



Lawrence Weiner, Helipath, Villa di Versegnes, Italy, 1990. Courtesy: Marzona Collection and Konrad Fischer Galerie, Germany

## **Lawrence Weiner: Skimming the Water [Ménage a Quatre]**

**by Karlyn De Jongh  
and Sarah Gold**

Lawrence Weiner has been making what he calls 'sculptures' since the 1960s – wall installations consisting of words. The basis for his installations is the idea that language is material. His installations are flexible: size, language and color are variable, and how they turn out is dependent on the location. As a person, Lawrence is very much like his work, at least so it seemed after spending 24 hours with the artist on his houseboat in the harbor in Amsterdam. The event in question was an art project performed by Karlyn De Jongh, Sarah Gold, Sophia Thomassen and Lawrence Weiner, who stayed with Lawrence on his boat. From noon on the 26th of

January 2010 until noon the following day, topics that ranged from life, art, fame, future, and sex were covered. The 24-hour event is documented as a theatre play in a special edition artist book, titled *Skimming the Water [Ménage a Quatre]*. What follows is a record of the event.

**Sarah Gold:** *It's interesting where you stand, as you might reflect upon your life today.*

**Lawrence Weiner:** It's almost impossible for me to do it. That's why I was thinking to take today, when there would be anything in it for me, to get to that point where you may be able to reflect, without having to sit quietly with somebody in a bar all night. I don't have a picture of myself that is very clear, I really don't.

**Karlyn De Jongh:** *How do you feel about the art world today?*  
[Lawrence starts to roll a cigarette]

**LW:** Yes, I am extremely disappointed in the art world. It has turned into a continuation of art school, with the same fights and the same stupid ideas. They complain about not fitting into the system, and then they fit in. And then they make sure that nobody else will fit in. Why didn't they change the system? But I'm also embarrassed by the failure of the opportunity everybody had. Let's talk about rationality. Why is it that in music, science, and mathematics we are still basically talking about the same problems, while everything else has gone ahead?

[Lawrence finishes rolling his cigarette and licks the ends together.]

**KDJ:** *What would you like to talk about?*

**LW:** Don't you think it is really rather strange that we are living in this world where there are people who cannot accept digital morality? And yet they use it to impose reactionary morality.

That's the whole Taliban thing.

**SG:** *What do you mean by digital reality?*

**LW:** Think about it. The simultaneous realities within the digital, the thing that makes your cell phone work, that makes your computer work. The computers from nowadays, not the earlier computers, because those were analogue. It's not analogue. Analogue is related to the world we live in. It's anthropomorphic, digital is not. It has been what I have been trying to use most of my adult life. In simultaneous reality there is no such thing as hierarchy. There can't be a hierarchy. It just can't exist. Now if you build anything that's based on a hierarchy, you are already going backwards. And I don't know why nobody has made this leap. There are artists who are able to handle the idea of simultaneous realities; they don't have to be the only ones who are right. I don't mean on a personal level. We tend to personalize things. Don't personalize it. But I mean it politically: I am not a humanist. I will fight for somebody's right to be who they are, but I'm also going to fight the person who forces me to sit through one family evening.

**SG:** *Was there a certain point in your life that you decided to become an artist?*

**LW:** I guess, yes.

**SG:** *Was that a conscious choice at that time?*

[Lawrence lights his cigarette.]

**LW:** I was going to school and they wanted to throw me out and put me in a nice school, because I got arrested too many times. I was working and wasn't paying any attention. But I had some teachers who were taking me on as a pet. They thought I was going to be a philosophy professor. They were willing to carry it through, although it was \$100 at the time. After they saw a collage of mine, they came to me and told me they knew I was going to be an artist. I must have been about 16 at the time. And I thought: "Yes, that's what I'm going to be, an artist." That's what I wanted to be. The next day, somebody

advised me not to do my BA, but "if you want to become an artist," he said, "you should go out there and be an artist. If you want to have a kid, you will have to teach, so get some art under your belt. If you have to teach, they will make you an honorary professor, but if you have your BA, they want you to get an MA and eventually a PhD as well. And you don't like school that much." It was the best advice anybody had ever given to me. The same as any other young person growing up in a counter-cultural thing, at times I had to steal something from an object, an idea, or something. If you're really hungry, you can steal a loaf of bread. What's the difference? If it gets to be a necessity, the morals go out the door. Somebody is trying to kill you and you have to kill them. I guess you do it.

