

INTERVIEW

Philip Taaffe and Fred Tomaselli in conversation, with Raymond Foye and Rani Singh

The following interview was conducted over the course of two sessions, at Philip Taaffe's studio on July 16th, and at Fred Tomaselli's studio on July 22nd, 2002.

All images by Fred Tomaselli are courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York.

FOYE: When Harry was making films there was a real demarcation between the actual making of the film and the assembling of the materials, and sometimes he had to let things sit for a long time. In Mahagonny, he left the material alone for eight years. What I've seen of the working process in your studio, and in Fred's as well, is very similar to how Harry worked, in painting as well as film: the collage elements which he spent months gathering and cutting and organizing; the way multiple layers are superimposed in composing the painting; even the formal design principles that underlie the compositions are developed in much the same way.

TOMASELLI Like a lot of my favorite artists, Harry seems to have been able to pull lots of different information into a complex conversation that becomes visually manifest in his work. The complexities behind the images that result are the type that are endlessly deep and revealing.

TAAFFE: It's also because of the unifying force of the abstract intelligence at work. In all of Harry's works that I've seen, there are many incidents, many little episodes that one can focus on. However, beyond that, there's always a real unifying intelligence. And as a painter, that is what you are always obliquely aiming towards somehow: to make visually manifest that

sense of a unifying intelligence—the grand synthesis. In spite of the manifold nature of its material concerns, or the amount of detail and complexity involved, the ultimate experience of a work need to come across as a singular expression. I believe this is an important guiding principle for an artist..

TOMASELLI: Most of my favorite art hits the viewer in some non-intellectual, intuitive kind of way. You can lose yourself in the work. It's a singular moment, but the complexity is there for later. You get more information the longer you look at it. In different times it might mean different things. You allow these other kinds of information to sit there and be available for another day...

TAAFFE: But don't you think that what you're describing is very much a painting thing? This is what painting does. We take that for granted, but I think that's what painting really does better than anything else.

TOMASELLI: You have to live with paintings to know how they can resonate over time, to unfold into a really big conversation.

TAAFFE: They keep expanding, growing before your very eyes...

TOMASELLI: The good ones do, and with different levels of information that you perhaps didn't recognize initially.

TAAFFE: And it leads you new ideas about life as well. It leads you new understandings of what it means to be alive in this world.

FOYE: But that's not just intellectual, it's very much about the carefully made thing which is often startling and beautiful in all the complexity and difficulty of what beauty is, that makes the work successful. But if it doesn't look good, it doesn't matter how interesting the process may be that went into making it, it's not going to get off the ground, right?

TAAFFE: Well, it'll be on the wall.

TOMASELLI: Whether you like it or not.

FOYE: Otherwise you get into what a lot of psychedelic art, or drug art, is. It's just a mundane description that leaves nothing for the viewer to do.

What I think is important in the psychedelic experience is not the experience itself, but what you do with that experience later, how you make use of the experience in the world.

TAAFFE: Yes, I think what you are referring to is the transformed, or transforming image, which is the opposite of illustrating. It's about letting the viewer discover things, it's not putting everything out there in a very demonstrative way. It's subtler, softer. It lets your mind and your eyes inside, lets you penetrate, so you can inhabit the pictorial space.

TOMASELLI: My art is informed to a certain degree by psychedelic art but it's in concert with many different ideas and 'isms,' so I don't really consider myself a psychedelic artist per say.

TAAFFE: Lately I've been wondering what Harry would have made of the internet? I wonder how he would have dealt with this whole situation?

FOYE: I've often thought of that, because what Harry did manually for decades is taking place now, digitally, almost with the press of a button. Methodologically, Harry kind of invented the internet.

SINGH: I remember at one point showing him a computer-generated program involving colored fractal geometry, and he was amazed. He said years ago you wouldn't believe all the time he had to spend working out all those permutations manually.

TOMASELLI: What do you mean he invented the internet?

FOYE: Linkage, hypertexts, the ways in which diverse subjects are connected; taking one set of experiences and transferring or applying them to another.

TAAFFE: It seems to me that Harry wasn't the kind of person who relished the instantaneous. It seems to me that he liked things to proceed at a certain pace. That's perhaps the biggest problem he would have with the internet. The speed with which things come at you. What would you say about that?

FOYE: He was very reflective in his general manner. He was certainly pret-

ty slow in getting out of the house...

SINGH: His work was so precision-oriented, it was very slow and tedious and repetitive.

