

A Conversation with Thomas Lawson and Susan Morgan

From 1979 to 1992 the founding editors Thomas Lawson and Susan Morgan published REALLIFE Magazine, a publication by and about artists interested in the dissolution of boundaries in art. When the rectitude of postminimalism held sway in the art world, Lawson and Morgan confronted that with a fascination in appropriative work as a forum for a new generation of picture artists. The magazine became a venue for artists' opinions, providing exposure for those overlooked by the mainstream and introducing the work of a new generation of practitioners. Or, to quote the artist and curator Matthew Higgs on the subject of REALLIFE, "this wasn't so much 'do-it-yourself' as 'do-it-together'."



Anja Dietmann: What significance did magazines have for you in the 70s, and which magazines did you find particularly influential?

Thomas Lawson: Susan and I shared an interest in magazines large and small. Before coming to New York we both lived in out of the way places—I was in Scotland and Susan was on Nantucket—and so we hungered for information, sought out news about art, theatre, music by haunting the places—bookstores and specialized libraries mostly—where we could find out stuff to feed our eyes and minds.

For me this went back to my teenage years in Glasgow, where I grew up. The central research library, the Mitchell Library, was near where I went to high school, and on an assignment to learn about Surrealism I discovered a trove of Surrealist magazines from the 1920s and 30s. This was before the concept of the 'zine' was well understood, but that is what these small publications were—idiosyncratically designed, singularly focused, cheaply produced. I couldn't get enough of them. Later, in college, I encountered Eduardo Paolozzi at a time when he was beginning to make his archive of toys and comics public. I didn't like him, but I was awestruck by the sheer range of comics and science magazines he had collected, just so much visual information in a context-free flood. Struggling within the constraints of required readings and term papers, this seemingly endless flow of unmoored imagery was deeply liberating. A few years later I was in New York, and found to my glee and astonishment that this kind of cornucopia of wildly unrelated imagery existed right there on the streets. There were vast, open-air newsstands on the

corners of Times Square, in the concourse of Grand Central, and I would browse them for hours, a wild conflation of news, sports, fashion, crime and porn. The imagery I used in the paintings I was making in the later 70s and early 80s came from the cheap magazines I bought and hoarded from these amazing emporia of the ephemeral.

The art world in New York in these years was undergoing a deep change. The artists with the most credibility were the generation that Robert Pincus-Witten dubbed 'Post-Minimal.' They had turned away from the established methods and materials associated with fine art, preferring construction materials they could buy in lumber yards, and find in the abandoned industrial spaces of Lower Manhattan—the lofts of SoHo, the broken piers on the Hudson. They privileged process over imagery. And they ruled the discourse. You could read about them in Artforum, read interviews with them in Avalanche, enjoy an insider take in Art-Rite. But from about 1975 on a group of younger artists started gathering in the same parts of Lower Manhattan, and we found that we shared a fascination with the repressed possibilities of image-making. And as we thought about the rich, and seemingly untapped resources of mass media pictures we found we also wanted to rethink discarded and devalued presentational modes like painting and photography. And so a shifting cabal, including at various times Sherrie Levine, David Salle, Mike Smith, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince as well as Susan and me, would meet for coffee or drinks, or go to a movie, and complain about the way the art magazines were so out of touch, were shutting us out, were in thrall to an art practice we thought had run its course, exhausted itself.

AD: Thomas, you worked for the magazine Art in America and suggested writing a review about Cindy Sherman—but the editor rejected your idea and said that she would just be someone you would know. Can you share some more on that?

TL: Well around 1976 or 1977 Craig Owens was editing a newsprint publication called Skyline, put out by The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, a group of architects who at that moment couldn't get commissions so had time to develop theoretical positions. Craig liked to mix things up, and asked me to write argumentative reviews of some museum shows, expressing some of the discontent I was just taking about. That led to an invitation to write reviews for the far more prestigious Art in America, and yes, in the monthly back and forth about what shows I should review I would get push back whenever I would suggest anyone

Anja Dietmann: Susan, can you tell me a bit about Flair Magazine? You stated during a lecture that it was more an artwork than a publication. In one issue, spaghetti paper was integrated so that you thought it was Japanese mulberry paper?

Susan Morgan: Flair was a very deluxe, short-lived magazine: only 12 issues were produced between 1950 and 51. Fleur Cowles was the editor and her then-husband Gardner Cowles, founder and publisher of the popular Look magazine, bankrolled it; the production—with different papers, die-cut pages, and inserts—was lavish and cost far more than any money that might be generated by sales: each issue was priced at fifty cents. Fleur Cowles's wide-ranging interests and enthusiasms were reflected in the magazine's pages (in contemporary terms, her editing style would now probably be referred to as 'curating'); the art director for Flair was Federico Pallavicini.

I'd first encountered Flair in the 1970s. In the 1990s, when I interviewed Fleur Cowles. I was delighted to find out that the midnight blue paper, smooth on one side and toothy on the other, was the Italian paper traditionally used to wrap spaghetti. I've described magazines as expanded conversations so I suppose my 'misconception,' imagining that the blue paper was Japanese kozo paper, wasn't particularly unusual or freighted with expectation: like in any conversation, as someone looking at Flair, I was curious, intrigued, happily encountering new information.

