the community, and take their suggestions for the work of art, which, for a lot of artists, is incompatible with being an artist.

THOMAS LAWSON: No, you just can't do it. So I'm finding that the market isn't that keen to support me, and this other situation isn't going to be that much better, or is going to involve so many compromises. Susan and I talked about it, and we thought that, Well, there's certainly nothing to lose by putting my name in.

So actually, weirdly, what happened was that I—so I did that, and then spring break of that year—so it's actually '89. Is it? Or '90? '90. No, it's '90. Spring break, I have to go to Gateshead for the install and opening of that mural. I spend a long week there. It's really great. [00:12:00] The artists who had been spending time there doing their installations and things had found these two or three restaurants that were really great, and we would go there every night, and there was a bar that was like the art bar. It was a really fun thing. Declan's show was well-received. It was kind of like a—as most of his projects were—you know, it was a really good, smart way of engaging sort of political thought and art thought in a public context, in a working-class town, and making it seem possible rather than weirdly elitist or threatening. It was just really good.

I fly back, and Monday morning, I'm asked to come in for an interview. [Laughs.] I haven't thought about really—so I can't believe that I gave a very good interview. I mean, it's just [laughs]—but whatever. Time passed, and the semester ended, and we went back to Brooklyn. Then I get a call from Allan Sekula to ask if I'm still interested. It's like, "Interested in what again?" [Laughs.] He said, "You know, that job." He said, "Because if you are, Steven Lavine would like to meet you." So I said okay. So I flew back here, and had a couple of meetings with Steven, and we talked about it, and he offered me the job. And that's how it started. [Laughs.] [00:14:00]

It was strange. I didn't start right away. I had things on my plate, so I didn't start until January of '91. I get there, and there's no support, no introduction. Just, "Here's a key. There's your office." The whole place seemed chaotic, and actually really, physically, in bad shape. Really dowdy and sort of falling apart. And the students were out of control. It was a time when—I mean, every—security guys were always coming to me to say that my students had done this or done that, and then I would have to talk to these kids, and they would say, "That wasn't us! They always pick on us!" It was just all this kind of confusion.

One of the first things I had to deal with was that a grad student had done this really stupid installation that was deliberately provocative. He had taken apart the railings around this—the main gallery in CalArts is this big open space, and it has a mezzanine around it in the upper floor. He had taken the railings off the mezzanine, and then used the wooden railings to make a swastika on the ground. So he had made this dangerous thing, and then this—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: With a swastika.

THOMAS LAWSON: —stupid, provocative thing.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Dumb.

THOMAS LAWSON: It had something to do with—there was a development happening across the freeway from CalArts that was called Stevenson Ranch. It was just starting. It was a big, new real estate development. Now it's all complete. [00:16:01] It's, like, a huge thing now. But at that time, it was just starting. He was making some not very clear connections between this and Nazis. So there was outrage. Staff and faculty were outraged. The provost at the time came storming into my office and was like, "What are we going to do about this?" or "What are you going to do about this?" It's like, "Give me a hint. [Laughs.] I just started." She was like, "Well, you've got to take it down." I said, "Well, wait a minute. We can't—that's not the way to do this. We'll have to have a conversation."

So we have a sort of all-school emergency meeting. And of course the kid has disappeared. Just completely made himself unavailable. So I have to defend his work, which I think is stupid, to this angry group of people who want to see it destroyed. I'm forced into taking positions which I agree on, and then had to—several times during my career at CalArts, have had to parade out the same stuff, which is that students are students, and that the whole point is that they get to do projects that are half-baked, and then we talk about them, and talk about what went wrong and how to fix it. And I was, I guess, convincing enough that everybody calmed down. But the kid, we never heard from him again. [00:18:01]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Doesn't sound like he was a very promising artist.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. But there were promising artists. In that first group of kids, who were really badly behaved, were people like Andrea Bowers, who was part of a—she was a grad student, but she was part of an all-girl punk band called Speaker Death. They couldn't really play instruments, but they really knew how to get the word out that they were performing, and they would get really messed up, and kind of yell and scream on stage. [Laughs.] Afterwards, there would be big messes to clean up and all that.

It's kind of amazing, because nowadays, the students are so serious and well-behaved. I hardly ever hear anything about bad behavior. There's always some kind of thing, but nothing on the scale and ambition [laughs] that they had back then. The graduation there was always outside, and it used to be in the afternoon, in the hot sun. The students always disrupted it, in performative ways but also in just obstreperous kinds of ways. That doesn't happen anymore. It's just been this—I think to do, probably, with the cost of it all.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, it's expensive to go there.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's become so expensive that you really need to take it seriously, in a way that—I mean, it was always expensive, but there were ways to ameliorate it at that time. [00:20:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: How do you think moving to California changed your practice as an artist?

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, initially, in the first few years, it interrupted it considerably, because I didn't have—I tried to have a studio on campus. I thought that it would be an idea to have a studio on campus, and that turned out to be a really bad idea.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Because people can reach you. They know where you are.

THOMAS LAWSON: There was that. The students, for the most part, would try really hard to leave me alone, but they couldn't.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: So there was that. But also, I didn't want to go back up there.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, on the days when you didn't have to.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. And then just being disoriented. I had become very used to how I got my ideas, and they had a lot to do with being in the city.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, New York City.

THOMAS LAWSON: New York City. Like the magazine, it was an aleatory process. It was about walking around, or driving around, and seeing things, and seeing people, and seeing shows, and getting ideas. It was just all this stuff. We had the same problem—Steven Lavine promised that CalArts would publish *REALLIFE Magazine*, and also create a press that I would be part of. Neither promise kept. But it was okay, because we found out that we didn't know how to keep the magazine going out of that context.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And you did close it not long after.

THOMAS LAWSON: Not long after. We tried—we had a guest editor, Lane Relyea, and he took so long to do it that we kind of just ran out of steam. [00:22:06] We did another one, actually with Ross Sinclair on the cover, with his "REAL LIFE" tattoo.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's a good way to go out.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. So that was kind of the end of that. But I was having similar struggles with knowing what to do with the work. I guess, kind of a year later or something, I developed a series of pieces that had to do with fire. Because one of the things about living here that's a little shocking, and is now even more shocking, is fire. I was kind of absorbing that.