TAAFFE: But don't you think that's part of the biological necessity for the thought patterns and the memory and the archaic shamanistic renderings—that they are coming out of a certain kind of pace? Not this violence of immediacy. How would he have dealt with this question? How contemporary a person was he?

SINGH: Well, he was both. His statements about technology were very much opposed to its effects. He felt the important things in life were song, dance, music. He had several statements which are quite hostile to technological innovation.

TOMASELLI: Yet he was utilising the edge of technological innovation at the time that he was using it. Audio recording, film, these are the dominant late twentieth century technical contributions to culture, and he embraced them. My feeling is that he had a love of inter-disciplinary connections, and a considerable ability to assimilate current technologies. My assumption would be that he would dig the internet because it's the sort of technology that facilitates the connections that he was interested in, and he seems to have been OK with that, when it served his interests.

FOYE: Precisely. He was delighted when the DAT machine came out because it was much better sound. But he never wanted the technology to take over as the motivating or directing force. Harry once said, "All you need to make a film is the desire to make a film. Everything else is contained in the instructions on the box the film or the camera comes in."

SINGH: But Fred is right, Harry was always using the technology that was available. When he was fifteen years old he was lugging a wireless recorder into the woods that required a lot of gear, heavy batteries or generators, and the like.

FOYE: I always felt that Harry used machines as a way of relating to the world. He was too sensitive and it was too hard on him emotionally to do too much one-on-one. To have a recording device or some means through

which he could relate to the world was how he was most comfortable. He also used technology mediumistically.

TOMASELLI: The fewer cumbersome things to get in your way, the fresher the mode of expression will be. Harry seems to have been one to not want to be too encumbered. There were laborious processes involved in his work, but there were also immediate ones that have to do with the moment he was in. I can relate to that. I use whatever I can, whatever works to make a thing. For us collagists, cutting things out of magazines is a lot more immediate than trying to paint them. And the effect is as good, if not better.

FOYE: Harry was terrifically visual. I was always impressed how amidst all the anthropological and museological pursuits that he had in life, at the center of it all was the activity of painting. As long as I knew him he always had a space where he worked, with paints and paper on a small table. He spent many hours every day on his paintings and watercolors. One could never quite figure out how he did all the things that he did or where he found the time. But he always considered painting as the center of everything he did; he never seemed to have any doubts that it wouldn't be able to hold all of these diverse ideas and interests.

TOMASELLI: Did he consider his films to be an image, or did he consider them to be a succession of images?

FOYE: One nice thing about Harry's filmography is that all of the films, or groups of films, are so different from one another. He's involved with very different concerns at different times. But certainly some of the hand-painted films were about image-making in a way that was very closely related to his paintings of the time. Aside from the attractiveness of the novelty of the medium, the colors were much brighter when the films were properly projected. I think most importantly it was a way of getting the paintings to move. It was the logical outgrowth of the fascination with the kinetic or dynamic aspects that were embedded in the images that he was working with. Later it was about explicating the relationship between painting and music, such as the Thelonious Monk film, *Misterioso*.

TAAFFE: That's an extraordinary film. You just don't want it to be over. And then when it is, suddenly the entire film is reversed and you watch it backwards! Even the music is played backwards. It's a great structuralist

statement, a visual parallel to the music that really had to exist.

FOYE: Thelonious Monk represented so much to Harry, as an artist, particularly in terms of abstract patterning and numerology.

TAAFFE: I've learned a lot about painting from listening to Monk: the elliptical nature of his music and how the permutations are worked out. I also loved the way he combined words sometimes to come up with his titles. He's certainly one of my artistic heroes.

FOYE: Phillip, when you were making experimental films as a student at Cooper Union, what did those films consist of and what were some of the influences behind them?

TAAFFE: I was ordering training films from the United States Army, and then I'd bring them to the lab and have them make a negative print, and then another positive print, and I'd take these prints back to the editing room and I would reassemble them. Then I shot titles which functioned almost like diaristic fragments. There was a wonderful film from the Department of the Army discussing the life-cycle of the Norway rat. I basically re-constructed the film. I was thinking of Bruce Conner and his films, and Robert Breer was my instructor. He was an extremely sharp man, very observant. He used to make these little wind-up robots and bring them to class. He would put them in one corner of the room and they would stumble across the floor...

TOMASELLI: They were like little monochrome shapes, crawling around the floor, right?