[Lawrence takes a sip of whiskey.]

I'm very grateful I never found myself in that sort of dilemma. But if you are in that sort of dilemma, you have to make a decision. That has nothing to do with conversation, and you have to live with it. [Lawrence takes another sip of whiskey.]

**KDJ:** *Are you disappointed that for all your hopes only this much has changed?*

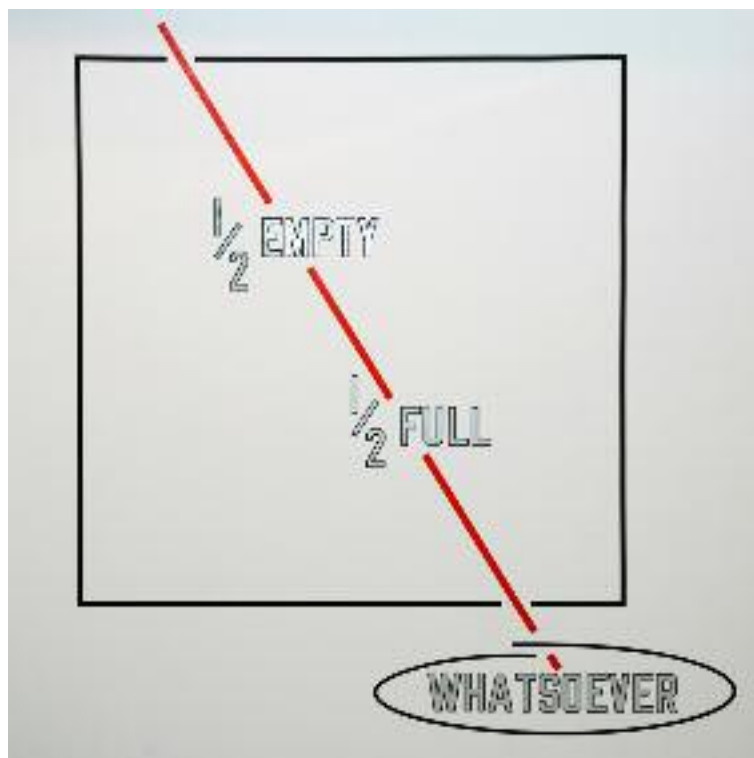
**LW:** No. Hey, you're only one human being. There are billions of people.

[Lawrence starts rolling another cigarette.]

No, I'm not disappointed at all. I'm not disappointed personally. Maybe dissatisfied.

**KDJ:** *Dissatisfied?*

**LW:** That's different from being disappointed. [...] I'm not pleased with the extent of the result, and I'm not pleased sometimes with what's come about, what's come out of it all. But that doesn't mean anything. I mean,



Lawrence Weiner, 1/2 EMPTY 1/2 FULL WHATSOEVER, Yvon Lambert Gallery

who cares whether I'm happy or not?

**KDJ:** *Well, you maybe care.*

**LW:** Do I? I wouldn't know what to do about it. I care. Yes, I care. But again, that's stages in your life where you've done well, you've done good for people. And you continue to do good for people, but you're not terribly happy with what it means to you. But you have accepted all these responsibilities, it's this problem: you have to figure it all out. It's all very nice to be existentially free, but existential also means taking responsibility for what you do. You can't balance it, I can't figure it all out.

**SG:** *Would you have done anything different in your life? If you would have a chance now, looking back?*

**LW:** Looking back, no, looking forward, yes. And if I intend to be able to do it, there's no way I can talk about it in public. That's something where it's not about honesty, it's about, it's not part of the game. Looking back, no. Yes okay, I regret I have hurt so-and-so's feelings and I should have been nicer to people, but that is nothing. Because you cannot even say you will do it better in the future, because it's not the same situation. Looking forward, I see things I would like to be doing differently. Then I'm put into the position of where I am, and I'm trying to change it radically. But again, that's not the kind of thing you can change. It's a hegemony, it's an imposition on you. You don't call up the culture which is your adversary at the moment and tell them what you intend to do, because they are in a position to build up all the barricades possible. So, that's something I cannot talk with you about. I'm sorry.