In Glasgow, for the show at Third Eye, one of the new pieces that I made there was a large photo mural, a detail of a fountain at Glasgow Green that I photographed and then had printed onto canvas. It was this new digital process. They scanned the slide and then scaled it up so that, with jet ink, it printed on any fabric that you wanted. You could get it on canvas. There was a place in the north of England that did that, and I found that there was a place out here. So I had them print up a series of fairly large canvases with images of fire, of houses on fire, taken from the *LA Times* picture archive. [00:24:00] Then, over that, I kind of threw paint. It was kind of a spattered paint.

I had just finished it. There were three or four of them. I just finished them, and thinking about—I had a relationship with Richard Kuhlenschmidt. I had shown with him several times through the '80s, in various of his galleries, as he moved around. It was just toward the end of his career as a gallerist. And so I thought I would do something. But then the riots. South Los Angeles was on fire. It was uncannily similar to these images that I had just done, but I hadn't been thinking about that, and I didn't want them to be misinterpreted that way. So I basically shelved them. It's a group of paintings that have not really seen the light of day, because it just seemed—I felt like I was getting a handle on being here, and then it was taken from me [laughs] in some kind—it was a very confusing sort of moment.

A funny kind of—one last detail about Ross Sinclair was that he was—here, he was the first student to participate in a new arrangement that I had created of an exchange program between CalArts and the art school at Glasgow. He was just about to leave to go home when the riots broke out, and I had to help him get to the airport or something, [laughs] because it was impossible to do that otherwise. [00:26:10] I was beginning to figure something out, and then it was kind of—well. And then, shortly after, we had an earthquake.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. Which damaged the school quite a bit.

THOMAS LAWSON: Which damaged the school really shockingly. The whole building was red-tagged. The thing about CalArts is it's all in one building, so the whole building is the whole thing. It had been designed by this architect, back in the '60s, to be earthquake-proof, and to some degree, it had done what was intended, but it's built in these giant, concrete blocks, and they're on some kind of—they're separate from each other, separated by two inches or something, and on some sort of foundation that provided movement. So the idea was that the five blocks would move in an earthquake, and that that would be it. So they did, but they banged into each other. [They laugh.] They cracked the walls as they—so we had to vacate the building, and we had to find alternative accommodations.

There were maybe several weeks of really intense work. When I first got to CalArts, one of the features of it that was sort of shocking was the critical studies area, which is the liberal arts component for the undergrad degree, was terrible. [00:28:07] I mean, it was a joke. I mean, so bad that the art school had actually hired, over the years, temporary faculty members to teach history and theory, because it wasn't being done adequately. I realized that if I wanted to see anything decent happen, we needed to fix that.

Luckily, there was sort of an interim dean who was then moving on, so there was an opening. I had met Dick Hebdige in London at Gerard Hemsworth's, one of the times I was doing work with Anthony, and knew that Dick was looking for something. He was on some kind of weird sabbatical in Canada, but he was really kind of wanting out of London. So I recruited him, and I remember I had this sort of clandestine meeting with him in a fancy hotel in Detroit, [laughs] because he was in Windsor, and I had some reason to be in Detroit. So we met, and I persuaded him that this would be a great thing and that he should apply for it.

Anyway, to say that Dick was in place. So Dick and I spent these evenings on the campus. The one area that had remained undamaged was our residence hall, and underneath the residence hall there was a cafe kind of space. We would meet with the students there and tell them what a great adventure this would be if they stayed. [00:30:01] I mean, it was kind of great. "It's going to be an improvised semester, and all kinds of things will happen. But please stay." [They laugh.]

Through some connections with the board, we found this building about five miles north of the campus that had been a Lockheed secret laboratory, and they were willing to let us use one of the buildings. It was some old

science building. It had all these little labs. It had office spaces, and it had larger rooms. We were able to make a facsimile of the school. The little labs became studios. The bigger rooms became galleries, so the students could have their shows. It was interesting. We had a meeting with the faculty to discuss what they felt we needed, and it was unanimous that we had to have enough gallery space so that the students could do their shows and have their reviews, and kind of progress. That everything else, we could—you know, we could do classes outside or whatever.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: The MFA show was eventually held at MOCA.

THOMAS LAWSON: At the Temporary Contemporary, which was also red-tagged. [They laugh.] So we were allowed to use it, but not publicize it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I saw, for years afterwards on former CalArt students' resumes, that they had had been in a MOCA show.

THOMAS LAWSON: Absolutely. Yes, yes. There was one who actually—we told them all, "We've been given this great opportunity to do this, but we can't draw attention to it, because the city will come and close it down." [00:32:02] And there was one who printed up postcards: "My show at MOCA." [They laugh.]

But yeah, it was a really intense moment. My office staff stayed on campus in a trailer, and I had a cell phone, which was like a brick in size, and I had a laptop that had a fax. We didn't really have email at this time. I had an office up in this Lockheed building, and was in contact with my staff with these new-fangled technologies. The cafeteria sent a cook up every day at lunchtime with a little portable stove, and she made lunch. It was kind of great.

One of the things I felt about it—I mean, it was an interesting sort of emotional thing—was that this was a project. This was like a public art project. It was the same level of intensity and engagement, dealing with all these details of making sure that things were working, that people were getting what they needed. I had to find out ways of getting the wood shop, or some aspect of the wood shop, or the print lab, available, and calming people down who were freaking out about all kinds of things, and getting the thing to move.

At the same time, I was discovering the Santa Clarita Valley, which I—until that moment, I had only driven up the 5, got off at McBean Parkway, and gone onto CalArts campus, and back. And suddenly, I was driving all over the place, partly looking for spaces, and then later as the semester developed, actually visiting students at their places, because many of them preferred to work at home. [00:34:11] I got the sense of a place that I still don't know that well, but it made CalArts feel more real.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Did all that upheaval, for everything from the riots to the earthquake, to taking on this large administrative role—do you feel that made your work as an artist a little bit on hiatus for a while, and do you feel that that had a kind of career impact on you?