TAAFFE: Yeah, they would just roll around and they'd be doing their thing during the class while he was talking about whatever material he wanted to present. He was a very easy-going guy. I also made some super-eight films. I was really into the editing. I loved slicing ever so little pieces of film and putting them back together. One subject I used derived from a series of books on Luther Burbank's fruit and plant mutations. As he was developing new species of fruits and vegetables they were photographed repeatedly throughout the growing cycle, and these were illustrated quite beautifully in a series of books that I found in the library. The colors on the pages were soft and saturated. The plums were particularly nice, very fleshy, and they

were photographed and printed in a beautiful manner. I filmed them with the movie camera with just enough frames to work with, and then I'd edit these frames so that the fruit seemed to be growing and contracting and growing again. I did a series of maybe twenty of these. I called them Fruit Loops. For my final presentation I got all of the projectors from the school, about six projectors in one room, and I was showing these film loops, and the fruit seemed to be dancing around the walls. It was quite lovely. I was also shooting Super 8 films in the Bronx Botanical Garden... very romantic stuff.

TOMASELLI: You describe the editing process to be the main unifying element between painting and film. Do you consider your work to be grounded in the editing process?

TAAFFE: In some sense, yes. I liked tearing apart lines, and I liked the surgical procedure of cutting and applying and taping. Also the history of cinema became important to me at one point. I thought of the process of making a painting as being about montage and assemblage and sequencing. My paintings always had a narrative feeling about them, and yet finally they were icons. I had to resolve this seeming contradiction. The paintings were about expression and gesture, but the gesture couldn't stand on its own—the mark had to be combined with other marks and be reflective of the larger scheme of things. I wasn't interested in just the gesture, but in shaping something structurally that would be more like making a movie.

TOMASELLI: How did you make the transition from film to painting?

TAAFFE: When I was in art school in the mid-seventies, I was going to see paintings in the galleries, works by Robert Mangold, or Robert Ryman. And a host of other painters. But the discussion amongst the most advanced students simply did not involve painting. We were students of Hans Haacke, and painting was considered very hard to justify because of the critique of the commodity fetish, vis-à-vis the Frankfurt school of neo-Marxist philosophers. That was really the major concern in the mid-Seventies, so painting was something I shied away from. I was making films, and photography, and some weird kinds of sculptural installations.

TOMASELLI: We're about the same age, we're probably informed by similar moments in history. It sounds like you and me both were being taught

that painting was bourgeois, and that its commodity status made it wanting in terms of its lack of radicality, and that true risk was occurring in installation and performance art. What this attitude set up for a lot of people our age, was a strong sense of doubt. We worked it out through other mediums and we found our way back to painting, and painting was in fact the most radical thing we could do in that particular context. To embrace painting, was to be misunderstood as somebody who was a reactionary; Somebody who wasn't truly getting out on a creative limb or who was playing it safe. It's interesting because at this point in time I feel there is no friction whatsoever in the acceptance of video, installation or performance in the artworld. In fact, those media are as acceptable as any painting today. It makes no difference. Radicality is not predicated on the medium that one is expressing oneself in.

TAAFFE: I spent a good two years after I got out of school reading some of the classics of Western literature, just to get a better handle on things. I formed a study group with an older friend of mine who was an amateur theologian. I remember we decided upon Herodotus, Chaucer, John Calvin, more critical theory and a standard economics textbook. We read them through completely, which was wonderful, but then I felt I had better decide what to do as an artist.

TOMASELLI: I was taught to think that way also. In the nineteen seventies and eighties you had to deal with everyone telling you that painters are morons. And then by making a painting you were almost saying, "I am an idiot." So you had to get through all this doubt about painting, if you were the least bit conversant with the current philosophies of the time. Making art was one of the few healthy things that I got pleasure from, and yet I was being told by the culture and by teachers and fellow artists that it was all over. I disregarded the conventional wisdom of nihilism and did it anyway, even though it felt a little hopeless. There was, and still is, a lot of doubt in my work.

TAAFFE: Yes, but I was going to say that given the critical atmosphere that we went through, it also informed one's ideas about painting. A painting has to meet certain critical standards, and we have that sense perhaps more strongly because of this negative atmosphere we were faced with. Ultimately I feel very re-enforced by having passed through all of that. I think a painting still has to do a lot. It still has to justify its existence. A painting

has to be a strong, intelligently powered idea, there's no doubt about that. The critical faculty remains important.