**SG:** *It's a question.*

**LW:** It's a major question. The bullshit that happened in the last 20 years, that art is about a career, that wasn't what it was about. It was about making these things that people fell over, and they had to get up and decide whether they were worth walking around or throw them away. You know better, you do better. If you don't know better, you can't do better. And the whole point of

## REIHEN VON ZERBROCHENEN FLASCHEN IN SCHLECHT GEMISCHTEN BETON GESETZT

## ROWS OF BROKEN BOTTLES SET INTO BADLY MIXED CONCRETE

Lawrence Weiner, ROWS OF BROKEN BOTTLES SET INTO BADLY MIXED CONCRETE, 1996, LANGUAGE + Red Glossy Vinyl. Courtesy the artist and Hubert Winter Galerie, Vienna. Work as shown during the exhibition Personal Structures Time-Space-Existence at the Kuenstlerhaus Bregenz in Austria, 2010

artists is to develop up not as themselves, but develop up in their practice with a relationship to the world as it's changing. But that doesn't necessarily mean being on mode. That might just mean getting better in relationship to the world. Too many things we use today are made by people who were willing to take the chance that what they were doing was not going to work. All the ones that didn't work, you never heard of. That doesn't mean they didn't make the right choice, does it? [...] I'm sorry, it sounds so heavy, but it's the truth. I don't know what is expected of artists. Yes, we're stuck with it. Not mom and pop people. Opalka is a good example. I'm sorry, I really don't get it. It's this idea that the artist who believes...

[Lawrence looks at the microphone]  
This is quotable...

...that their own self-development is the whole reason for the existence of art. It doesn't have a fucking thing to do with self-development. Almost everything is science, philosophy, mathematics, art, cinema, music and cooking; it only functions in the stream of life. There are accidents and other things, but this self-involvement really gets to me. [...] But it's work, it's not

you. And every omelet isn't great. I've read it somewhere: it's called profundity. You want somebody to look at it if you want to hear more than O, wat moo! [How beautiful]. Dat is niet genoeg [That's not enough].

**KDJ:** *When you say it's your work and not you, is there a difference for you between yourself and your work?*

**LW:** Yes, there is. But if I fuck up, my feelings get hurt just as much as another person's. I have feelings and things, but it's not me. It's not a reflection of me.

[Lawrence rolls another cigarette.]  
How I deal with it in the world is a reflection of me. But it's not me. It's not a representation of me.

**KDJ:** *What do you mean, when you say it's not you?*

**LW:** Things are made by people for other people. But being a person, you also have your own feelings and your own existence and everything. I don't see the work as me. It's not me. I'm very proud of it, I like it when it works. I like getting compliments, just like anybody else. But if it doesn't work, and it was a good shot, I can be upset, I can be depressed. But I don't feel I am vermindert [reduced]. If the second time it doesn't work, then I am

verminderd. Then I'm not functioning. [Lawrence takes a sip of whiskey.] But there's also this other thing, it's not going to work all the time. Somebody can say: "It should have been green." I have to listen. But it's not you. That's the problem that people with celebrity have. Do end up doing strange things, like going into a bar even if it's not the people you're interested in, but they have no way of knowing who the hell you are. It's like when somebody's cruising you, there's something left in you that doesn't go with the whole package. It can lead to embarrassing situations, but that's life. At least you know that there is something left in you that has a certain charm. You forget sometimes, you loose it. You begin to think that you are just another kind of presence. It's the same problem with some of the earlier artists we have been talking about. They forgot that it has to be them outside of the uniform, outside of who they are in the world. Just every once in a while. That's different. That's personal. You wanted personal? That's personal. And that's a major problem. You like it. You like the idea that you have access to the entire world, practically. Because the art world is international.

**KDJ:** *You don't seem to need many of the exhibitions that you're doing. Is there an exhibition you would still like to do, that you desire?*

**LW:** I can't think of what. Yeah, there are some things that if I did, I would feel very excited. But after a while, you have retrospectives in the cities where you work and you have retrospectives in cultures that adopted you and they are well attended and paid attention to. I don't know. In Los Angeles, I had a real relationship with Los Angeles. But a genuine relationship, like outside of this other world that now exists. It goes all the way back. It was so gratifying to me. There were two parties at the opening. One was this fabulous party, this naked lady party with a swimming pool I did a piece for. But then there was another party, that an old friend of mine, an artist, threw. He happens to

have just as a chic house, in the same neighborhood.