THOMAS LAWSON: It had a career impact, no doubt. Not just—I made those fire paintings, and I did them out of the studio on campus. And then, realizing that that wasn't really working, I decided I needed to come into town. Susan suggested that Bill Leavitt would be a good person to talk to, that he seemed to her someone who had an eye on cheap things. [Laughs.] And sure enough, he had a studio actually quite near here, over on Second and Western. It's where he lived, too. It's an apartment with extra space. And the other apartment on the floor was available, and so I took that.

So I had a studio there, and I started making a new body of work that was much weirder and more personal than anything I had done before. [00:36:06] Very psychological in a way. They had a formal frame-up. They were diptychs with a bar of color between. So there was that. The diptych format, the actual size of them and the fact that they broke into that, was a direct—it's an outcome of the earthquake, because having a studio in a building that is red-tagged, I couldn't get back into my studio. So I realized, Oh, I need to think about portability to some extent. I had a station wagon at the time. The parts to these diptychs fit the back of the station wagon. I made them down here. That part of the thinking wasn't really that relevant, but it was part of that.

So I made these paintings, and as I said, they were a little strange. They matched kind of gargoyle-shaped heads and things—sort of horror images—with interior scapes, rooms of some kind. Some of them actually based on the studio itself, and some from other sources. Some of the screaming heads and things came from movie stills, and some came from architectural details. I had a show of that with Anthony in London, and that show then went to Norwich, to the art gallery there. [00:38:00] But it wasn't a particularly well-received show. I had kind of lost support from Metro, so I didn't have a way of showing it there, and I didn't really have anything here. So yes, there was sort of a slowing down of momentum in some way.

Related to that, I think, through the '80s, I was on the road a lot. Invited to give talks at all kinds of—you know, at colleges, and all kinds of—panel discussions. I was in demand as a speaker of some kind. As soon as I took this

job, it stopped. I have to think it has something to do with thinking, Oh, well now he's, I guess, too identified with this college, or too busy. I don't know, but it just [laughs]—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Do you think there's still a thing at that point of leaving New York was kind of—it still was thought of as so much the center. I remember Buster Poindexter used to—I used to see him all the time in New York. He had a song, "When You Leave New York, You Ain't Going Nowhere." For some people, even outside of New York, it was still like, Oh, well you quit, if you left New York.

THOMAS LAWSON: I think there's probably an element of that—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I don't think anyone feels that now, but maybe in 1990, people—

THOMAS LAWSON: I think they probably still do, and on some level I think a curse that both Susan and I have is that we're sensitive to the future, that we're sort of early to pick up things. It was my feeling, around that time, that New York was kind of entering a new phase that wasn't going to be as interesting. [00:40:03]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And that Los Angeles, potentially, was the opposite.

THOMAS LAWSON: And that Los Angeles had something happening. There was this range of galleries that were very young and artist-oriented. Blum & Poe was starting. They were hilarious, and really into people like Sam Durant and Dave Muller, who were just graduating from my program. The ACME guys. It felt like something real. My orientation constantly has to do with looking towards younger artists. As we changed with *REALLIFE* and bringing new voices into that, and organizing exhibitions, and the teaching stuff, it was all about, What are younger people thinking? And selfishly, what can I take from that, that keeps my thinking fresh?

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I can remember you telling me you had an amazing student, Mark Bradford, when he was still a student there. That was very, very early on.

THOMAS LAWSON: He was great. [They laugh.] And is great. One of the great joys about working at CalArts is that it consistently attracts really great students. Year after year, there are people there who teach me more than I teach them, I think. They're just really—it's an amazing phenomenon. [00:42:01]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's the best thing about teaching, is when you feel you're getting a lot out of it, too.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, yeah. So this early part of the '90s, a little bit problematic on that score. But one thing that happened that was interesting was that I got an invitation to be a co-selector of something that I actually had never heard of, called the British Art Show, which is a five-year, quinquennial, survey of British art, organized by Southbank. It was kind of amazing. Initially, I got a phone call, but then the official letter came from the Queen. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's nice. Otherwise, you have to wait until you're 100.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. It was like I had become Americanized enough to be a little taken aback that—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: "Her majesty requests." Yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: So that became a multi-year project of flying back and forth to London. My co-selectors were Rose Finn-Kelcey, an artist, and—oh, what's his name? The critic. Richard [Cork]—for the *Times*, the *Times* of London. [. . . –TL] The three of us, we were a curious combo. Rose and I, as artists who were also involved in teaching, had an interest in younger artists, and Richard, as a critic, had a kind of view of what was going on in the galleries. [00:44:00] I would go there—I mean, I can't believe I did this—something like once a month, I would go to London for the weekend. I would leave on Friday, spend Saturday and Sunday doing studio visits and having meetings, and then fly home on Monday.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, that's too much.

THOMAS LAWSON: It was too much. But it was fabulous also. It was the height of the YBA moment. Again, there was a group of really great young artists. We put together—the show before us had been a giant survey, I think 100 artists or something. So we decided that we would limit it to somewhere between 20 and 25, and give each of them space. That was complicated. It's much harder for three people to limit things in that way. But it gave me this insight into the British art phenomenon, at a time when it was really lively. Douglas was in the show, and so was Damien, and Tracey Emin. You know, it was all of that.

The show opened in Manchester, which was interesting, because that's where my brother lives. So he and his family came to the opening and got to see what I do, which is sort of an interesting thing. Its next venue was in Edinburgh, at the Gallery of Modern Art. That was really great. I mean, it really looked good there. Tacita Dean was also in the show. [00:46:01] And we all went to the premiere of *Trainspotting* [they laugh] to celebrate that

show. That was kind of an interesting sort of cultural moment. So, big curatorial project.

I also did a couple of smaller projects. I did one at Artists Space in New York, that I called *Hot Coffee*, that included Andrea Bowers and Dave Muller and a couple of other people. Then I did a show here, at Barnsdall, called *Shimmer*, that was a painting show. So I was sort of doing that kind of work, and kept these kind of weird personal paintings going, but not getting much with that. They developed, in turn, into a series of very angry little collage works with masks, little doll masks. I showed a group of them with Rosamund Felsen. And again, nobody paid any attention, but it was [laughs]—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But do you feel, in a way, that having an academic affiliation, in a way, freed you, in a way, from the necessities of the market? Or, you know, you didn't depend on it to pay the rent?