When I asked Fleur Cowles about the paper, it was part of our conversation and my experience of Flair—marveling over the odd details in the magazine, the surprising mix of characters and materials—so it was simply like any illuminating moment in a conversation when you discover or realize something.

AD: Susan, how did you go about arranging the interview between Kellie Jones and David Hammons, whose work reflects his devotion to Civil Rights and the Black Power movement?

SM: I'd been interested in David Hammons's work for a while—in 1981, when I was living on Chambers Street, I used to walk to work past a Richard Serra sculpture (*T.W.U.*, Richard Serra, 1980-81) on West Broadway and Franklin Street. Suddenly, one morning, there were 25 pairs of sneakers tied together by their shoelaces, tossed over the top, hanging on *T.W.U.* (*Shoe Tree*, David Hammons, 1981). It was fantastic and I hoped we could include it in REALLIFE but I'd also heard through a curator that Hammons didn't have a phone and wouldn't agree to talk to me.

By the mid-80s, Tom and I had moved to Brooklyn and I would walk by Cadman Plaza where Hammons was working on *Higher Goals* (1986-87), hammering bottle caps into telephone poles.

associated with the Pictures group. This was frustrating—I had some access now, but still couldn’t write about the range of things I wanted to touch on. So I would cast about for sympathetic openings.

Rosalind Krauss had just established October with Annette Michelson and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, and had recruited young academic writers like Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens, who were open to these new ideas, but built them into overly complex and forbidding intellectual constructs that repelled most potential supporters. Pincus-Witten was always looking for new material to write about, but he had developed a chatty, gossip format for Arts Magazine that seemed to trivialize things in an unfortunate way. We wanted a publication that would publish our voices, more or less unfiltered. And in the end Susan and I, with our long, shared interest in the little magazines of the past, realized we should just start our own. And thus REALLIFE Magazine was born.

AD: How did you finance the magazine? To me it sometimes seems like the realization of idealistic concepts or projects and economical realities can be in conflict with each other. Were you able to find a way to negotiate this incongruity, especially in the Reagan Era?

TL: We started the magazine with a small project grant from Artists Space, and then used that first issue to apply for grants from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Both funded us regularly for the next decade, and in fact NYSCA created a multi-year grant so that small organizations like us could rely on funding for three years at a time. When we moved to Los Angeles in 1991 we discovered that California did not have as generous state support for the arts, so the last issues were supported only by the NEA.

We tried to sell advertising for the first few issues, but that was never really a viable way for us. We were too small to charge much, and too small to pursue ad sales, and collect ad revenues. Plus most galleries only wanted to buy an ad if we were giving space to one of their artists, which raised ethical questions, but also practical ones; most of the artists of interest to us did not have gallery representation at the time.

It’s interesting that you bring up a fear of government interference. The later 80s certainly saw large political fights about this, but at that time the larger consensus was that government should stay out of aesthetics. In their establishment both NYSCA and NEA had created a firewall between the peer group panels made up of artists and curators who looked at proposals and made decisions and the

During that time, Tom and I were at a party in the East Village and I was talking with the hostess when a guest, Kellie Jones, arrived with a copy of a Norman Lewis* catalog that she’d just written. I said, “Oh, my boyfriend did a Norman Lewis retrospective” and she said, “Is he Thomas Lawson?”

Kellie and I kept talking, she was an art history graduate student and I told her that Tom and I had a little magazine and maybe she’d be interested in writing something for us. I invited her over to our apartment and we just kept on talking. She mentioned that her parents had both recently published memoirs and she and her sister were joking that they should publish their own memoirs to tell their sides of the story. I wondered if her parents were artists and she replied that they were actually both writers: her mother was Hettie Jones and her father was Amiri Baraka. Kellie and her sister Lisa had grown up in New York around an amazing, diverse community of artists and writers. I reckoned that David Hammons would talk with her and he did.

In 2011, Kellie curated *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980* for the UCLA Hammer Museum. When I saw her there, she immediately said, “Oh my God, my interview with David Hammons! The shot heard ‘round the world!” And it was. For years, that incredibly quotable interview was one of the few pieces about his work.

*Norman Lewis (1909-1979) was an African-American painter, a New York abstract expressionist. Tom curated the retrospective in 1976.

Susan Morgan and Thomas Lawson
at the Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York, 1991



political appointees who oversaw the organizations. That worked pretty well until it didn’t, when several political people overturned decisions in the late 80s.

The biggest grant we ever got was from the NEA in 1983 and it was for a double issue devoted to politics and art activism. It included a cover that paired images of Reagan and Stalin, an essay against US intervention in El Salvador, an interview with the filmmaker Jackie Ochs about her documentary on Agent Orange, along with several pieces about Group Material and other politicized art collectives. No discernible censorship there.

AD: How did you choose the contributors and how (or whether, perhaps) did the Magazine morph with the growing success of the participating artists?