[He lights his cigarette again.] If you're being honest and you're being open, there are things you don't bring up, because there is no way another person can relate to it, without believing you. I don't want anything I am talking about, that somebody would have to believe me. I tried to talk about anything and if people would take the trouble, they can get back, they can find somebody that remembers. Art is a fight, it's an angry thing. It's supposed to be. Not that you bite people, but it's an angry thing. It's about taking people's dreams away. When you change a basic perception of reality, you change somebody's entire sense of themselves. I studied existential philosophy. I would like to know where the fuck killing a stranger came in as

being an existential act. Since existentialism is essentially religious. If you cannot go out and deny your creator in public, you are not being existential are you? Why kill a stranger? It's such a bourgeois idea. It worked for Camus, but he had such a different concept of life. He was a resistance hero.

[...The following morning...]

**KDJ:** *Yesterday evening you told us that you start each day with questions. What kind of questions do you start with? What are the questions you're thinking about at the moment, this morning?*

**LW:** With Lisbon I have this problem of adaptation. About what do we do when we deal with materials, in order to be able to understand them or use them? And I start to figure out essentially a way that I can tell myself



Lawrence Weiner, Untitled, this work has been made in June 2007 on the occasion of the Symposium at Arti et Amicitiae, Amsterdam, Netherlands

about adaptation. That's where some of the drawings come from. Those are the questions. They are really not very profound.

**KDJ:** *Is adaptation an important issue for you?*

**LW:** Yeah, I did that whole body of work years ago. Then I found out about ALTERED TO SUIT, because things essentially are altered to suit. And the whole concept of the level of adaptation, what the interactions with either the expectations or the society are, are extremely important to me.

**KDJ:** *But your work also seems to be adaptation: you seem to adapt to the space in which you...*

**LW:** No, that's the installation. Let's try to keep it straight. Let's not worry about consecutive things. The whole point is, that it's just means to place it in the public. It has very little to do with the work itself. Its nature allows it to install it on a wall. Again, if you're going to install it on a wall, you might as well try to get it right. It's true. Our society, it tells us we should put on clothing, also the weather, then you might as well just get it right. And that's all it is. And then you realize that what you do has political implications, there's social implications and there's other things. And you try to deal with it. That's not to me a problem. This part of the job, it's not an easy part. It's supposed to look simple, but in fact that's something else. That's part of the job and you can't complain about it. [...] I mean, the adaptation of how you essentially are going to put materials together. Because it's not haphazard, I wish it were. And I have a problem: I am pleased with the things I end up showing, or else I wouldn't show them. I mean if I have a show, I don't have to do it, I could also cancel. But I don't like moving them from one place to the other and I haven't, there was a point in the adaptation to put it in one show, but it wasn't made for a show, really. It was made because I had the opportunity of the show. There is a difference. I've been very upfront about it with everybody, that it's made special



Lawrence Weiner; Untitled, this work has been made in June 2007 on the occasion of the Symposium at Arti et Amicitiae, Amsterdam, Netherlands

for them. It's special because they ask me to make something for something. And I would use the materials of what's around. So, if it's in a coal mining area, I might try to be interested in coal or steam or whatever they use to make the machines work. But that's not really site-specific.

**SG:** *How do you work?*

**LW:** It's all very physical. It's materials. It's things. I don't have a working process. To draw, yeah, you have to stand at the drawing table and draw. The work comes from work. It's studio work. I don't know how I work, but it seems to work.

**SG:** *Where do you think your interest in*

*material comes from?*

**LW:** The same as everybody else's. I have to walk across the earth. If they would have given me the opportunity to fly, I might've been interested in air. Which is immaterial too. I have no idea where it comes from. Do you? You're supposed to insight me.

[...]

**KDJ:** *So, mainly the questions that you have are related to your next show?*

**LW:** Well, yesterday you asked me about spending all this time talking about myself. When you then find yourself in the middle of the night, no matter how many people are in the bed, you end up feeling alone. It's

about things I do not really have; I don't know what to think. That's why I said that life is odd. I don't quite know where I fit into it.

**KDJ:** *Do you feel lonely sometimes?*

**LW:** Working? Yeah. Surprisingly, there have been periods when you feel less lonely. When you feel that what you are doing well, you know it's going to work, then it's making some change to somebody, but you don't feel that much of a mosh around you. It's about a mosh really. I don't have a lot of fears and things, so it's not about angst or anything. Willem is niet bang [William is not afraid] that's the strangest song in the whole world. Hup, daar is Willem met de waterpomptang... want Willem is niet bang. [Hey, there is William with the pipe wrench, 'cause William is not afraid] living on a boat, you understand what they have to be afraid of. [Everone laughs.]