THOMAS LAWSON: Yes, there was that, and that was definitely a great thing. But it also seemed to free me from the opportunity to keep showing. [They laugh.] [00:48:01] Which was not so great.

But anyways, the work that I was doing began to take some different things. In the later part of the '90s—the British Art Show had me going back to London a lot, and also up to Scotland. Around that same time—I think you maybe did this after me, but I was the external examiner at Glasgow.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, I did that for many years, I think after you.

THOMAS LAWSON: I did it for about four years, I think. That took me to Scotland twice a year.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, I did it for even longer than that, actually, and it was great for me, just because it took me back to Glasgow twice a year. I did it with Jane Wilson, and other people sometimes too. For some reason, they just kept extending it, and it was great. I loved that.

THOMAS LAWSON: I enjoyed that. It was helpful to see another art school and how it functioned.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Very differently.

THOMAS LAWSON: Very differently. But it was helpful. I would like to think I was helpful to them, back and forth. But anyway, through the '90s, I was reestablishing this connection with Scotland, and we had the apartment, so I had a place to spend time, and ways to get there and to spend time with it.

In the later '90s, as you know, the Labour government agreed to a devolution, and there was to be a vote, and it was to be yes to devolution, and yes to taxing power. [00:50:07] It was the yes-yes vote. In the lead-up to that, I had a sabbatical. I actually spent some time, a longer period of time, in Edinburgh, and sort of got involved in thinking about this, and was doing research. All the way back to high school, I felt that I had a handle on Scottish history. I mean, I read quite a bit about it. But I discovered that there was this one little piece that I didn't know, and it was about a figure from the period of the French Revolution.

It's this guy, his name is Thomas Muir. I found some reference to him in something I was reading, and I followed a footnote, which then led me to the National Library of Scotland, and I found this vast trove of fascinating research, that had to do with revolutionary politics and Scottish politics, at a moment that I found fascinating. I got really deeply involved in the research. It turned out this character was based in Edinburgh, but he had spent time in Paris. He had been banished to Australia. He had escaped. He had actually spent time in California, and in Mexico, and in Spain, and back in Paris. There was information about him all over the place, in different archives. So that became a project, and I began to kind of piece together things about this man's life, thinking that something might come of it. [00:52:02]

In that time, you and I did a project together with Douglas Gordon. It was a street sign or some—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: *Empire*.

THOMAS LAWSON: *Empire*. And we wrote something. It was organized, or published, by this woman, Lucy Byatt. She had a company, but it was her. At the conclusion of that, I had dinner with her, and we were talking, and it was kind of like, What next? I basically asked her, "Can you do something for me? Can you find me some other project?" So what she came up with was that, following the devolution vote and the decision to bring a parliament to Scotland, there was now in place an architectural design for a new parliament building. The architect in charge was this Spanish guy, Enrique Morales, who lived and worked in Barcelona. He was open to some sort of artistic intervention, and I could perhaps be interested in that.

So I went to visit him, to talk about it, and he was very open, very nice guy, and we started to talk about different things. I was in the depth of this research, and so I was telling him about that. So we were thinking about different ways that there might be some kind of intervention in his design that would do that. And then he died. He was in his 40s, he died of a heart attack. [00:54:01] So the design continued, but his wife took over,

and the engineering company that had the main contract—they didn't want to be involved in complexity. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, they wanted to finish the project.

THOMAS LAWSON: The building was complex enough. They didn't need anything extra. So my project was shelved, but there was still a little bit of money left. So Lucy said, "Is there anything you can do?" What I did with her was I published a partly fictionalized transcription of Thomas Muir's trial for sedition at Edinburgh, and I kind of presented it as a play. Most of the material in it is archival, but it's altered, and there's fictional elements added to it. So it's a piece of writing, but it's constructed in the way that I construct my paintings. And we made this little book. As I was doing—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: *The Pest of Scotland*.

THOMAS LAWSON: *The Pest of Scotland*. That became—there's now three of those books. I've done different elements of his story, following the same pattern of archival material and fictionalized stuff, and experimenting with different voices and different kinds of points of view. So that's an ongoing project.

But also what it allowed to happen was that I started a new series of paintings. I had—well, there was two things that went on. [00:56:00] I had started—because he traveled the world in this bizarre way, I was thinking about the world, and I began to think about mapping the world, and images of maps. There's a kind of high-end architecture company in Edinburgh called Reiach and Hall, and they, from time to time, present artworks in a room in their basement. Alan Johnston, sort of Scotland's conceptual artist, is their art advisor or something, so he invited me to do something. And so I did a piece with them, which was a large map of the world on one side, and on the other wall, the longitude and latitude of Thomas Muir's travels.

That, in turn, led to two series of paintings. One, a group of maps, some large-scale, which were very exciting to me to get back to the scale of paintings I had been doing in the '80s, and also some smaller ones. In conjunction with them, I also started doing a series of portraits. The idea behind them was that I would shoot for 100 portraits of individuals that crossed paths with Thomas Muir. Again, it was part of digging into the archive. Some of the people he passed are historical figures. I mean, Robespierre or Danton. Some of them on the British side were aristocrats, Scottish aristocrats, some of them who had been radical, and some not. [00:58:03] But anyway, they all had portraits. But some of the people he worked with, or contacted with, were working-class people who were part of the radical underground. They show up in the public record either as caricatures in newspapers, or as courtroom sketches, or execution sketches. So there was this really interesting range of portrait style that allowed for this play of pastiche and quotation that I like to do. So I headed off into making—as I said, I initially intended to try for 100. I made it to 80. [They laugh.] A hundred just seemed—it was getting—pushing it.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Once you had done 80—

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, yeah. And I was getting to a point where I couldn't find things any longer.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So probably at 70, it became difficult.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. They were small. They were 12x9 inches, just little pictures. So I was doing these things, and at this point I had a new studio, the one that I still have over on Glendale Boulevard. Because I was making these big paintings, so I needed to expand my—the apartment thing had become small, and it became clear that the landlords intended to knock it down. So there was that.