TOMASELLI: It's just more information that can lead to the re-interpretable nature of painting. Painting may be informed by some of this doubt or some of the philosophy that comes out of the skepticism about painting, and that might be in the painting in tandem with other ideas that you're working out. To me, it seems like painting has the ability to assimilate lots of different kinds of information, and this complexity is a mirror of the world we live in. You can throw the philosophy in and it doesn't hurt the painting one bit. It just gives the viewer an extra little something to think about and becomes part of the text behind the painting.

TAAFFE: I had always liked to make paintings, and when I left school it became for me, existentially speaking, the most radical thing that I could do. I was living at the General Theological Seminary, in Chelsea, just before I moved to Jersey City. I was going to see movies in the afternoon and then I'd come home and I'd try to work at night. I had a small room, and on one wall I mounted drawing paper, and using paint sticks and a little cassette tape recorder I'd start to work myself into a frenzy, describing a part of the film that I had seen. When I started to induce this activity I was making lines on the paper, and as the lines suggested certain pictorial memories, I began to speak into the microphone. Then I'd throw another piece of paper over the paint-stick and start another one. I did this for a couple of months—not every night, because it was a very intense activity. After a while I noticed that as I was murmuring into the microphone and making these lines and describing what I was trying to get at in the painting, the words would fall away and the gestures and images would take over...

FOYE: What you're describing is a ritual. A ritualistic process.

TAAFFE: It was some sort of ritual activity, yes. Very much so. But the important point is that as I was doing this, the language fell away and I became more interested in what I was constructing pictorially. At that time I felt I knew in my bones I was in the right place, to be engaged in this process of visual gesture building. I was convinced that not only did I have the capability for it, although I suppose this was evident to me by then, but that this was also a deeply personal activity which could take into consideration everything I cared about. In terms of my reading, in terms of my under-

standing of the history of cinema, and with regard to virtually any other subject I might learn about or expose myself to, I realized that painting, as a discipline, might be able to reflect or contain all of these ideas. And it had nothing to do with the limited idea of the contextualization of the art object as a consumer fetish.

FOYE: Did you ever have similar experiences in terms of ritualized activity, of going to some strange place and coming back with evidence of that?

TOMASELLI: Well, there are different events that I've used as systems to make paintings. In 1996, I did a piece called "Dermal Delivery or How I Quit Smoking". Everyday, while I was quitting smoking, I would take a nicotine patch off my body and place it on the surface of the painting. I would then add little square photographs of skin, Band-Aids, and paint until it looked like a big flesh colored quilt. I was thinking about the ideal of paint as skin. It was a really hard piece to make because quitting smoking made me go a little crazy. I've also put panels out at night in the woods and aimed lights at them, thereby summoning huge clouds of insects to swarm around the work. I would then pour resin onto the panels and captured these bugs as a kind of portrait of the atmosphere, but also as a reliquary of a collision between nature and technology.

FOYE: That's also a form of landscape.

TOMASELLI: It is a form of landscape, absolutely. But then I use that as a jumping-off point for making a painting. Lots of my work involves private performance and experiments but they probably resemble more of a Victorian empiricism rather than any type of shamanistic losing-yourself-kind-of-thing. I've had ecstatic and otherworldly experiences, either on drugs, or sitting on top of a cliff in Yosemite on a full lunar eclipse... whatever. I've had these moments, but I need to be detached from them to have some clarity about the experience. I have to put myself at a distance before I try to incorporate that experience into my work. I haven't taken LSD since 1980, and it took me about ten years to get some of that information into my work. I have very conflicted feelings about those experiences and I try to incorporate that scepticism into the work.

FOYE: For me, what's of value in the drug experience, is the refreshment of vision that can result. Either challenging reality in a major way through

psychedelics, or else just twisting one's consciousness slightly through marijuana.

TAAFFE: I find that grass helps me on occasion to cut through the heart of the problem, it can be very focusing in that respect. I especially like to smoke it at the end of a busy day when I'm trying to resolve a particular painting. It's really good for this. I make lots of procedural notes that I apply towards the next day's project.

TOMASELLI: In my life I have only ever been able to access the sublime chemically. I realise that I'm a mediated person for whom there are so many artificial versions of the real that I've experienced long before I've experienced the real- and so many cultural versions of the original, that it's very hard for me to access an original experience. I tend to question my identity in light of the manipulations that I'm subjected to. One really doesn't know where one's desires come from or why one even wants certain things. In that context drugs can be almost the only original experience one can have, because they are being generated from within your body. They're not an externally manipulated experience that's coming at you. They are a little dangerous, and the sublime is a little dangerous....