**KDJ:** *Do you feel lonely also, when you're alone, working? Or is it more the loneliness that you feel when you are...*

**LW:** It is when you stop working. It's when you reach others. Also, there is a change to one's relationship to the world. I am objectified. I am an object. I always politically say: "You are supposed to be an object, not the subject and ta-da-ta-da-da." But you are a person and you have a subjective reality.

**KDJ:** *When do you feel you became an object?*

**LW:** That's been my problem somewhere in the 70s. I didn't do it. I never said I was. But in the 70s, something I did, crossed the line. Once that crossed that line, you can't even feel that you are a polite person and that everything will be fine. It all changes. It's going to take me a couple of minutes to wake up. I'm sorry. [...]

The problem is that our society has reached a point where, in fact, that's the problem with art. We begin to use our desire for things, because we feel so completely out of it, so completely not related. I am relating it to something that has to do with people. There

is a desire, but there is no way to figure out what it's supposed to feel like or look like, so of course, it's never really satisfying.

[Taking a sip of coffee.]

That after a while it won't be there anymore, you are more intellectually interested than physically. That's interesting with art. Art has become this problem where it's much more about the intellectual necessity, then it's more a social necessity. It's this vergadering [conference] thing, where people have to say something that has to do with something. It's so much easier when you say "Let's talk about time." Or talk about green. And say you're talking about art, what are you talking about? And talking about yourself: the kind of work that I make, you cannot really think much about yourself. You have to step aside and you have to do it all totally synthetic, because the work doesn't allow for your personal feelings to come into it. It really doesn't.

**KDJ:** *You mean, specifically your feelings?*

**LW:** Yes, mine. That's all I know. I don't know how other people work. Or why.

**KDJ:** *What I understood yesterday, is that you do want certain people to react upon it.*

**LW:** I want anybody to react upon it. But then you are a human being: there are certain people that you prefer if they would react upon it. But it's anybody. As I said, I am really happy when some hunter comes in with his family to the museum, only because they feel they should go to a museum. And then they find themselves perplexed by something. Anybody's work. And they say: "Oh, I get it." That's a luck, a pleasure principle. [Lawrence puffs on his cigarette.] It leaves you in these strange states.

**KDJ:** *What do you mean with 'these strange states'?*

**LW:** It's this state where you find something and have to find out how to make my own work relate to me. Because you find yourself that day thinking in other terms and you don't really want to be somewhere. But it got you there and now what do you do?

**KDJ:** *Is it some sort of feeling of alienation from the work that you do?*

**LW:** Each time it's finally finished, yeah. I have to re-adapt to how am I going to let it function. Because of course, you want to let it function. Because you made it for other people to function with. You have to decide what you are going to change in your attitude and things like that.

**KDJ:** *Is it for you easier with the work you made in the 70s?*

**LW:** I don't remember. Honestly and truly. This is what the problem was when I was writing to you, that I don't know what we are supposed to be discussing: I don't really remember how I felt in the 70s and the 80s. I remember what happened to me. I remember a lousy hotel or a good hotel, and I remember I felt fine when I went to install. But I don't remember the impetus at that moment. I am very outer-directed as a human being. The world changes so radically, that I don't know.

**KDJ:** *Does that mean you have feelings about the work that you do at this very moment?*

**LW:** No, I have feelings when it's finished. I don't really have feelings before it's finished, because otherwise I will be altering it to suit.

[Everyone laughs.]

It's true. Whatever I will be doing, it will be a point in the adaptation of what has fallen into place. I know that sounds very pretentious. It's not that it's automatic, but you really do have to follow what you're doing straight through and give it its dignity and then say: "No, I reject it." So basically, you have to throw the whole project away and start again, if you really cannot accept it. Or you find yourself doing something that you realize will be used against what your core beliefs are. And we all have core beliefs. You didn't realize it at the time, because it wasn't something you wanted, it's just that the material itself led to it.

**KDJ:** *What are your core beliefs?*

**LW:** That the work can be used to propound certain things. That's the

political thing. That's the responsibility of the artist. And it's a legitimate responsibility. That the work will not be used in a manner that you probably don't approve of.