So I've got this new studio and these new paintings, and I'm having people over. I had this ex-student over, Melissa Thorne, who was a painter and musician, and really interesting person. [01:00:06] She had this really great observation. At that moment, on the walls, I had these maps, but I was telling her about all this other stuff. She said, "You know, it's really interesting that you don't include any reference to contemporary politics. You've got sort of 18th-century politics, and you've got these maps, which maybe bring us into the present."

I thought that was really pretty spot-on, so I began to think of it, and what developed from that was a series of similarly scaled portraits of—I don't know how you would describe them. People who had run afoul of the whole mess in Iraq. Because this was the beginning of the wars in the Middle East. So it was people who had been taken prisoner, and most likely had been beheaded. So I made these portraits. There's one that's very gruesome, that actually you can see is a beheading. The others are more subtle. They're just kind of pastel portraits with a blindfold, so you can project or not.

As that was developing, Lauri Firstenberg came over to see. She came over because we became friends when the REDCAT Gallery was first opened, as a sort of extension of CalArts—[01:02:06]

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THOMAS LAWSON: —and I was involved in the search committee for a curator. We ended up hiring Eungie Joo, but Lauri was the—the also ran, kind of thing. She had then gone on to create her own space, LAXART, which I think was a better thing for her, in fact. Anyway, so she came over and offered me a show of this work, so I got—finally [laughs]—got to have a show in Los Angeles of recent work, and it was the maps and the sort of Middle Eastern work. It's sort of the beginning of the new century.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: But you also started publishing again, in a way, with *East of Borneo*, so it's not like that ever went away either.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right. That story—because, exactly, it's all part of the same—I think, in some ways, the first years at CalArts were so all-consuming and, to some extent, exhausting, that it was hard to keep—I did keep working, but I couldn't do anything about projecting and getting anything in return for it.

As we moved into the new century, a new set of circumstances opened up. The first one was that—you know, at CalArts, we have this endless program of bringing artists in to teach for a semester or for a year, full-time. [02:00] All kinds of interesting people. It's one of the interesting dynamics. A lot of people think that, as dean, I get to hire people, but—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you wish. [Laughs.]

THOMAS LAWSON: You wish, right. Actually, I don't wish. I like the fact that it really is much more of a discursive collaboration.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Up to a point, I'm sure.

THOMAS LAWSON: But the thing is, you learn how to present your case. You know, that's [laughs]—that's the key to it. Anyways, around this time—I think it was Leslie Dick who brought him to our attention—but we hired Mark Lewis from London—Canadian artist, but from London—who does this very interesting formal film work, very carefully made work. He was a hoot. He's a very charismatic figure. He and his wife came and stayed. They came for the whole year, and we enjoyed each other's company. Toward the end of it, he said, Can we have a meeting? He told me that he and Charles Esche had just started publishing a magazine in London called *Afterall*, and they were looking to expand it in some way. I had known Chas from Glasgow, because he used to be the curator at Tramway, and he and I had talked over the years about potential projects and just never come up with one.

So here was one. [Laughs.] I took it to Steven Lavine and reminded him that he had once promised this kind of thing. He agreed, actually. [04:00] He was quite enthusiastic about it, and said that he would put some money into it to make it possible. The money included hiring an assistant and covering our share of publication costs. The format that we developed was that we were going to publish twice a year, and that it would be, editorially—the format they had was that, editorially, five artists were covered, with two essays each, bracketed by two kind of contextualizing essays. That was their kind of format. What we came up with, to kind of make it a collaboration between London and CalArts or Los Angeles, was that the essays would mirror—it would be a mix of U.S. and European artists, and a mix of writers, and that sometimes it would be American writers looking at European art—you know, just trying to get some kind of dynamic going there.

The way we actually did it, which was amazing until it wasn't, was that I would go to London for a week, and we would argue over content, and discuss artists and ideas and so on. We would have huge arguments, but at the end, agree on something. Then six months later, they would come here, and we would do the same thing. [Laughs.] It really was amazing, because there was the three of us, plus Silke Otto Knapp, who was their managing editor, who's also really smart and opinionated. [06:10] Mark and I particularly would have these really knock-down fights. As I said, it was really exhilarating for the first two or three years, and then it just began to get really hard.

As that was happening, the Internet became a real thing in terms of publishing and so on. It became clearer and clearer that we needed to expand into that. I didn't know anything about it, really, but Natalie Bookchin had recently been hired in the photo program at CalArts, who, at that time, was a big net artist. She brought along a whole bunch of students who were all into it. And so I was hearing all about the net and its future, and our future being tied into that, in a way that convinced me that we needed to do this. But London was not so keen. They wanted to do books. They were really invested in expanding.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Which they did.

THOMAS LAWSON: Which they did, yes. And they could, because they—one of the tensions between us was that they were attached to Central Saint Martins, and through that, got research money, but they got it by doing research books. CalArts is a small, private thing, that all we can do is beg for money. In those first years, we were part of the consortium at Warhol Foundation, which had just opened up to support art publications. [08:08]

We got a grant from Warhol. Unfortunately, that initiative ended, but for a good number of years, it was a good thing.

Anyways, we started an *Afterall* online, but it wasn't all that good, but it was something, and it got me into it, understanding it. But at a certain point, we tried to kind of hash out—actually using the Warhol Foundation people as an in-between, we tried to kind of get a better agreement between Mark and me and Chas. Chas and I reached an agreement, and then Mark nixed it. It was just spiraling out of control. So I said, Well, can we just sort of agree to disagree, and part? I'm going to start something here.

It was curious, because part of the idea had been to create this international thing, but the actual space between Los Angeles and London made it really hard. We printed in Europe, which meant that the magazine showed up in LA a month after it had been circulating in Europe already. So we always felt like we were out of step. The great thing about going onto the Internet was that—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's instant.