TL: We started with a fairly clear idea, which was to give voice to a generation of like-minded artists, who, in that moment, lived in New York. We also wanted to bring attention to members of an older generation who had been neglected in some ways because their work didn’t fit the current mainstream narrative—artists like Bob Moskowitz, Neil Jenney, Michael Hurson. So in the beginning we would directly ask people if they would like to contribute something. But as we continued we developed a method based on the chance encounter—remember we had both been influenced by Surrealist thinking. We would see something, get in conversations with people, and soon enough an issue would start forming.

Another way of saying this is that we based our editorial process on curiosity, we wanted to know what was going on and what people were thinking about. So it was fairly natural that we would keep moving forward and not stick with the same group of artists. Plus the 80s developed very differently, and required an ever-more self-consciously political position. And as a result the artists we followed tended to be more politicized, and from more diverse backgrounds.

AD: In which presentational modes were you interested when painting and photography were no longer being devalued?

TL: I am very interested in painting, and its relationship to photography, but editorially we were always interested in all media. We talked about movies and television, as well as film-making and video. We considered various types of street art and agit-prop, hyper-linked performance, documentary and personalized fiction. We considered the whole gamut: what was important was an engaged intelligence athwart the mainstream.

AD: What prompted you to stop doing the magazine? In your opinion, what has changed between 1979, when REALLIFE was first released, and today?

SM: I’ve often described REALLIFE Magazine as having an aleatory quality—Tom and I worked as unpaid editors and each issue developed through a combination of intention and happenstance; contributions often came informally from people we encountered in the city or as we traveled. Nearly all of the issues were designed by Janet Waegel and the three of us worked together with a kind of covert-action efficiency, sneaking in after hours to use the art departments of major publications—Esquire, Rolling Stone, Us—where Janet Waegel worked during the day.

In 1991, when Tom took a job at CalArts, we moved to Los Angeles. As our work practices shifted, we were also beginning to get a read on a very different city. In the early ‘90s, I was writing regularly for Interview and Mirabella. Although these were mainstream magazines, the editors I worked with—Ingrid Sischy and Amy Gross—both had a sense of trust and daring and I was able to publish about artists who were then still considered outside the mainstream—including Andres Serrano, Vija Celmins, and the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks.

Since we didn’t want to abandon REALLIFE Magazine as a project, we considered other ways to continue. We had an interest in moving into book publication but we were unable to get the institutional support we’d hoped for. Because we had always managed with a very small budget, we still had money left from our NEA funding and reckoned that the timely way to produce an issue might be to invite a guest editor to put one together. We’d never done that before and unfortunately, it didn’t work out with the efficiency we’d hoped for: the guest editor delivered the issue a year after the agreed deadline. As grant recipients, we had to file progress reports, stay current with our funding agencies, and account for any inexplicable delays so our attempt at working with a guest editor turned out not to be a good option.

REALLIFE Magazine grew up alongside the personal computer. The first issues were composed on an IBM Selectric typewriter, the copy was set by a typographer, and the design was laid out on boards that were shipped to the printer. At that time, designer Janet Waegel was working with art director Roger Black who’s widely recognized for pioneering the use of the Macintosh computer in magazine design. In addition to her talent as a designer, Janet brought these new technologies to our pages: we started out sending texts via fax modem and it soon became possible to float images, enlarge type, and bleed margins on a screen, transforming the entire layout process. By the 1990s, the “World Wide Web” had arrived, radically changing and expanding the way in which information was made available and accessed.

AD: Can you tell me a bit about your current work with the online magazine East of Borneo and how your experience on REALLIFE influenced it? At East of Borneo you can also follow your interests in making books, right?

SM: I'm a contributing editor and writer for East of Borneo. I've also done two print publications with East of Borneo Books. I edited and introduced *Piecing Together Los Angeles: An Esther McCoy Reader*. Although McCoy, a great literary writer and important social critic, has been widely recognized as the person who put West Coast modern architecture on the map, there had previously never been an anthology of her writing. I also wrote the essay for *As Is: Noah Purifoy, Joshua Tree*; a collaboration with photographer Dominique Vorillon, it's a portrait of sculptor and social activist Noah Purifoy and the outdoor museum he created in the high desert 125 miles east of Los Angeles.

My work has always been fueled by curiosity, observation, reading, and research. My interview with painter Robert Moskowitz, featured in the first issue of REALLIFE Magazine, was my first published interview. Since then, I've published a great deal and done hundreds of interviews for magazines, biographies, and oral history programs and my subjects have ranged from Joan Jonas to Johnny Depp.

While doing research, I find that primary source materials—contemporary articles and interviews, correspondence, archived media—provide vital insights and context. A library card has always been an essential part of my life. During the '80s, access to primary source materials was limited so I spent a lot of time consulting The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, a long-established index to published articles, and requesting copies of out-of-print publications. I would also book research sessions at museums and institutional reading rooms or watch old videotapes at television archives. Now, in the digital age working with East of Borneo's online presence, the live footnotes are linked to primary sources: a reader can see a scanned image of an old handwritten letter or vintage photograph, listen to an audio of an interview, or watch a movie. At East of Borneo, a reader can share in the research experience, encounter the same 1922 newspaper article that I used to have to hunt down all alone in the library stacks.