**KDJ:** *Do you feel more responsible when you make work for a specific group of people, like now with the children project?*

**LW:** No, it's always the same. I don't have a nicy, nicy thing about children. I just find it sort of interesting to talk to them. Not in any depth. I don't look to children to make you feel good: you can always feel good, because children are always a pain in the ass. So, when you are nice to them, you can always feel good about yourself anyhow. It's a win win situation: you are nice to them, they feel a little bit better about themselves. It's a win win and if you are going to make a big fuss out if it, you are looking for credit. You're not supposed to get rewarded for doing the right thing. And you have to believe, that maybe you're going to get punished for doing the wrong thing. You have to keep it within some sort of reason. No, don't make a big thing out of the fact that I make editions for children. It's another part of the society, but don't expect anything or else you're going to end up with that expectation that bourgeois parents have, that the child becomes a reflection of you. That one, I know, ain't fair. And it probably ain't a good idea. And I am going to make some more coffee, before we all die. [...]

There is no double meaning. You can say ethics, you can say aesthetics. It's the same word.

**KDJ:** *Do you think your work is aesthetic?*

**LW:** Oh, of course it's aesthetic. It's not in dialogue with dead people. It tries not to waste the time. You know, if somebody has figured out the cure for something, and it's working, move on. You might get an insight and make a better cure, but just move on. And if you have to give credit to somebody because he got it right, that's fine, isn't it? But if you base that what you're

doing only on the fact that they got it right, I don't see the relationship. That's the major problem we are having with contemporary philosophy. You can't keep making things just to get credit. And in order to get the credit you have to associate it with something else, you will end up being the Japanese De Kooning. Which still means that you do make a very decent painting that makes sense, but it doesn't tell anybody anything they didn't know before. [Lawrence lights his cigarette.]

**KDJ:** *Is that the morality that you are looking for? Did you want to give people the opportunity to think new things or to learn more?*

**LW:** Maybe, for them to take... Everybody is in a different situation, and if you're paying attention, maybe to give them the tools that what they make could be more useful to you. Maybe it's not altruistic. Don't you think that if one can figure out this XX, XY, correctly, it would make your daily life a little bit more amusing? So, it's not about altruism, is it? That is at this point, what I'm caught in between. I'm desperately trying to figure out what the essence of a line is. What does somebody mean when they say: "Draws like a man, draws like a girl." What do they mean exactly, when you are not sure what you are supposed to be meaning. You have a synthetic thing you tell yourself every day what you want to be, but that has nothing to do with what you are.

**KDJ:** *Isn't it because you are in a certain way, that you make the things you make?*

**LW:** That's for you to figure out, not for me. If I'm having difficulties, I know I'm very complicated to be around. If I find myself with really imponderable things, where I can't get an answer, but I am working towards it, I find the reactions of other people much nicer and you're really basically functioning better.

**SG:** *Do you still see yourself as a sculptor?*

**LW:** That's all I do: I make sculptures. All the rest of the stuff is all just social "angst" that you let people force you in

to the fact that you have to interrelate to them and communicate and all of that. But basically, I make things that you put out in the world and people have to decide whether to climb over, go around or move out of the way. And there are people who like it where it is. I just leave it. But that doesn't mean that sometimes something else is going to supersede it. It's supposed to be. It's the natural order of things. It's one of the things why people keep working. They're trying to keep things that fit in with the natural order of things. That you don't have to spend your entire time defending something that you have already done. That maybe it has outlived its usefulness. It all sounds very nice, but each time it's an emotional decision. Don't you find that? It relates to everybody, that thing that you choose to do.

[Lawrence lights his cigarette.] You basically have to put it into a context. That complex is whatever context you find it in. The advantage of international art is that you find your work functions in different contexts. I'm working on something for Abu Dhabi now. That's a whole other context. It's a culture I seem to understand, but I would prefer not to live in. And yet, if I am going to do something, it has to have some dignity and it has to be useful for people that you're doing it for. Without changing your inheritance belief pattern. It's been a great privilege that the work keeps finding itself in places, even though it's the last place you would expect it to be in, it functions. You don't really know how you're supposed to feel about it. You're not making it universal. But the world is catching up to everything. It just comes along and there you are.

[Lawrence chuckles.] Don't you find that exciting? It really doesn't depend upon you being who you are or what you are and it depends upon how this stuff sets in the world it finds itself in. And there has to be a point where that happens. And when it does, you're stuck with it. It just doesn't go away. It's weird.