THOMAS LAWSON: —we could be local, we could be super local, but also, it's everywhere. [10:00] We had moved into this next phase of the Internet, the sort of social media-driven side of it, point two or something. It's like the web two. It's like the idea of a different kind of connectivity. I worked with Stacey Allan, who still works with me, and Caleb Waldorf, who's a brilliant web designer guy, to create this new site that would allow for all this interactive—that our readers could upload material, that footnotes would be live on page, and they could include a link to a video if that was necessary. So it would be this very dynamic reading experience, dedicated to the idea of creating, ultimately, a kind of ever-expanding archive of art associated with Los Angeles.

It's been close to 10 years now that we've done that, and gone through a redesign. It's kind of amazing, actually. And now talking with CalArts about a next step, about how to expand that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Do you feel—sort of as we've been talking, throughout your career, there's been these shifts and multiple things. You described your way of working as projects, and I think that applies not just to individual bodies of work as an artist, but *East of Borneo*, *REALLIFE*, public projects, et cetera, et cetera. CalArts, in a way, is a project. [12:00] Do you feel that that has inhibited a proper critical response to your work, because it's kind of not that easy to slot it into one box?

THOMAS LAWSON: I fear that may be the case.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: I've thought that too, because—well, two things. One is that it covers a lot of ground, and people are maybe interested in one aspect of it more than another. But also that you're such a strong writer yourself, and have such a strong—I think, sometimes, for artists who are good writers, it almost discourages other people from—

THOMAS LAWSON: It does.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: —going into it. I can think of other examples of artists where they've kind of—you know, other writers are reluctant to go in there, because they feel that it's covered. Allan Sekula might be an example of someone like that. I don't think there's enough writing about Allan Sekula, and it's partly because Allan was such a good writer himself.

THOMAS LAWSON: When I did the show at La Jolla, there was a local critic who had real cred. Not just a hack, but an actual art writer. She came to the show and really liked it and everything. But then she straight up told me that she wouldn't write about it, because it was too intimidating, because of my writing. I was like, Give me a break.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow. No, I mean, "It's okay." [They laugh.] That must be very disheartening to hear in a way.

THOMAS LAWSON: I think there is this issue that people who are into visual arts, and particularly painting, want to think about that. And it's confusing if then you say, "Oh, I also did this writing project about some obscure Scottish figure. [14:03] Then there's this online publication that I'm kind of engaged in."

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And it is all part of your work, obviously.

THOMAS LAWSON: And it's always the same—to me, all of it has the same working method, which is sort of archival. It's that I look into the record and collect things. I collect images, or I collect texts, and I do things [laughs] to those things, and re-present them in some way, and put them into a new context. That's kind of what I do.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Whatever the medium, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: Whatever the medium is. Sometimes I'm privileging content maybe more than form, and other times it's the other way around. At the show at LAXART, with the maps and Middle Eastern things, Lauri wanted there to be a public discussion, part of her kind of remit as a nonprofit space. We invited Tom Crow to come, and we had a really good talk. But one of the things that was surprising of that kind of academic writer, he's pretty sensitive to the range of places that meaning occur. But he seemed a little reluctant to think about the way in which I handled color and scale and mark as meaningful. He wanted to concentrate on, "Well, where does this map come from?" and, "Why is it that projection of the world and not"—and it's like, "Well, that's okay, but also" [laughs]—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, also it's this color, or it's this size. That's funny. [16:00]

THOMAS LAWSON: So there is that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's also the question of how much information is there. I think for a lot of writers, when there is hard information, they gravitate to that and then things like form and color get shortchanged. Whereas if they're writing about, say, a pure abstract painter, then they can't wiggle out of it like that. You've got to write about it.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. But it's funny. Back in the '80s, I got consistent support for *REALLIFE Magazine* from the big funding agencies, but I also got three NEA artist fellowships for painting. One way or another, my peers were able to do that. Then, more recently, I got a Guggenheim in 2009, also for painting. I'm kind of in this happy moment where I feel like, in the last 10 years, I've had a return of interest to painting. I got *East of Borneo* up and running, and then I've been painting. There have been these large-scale paintings dealing with full-scale figures. It's very much been life-sized figures.

Some of them—I mean, the first series of it was a group of images of people looking away from the viewer. [18:02] They were all back to the public, and looking into the—whatever. There was kind of an art historical reference, which has to do with Domenico Tiepolo, the less famous son, who did a big mural painting in Venice of people lining up for something, but they're all—had their backs. So that was kind of the inspiration. I had a group of students pose for me, so it was like this—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Getting very classical.

THOMAS LAWSON: Exactly!

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Beaux-Arts.

THOMAS LAWSON: Right, right. It was interesting, because it was at the same time that I was still working on these small portraits of the 18th-century figures. These are groupings of young people with their backs to you, but they were all completely recognizable, because if you know people, you know how they stand, and the way that they—it was really kind of interesting.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: So after all these years, you're making large paintings of the figure from models. It's a long and winding road, Tom.

THOMAS LAWSON: From that, I then—the series—sort of in this period, I was at some event for MOCA. It was a celebration. It was for new curators. Bennett Simpson or something, perhaps. It was at this collector's house in Beverly Hills, with an infinity pool. [20:00] It was just an extraordinary event. The entertainment was some barefoot guy in a white suit playing an electric violin, a New Age kind of sound. It was one of these out-of-the-world experiences.

During that, David Kordansky, who had been a student of mine, came up to me and he said—since graduating, he had opened a gallery. He came up to me and he said that he was thinking of moving his gallery and expanding it, and also expanding the range of representation, and that he would really love to include me in his group, which was very flattering. So he came over to the studio and we had a more serious conversation about it, and so we started working together. This was also the first time for quite a while that I had had a gallery to work with.

The group with people with their backs to the audience was shown in New York at Participant, and building out of that, I started working—thinking that the next step had to be thinking about the figure, had to be the nude. And so that's a whole [laughs]—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Is that what you're doing now?

THOMAS LAWSON: No, that was—I did that. There weren't that many of them. But it was that kind of thing. It was like, How on earth, in this day and age, do you do that? [22:00]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: From models?

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, you can't do that.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.] Well, you can. People do.

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, you can. Yeah, but it's not credible. And I certainly couldn't work with students. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: No, no, that would be—other people have.

THOMAS LAWSON: Other people certainly have, but that's like, No. Then there's sort of like pornography or something, and that's not cool either. What I did do—it was kind of interesting—was that I found—we have these friends in Bordeaux, Dani and Michel, Danielle Colomine and Michel Aphesboro. For years, they've published an on-and-off—a magazine called *4 Taxis*. Their project is that they go somewhere and they make a publication. We met them in New York in 1980 or something. They've always been associated with the art school in Bordeaux. So this thing that they do is that they take a group of students somewhere. It could be Berlin or Seville or Mexico City or Los Angeles or New York, and they spend a period of time. Three months, something like that. At the end of it, they make a publication, which they call *4 Taxis*.

Anyway, we were visiting them one summer in this period where I'm thinking, What's the next step? At the museum in Bordeaux, the fine arts museum, part of the collection is a collection of what they call academics. They were the life drawings from the academy from the 19th century. [24:02] They're all these slightly clumsy neoclassical figures, and they were fabulous. So I took pictures of a bunch of them, and they became the basis of a series of paintings that I showed with Dave three years ago or something.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Are you still pursuing that?

THOMAS LAWSON: No. That was that. Now—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, where are we now?

THOMAS LAWSON: Where we are now is that I'm working on a series of—actually, even, they're like seven-feet paintings. They're huge paintings. The Trump election threw me for a loop. I really had a bit of an existential crisis, like, Is there any legitimate way that art can be—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, it's a challenge.

THOMAS LAWSON: —a part of this? Of course, one thing is just straight-up protest, but I'm not very interested in that. So it took a while.

I had another kind of fallow year of going to the studio and just sitting there miserably. But finally what happened was that—one of the classes that I teach regularly is—I call it What Makes it Art? It's designed for first-year students, the incoming undergrads. It's a survey of art history and art theory. We kind of gallop through 500 years of stuff. I really kind of enjoy it, because it keeps me returning to things that I really like to look at. So I was thinking about it, and found myself thinking about Goya, and how Goya had—we don't really know just exactly what his frame of mind was, but he made these portraits of the power structure that he was employed by, that somehow seemed to indicate that he thinks that they were all mad. [Laughs.] [26:24] Or vain, or kind of out of it.

So I went to the CalArts library and got out all the picture books of Goya and looked through them, and found some amazing things to work from. I've been developing a series of paintings that, while there's sort of a reference to this repertoire of Goya, is also overlaid with a repertoire of news images of the Trump family and their various appearances. Not him so much, but more the women. I think they're pretty strong, odd kind of metaphors for power.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, well, it's a strange time.

THOMAS LAWSON: Again, I've managed to find a way that incorporates archival imagery and—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You're finding information and images, and putting them together.

THOMAS LAWSON: Present and the past. They're also very—not so much colorful. They're more subdued. There are a lot of blacks and browns. But they're very painterly in a way. So I'm good with them, I think, and looking for some way to bring them to the fore. [28:03]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Will that be your next show with Kordansky, do you think?

THOMAS LAWSON: Probably. One of the things about Kordansky is that he has become such a big gallery.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: [Laughs.] Yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: When I joined him, he was very little. He was still in Chinatown, and he was moving to Culver City. Since then, he's just grown and grown and grown.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's an enormous gallery.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's an enormous international gallery, with a lot of artists. So it's very—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: You've got to line up for your show.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's very complicated to figure out how to negotiate that. And I just learned a month ago, he's expanding further.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It was already a big gallery.

THOMAS LAWSON: Two buildings next door to him are being taken over.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Wow. Amazing. Well, still sounds good. I don't know, we seem to have kind of got up to the present. Is there anything that we've skipped over or should—

THOMAS LAWSON: No. Maybe just a little bit more about education. Because one of the—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yes, right. You've been a teacher for a long time now, as well as a dean.

THOMAS LAWSON: One of the things that frustrated me about art schools in the '80s was I kind of—they just felt very limited. And it was partly the power structure of them, that most of the interesting teaching seemed to get done by adjuncts, and that there was some kind of hierarchy of people who were defending territory, and that they were not necessarily in touch with what was actually happening.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, that's how art schools become defunct, is—

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, exactly. [30:01] Part of the appeal of moving out here and moving to CalArts was that it seemed to be a school that was more conscious that you needed to keep an eye on things. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Well yeah, and also, in a way, I feel like, especially at the graduate level, the students kind of educate themselves. So in a way, what the school needs to do is bring in the most ambitious and talented students. In a way, you do that by having people teach there that they want to work with. But then once they're there, kind of they have to take the ball into their own hands and—

THOMAS LAWSON: What I've learned, sort of managing this, is that, yes, you have to bring in a constant stream of people who are at the top of their various games, and who are willing to talk, and you also have to make sure that you've got the facilities. That the studios that the students have are adequate, and that the places where they make stuff, that they've got the tools they need. That's obviously a budget thing, and so it's a constant struggle—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Some areas, too, you just constantly need to upgrade.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. So the job that I have, I feel, is this constant refreshing, both of material stuff and of people. And finding that—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's like you want some continuity, people that are there a long time, but if people stay too long, especially if they become invested in replicating their own practice, then that's a downward path. You need to be constantly bringing in—

THOMAS LAWSON: One of the things I've been very lucky, I think, at CalArts, is that we have a reasonably viable sabbatical system, but also, because a good number of the faculty are, in fact, active professionally, they're always asking to take unpaid leave. [32:22]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, I think that's a great system, actually.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's a great system. No, it's fabulous.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: A, they should be able to take the leave, and B, that gives you the opportunity to bring in fresh people.

THOMAS LAWSON: I get to bring in fresh people, and then they come back refreshed, with—so it's—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Art schools can't function unless the faculty are active. That means, sometimes, not being there. They come back refreshed.

THOMAS LAWSON: So the thing about CalArts that—I mean, the art school, I guess, particularly—that the dean has, since the beginning, always been an artist with a professional life, and who is engaged in teaching. So that's a big job. There's a lot of different things. Despite getting exhausted from time to time, I enjoy that, and each part works to help the other.

But one of the things that I feel like I've been getting a better handle on is that I've developed an idea about teaching. Not one that needs to be all-encompassing or the only thing, or even the only thing that I would do, but I've had a series of classes in more recent years that have had this open-ended project aspect to them that is really interesting. [34:04] It's just following on what you're saying. It puts the onus on the students to come up with it. At the beginning of the class, I will say, "Listen, we've got a framework here. We're going to look at something. But what you do with that is not something that I'm going to say. You have to work as a group to come to that."

For me, the first time that that came into real focus was during the PST, the first [Pacific Standard Time]. We were able to get a grant [from the Getty Foundation. –TL] The reason that they were willing to give us a—it was a research grant, but it was an idea that there would be a show at REDCAT. So the research was a class, and it was a class that I would teach, with Clara Kim assisting. We called it The Experimental Impulse. Classes at CalArts are always a mix of grads and undergrads. We started off, and I said, "Listen, for several weeks, we'll look at the history of art from LA, but we're kind of trying to figure out something that we want to pay more attention to. We're going to spend a year and a half developing something, but we don't know what this something is yet, and we don't even know what we're doing yet." In the course of the class, the focus was this idea of experimentation, and potentially went all the way back to the Schindler House, and to that kind of experiment, and social experiments of living, to different kinds of experimentation in the '50s. [36:04] But what the kids in the class wanted to look at was the '70s, and they wanted to look at the kind of experimental education of CalArts and the beginning of artist-run spaces in downtown LA, with Womanhouse and things like that as the kind of link between them. It was amazing.

They developed this thing. They did this huge amount of research, interviewing people, digging up things from the archives. In the end—by the very end, there was only Fiona Connor and Ben Tong kind of left standing, but they put together a really fascinating show that incorporated *East of Borneo* as sort of the catalog. All of this material that they gathered went online, and the experience of being in the gallery was that you weren't looking at anything original. Everything was a Xerox of archival material, or you were going online to look at the pages on *East of Borneo*, or you were listening to earphones, to audio interviews. It was a really inspiring sort of experience, because the collective aspect of these students working through the idea.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Another aspect of teaching and art education here—and I wonder how much you think this is still true—there's always been slightly a feeling on the East Coast and New York that a really serious artist shouldn't be teaching, or not that much. And in LA, of course that's not true. [38:00] Teaching and being associated with an art school—not for every artist, but for many artists—is part of being an artist here. Do you think—what's your feeling about that?

THOMAS LAWSON: Well, I think it's—yeah. I think, historically, the situation in New York was that artists talked amongst themselves in the evenings, in the bars, and that's where that happened. So the schools were something else. SVA was originally a commercial school. It was about commercial art. There was Cooper. It wasn't like there was a lot of art schools anyway. But there were people like Ad Reinhardt who did it, and did it seriously, and Motherwell. It wasn't completely—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: It's not totally one-sided, yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: But yes, I think that the sort of debate happened in the bar, and LA doesn't have that culture. But what LA has, from the beginning, was like four or five art schools. [Laughs.] Artists like Baldessari really depended on teaching for a long part of their career.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: He had no market for a lot of it.

THOMAS LAWSON: Or Michael Asher.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And in a certain point, for some people like you've mentioned—Baldessari and Asher, associated with CalArts for such a long time—it's impossible to think about their practice as artists without taking into account their activity as teachers, in a way that even the people you mentioned in New York—you can talk about Ad Reinhardt without talking about Ad Reinhardt the teacher. [40:06] I don't think you can talk

about Michael Asher the artist, without talking about Michael Asher the teacher.

THOMAS LAWSON: No, it's true. I'm just remembering that, at some point in the '80s, I was on a panel discussion at the Tate, and John was on the panel with me. In the introductions, he identified himself as an artist and an educator. As a New York artist at that time, I was like, What?! [They laugh.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, "Are you nuts? Shut up!" [Laughs.] Yeah.

THOMAS LAWSON: I now certainly—I mean, I don't know that I would use that formulation, but I understand the desire to say that you're more than an artist. That you're—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: And you look at the students these people had. I mean, it's very, very important. Maybe you can think of European examples. I mean, the Beckers were artists and teachers. But in New York, that is a very played-down element.

THOMAS LAWSON: Also, it's very much the center of a market.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, so that's the focus.

THOMAS LAWSON: But anyway, I wanted to say another class, also, that I've just finished this last semester, along this line, because I was really psyched by it. I came up with an idea of thinking about water in Los Angeles. I kind of announced that I would be doing this, and that it would have two parts, and that students didn't need to commit to both parts, but that you would have to apply for it, because the first part was spending a week in Mexico City. [42:00] One of the perks of being dean is I could find some money.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: A little money for that.

THOMAS LAWSON: So I said, We're going to go to Mexico City for a week and investigate ancient water systems, and then we're going to come back to Los Angeles and investigate the water systems here, and again, we'll see where it takes us. I had a group of—at its max, it was 12. There was a core group of maybe eight. It was the same kind of thing. We really got into it. Actually, some serious research and amazing field trips. They decided that what they wanted to do as a group project was walk the length of the Los Angeles River.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's a long walk.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's a long walk, but it's a doable one. It's 51 miles. And so that essentially was five days, and —

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, you can do 10 miles a day.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah. We didn't all do the whole length. We did it in parts. Some of the way, you walk actually in the river bed, and sometimes on pathways beside it. People collected material on their walks, and we had a show. And there's still the potential of a publication. Again—

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Satisfying.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's very satisfying. The level of engagement was amazing. Even during spring break, we met to do a field trip.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: That's commitment from students.

THOMAS LAWSON: It's commitment. And from the teacher. [Laughs.]

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah, well, right. They could have gone to Daytona Beach.

THOMAS LAWSON: Yeah, yeah. [44:00] So I feel like there's something that I'm interested in, in the next few years, of thinking further into this idea of this sort of open-ended, project-based teaching. I think it's a good way to get out of any potential danger of teaching too much from my own practice or anything like that.

So I wanted to get that. And I think we're pretty cool.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: Yeah. Okay, well, thanks very much, Tom.

THOMAS LAWSON: Thanks for doing this.

RUSSELL FERGUSON: There's an amazing amount of information there, so hope people find it useful.

THOMAS LAWSON: I hope they do, yeah. All right.

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