TAAFFE: What characterizes the sublime is the fear of that something which is beyond all human control. It's a quality that can certainly be attributed to nature at times, but it really refers to events or experiences that are almost too much for the human soul to bear. And so, one of the means we've been given in order to glimpse the depth of these kinds of experiences is through the use of entheogenic substances.

TOMASELLI: Yes, and in that respect I feel that's the only way I have ever been able to access the sublime. I'm very interested in the concept of the sublime and its influence, because it's a major subject in the history of art and it also happens to be the major component around drugs. Harry Smith is certainly an exemplary artist of an earlier generation who explored that connection in a useful way.

FOYE: In the 1840s Baudelaire was writing about the idea of the artificial paradise. Hashish, wine, opium. That whole combination of drugs and painting and poetry and modernism goes back a hundred and fifty in a very direct way.

TAAFFE: I think all of these things can be extremely advantageous to an artist. It's all a question of maintaining the right distance and finding the right applications. I believe one must be very objective about what needs to happen in a work of art. When you get an idea for a work, that idea in a sense is coming from an ecstatic place, at that moment when the idea being given shape occurs is also the decisive moment which contains the temporal implication of, "Alright, this is what I now must do based upon this initial idea to see it made manifest." But I think that idea, that generative impulse, is always coming from an unconscious state. Attendant upon that instant of realization is a leap that you must take that is coming out of the faith you have in yourself and your own artistic history and what you want to do next. For example, what you were saying about your Archimboldo-inspired piece as perhaps signalling a new direction in your work that you may continue to continue. To do that you will have to be very observant in this Victorian sense you mentioned, and very specimen-oriented, exacting and organized, et cetera, However, the originating impulse... where does it come from? That is the most sacred and magical phenomenon.

TOMASELLI: For me it's a combination of laborious techniques that are done in an empirical way, mixed with little pulses of mysterious inspiration. You get going on a painting and along the way you have small flashes of realization, and they're quick. "Oh, yeah!" and then you know what you want to do. Along the way you get other little pulses that might move you to a place different than that initial impulse, and then that's when the work starts to take over.

TAAFFE: Your nervous system is guiding you...

TOMASELLI: Exactly. To be absorbed in the making of a painting is to lose yourself. But even while losing myself in my work I do very intently try to keep in my mind that I am making a vivid, convincing object, for myself, and in the process I hope that work will translate to other people. I don't have any control over that, but I am tapping into some archetypes I think, and I am tapping into some things that are real, and some conditions there are real and that affect me and that I think affect other people, and hopefully the work can communicate but ultimately I have no control over that so I'm just trying to make the work I want to see and the work I want to see isn't necessarily out in the world already so I have to make it in order to see

it. It is ultimately a non-intellectual, and quite intuitive process. As much as there's a lot of detached fabrication and assemblage and building in my work, those moves are always in tandem with these other impulses that are completely non-intellectual. I don't know where they're coming from, but I've learned to pay close attention to them. I think good artists do pay attention to this stuff.

FOYE: One topic I wanted to touch on is the subject of folk art and folk music. Harry used to say that recorded history extends back only five thousand years. Mankind has been around for five hundred thousand years. What about everything that came before recorded history? That's where songs and dances come in: folk art is a way of tapping into these archaic echoes. How do you feel about folk tradition and how you use it in your work?

TAAFFE: For me it has to do with a geographical and historical transposition. I seriously want to make a parallel visual environment to what I imagine were parts or fragments of another lived cultural reality. I'm travelling through my work, and trying to provide another reality. Yes, it's an imaginary one, however it consists of these other cultural forms that are catalytic in nature. They spark memory, and they provide clues or marks to guide one along this journey. I think of a painting as a journey, not only in terms of its making, but also in terms of the personality and the mind of the artist who has shaped this thing. It is coming from life. This is what makes a painting the specific thing that it is. I think that the folk forms are celebratory markings or points of passage into an imaginary reality, they become characters in the pictorial fiction—the story as it exists in the painted work. And it constitutes a means whereby this alternate reality can be actually built up.

FOYE: Folk art forms also have a vitality, or a veracity, but are operating on a premise that is not so different or distant.

TOMASELLI: They're not self-consciously "Art."

FOYE: Well, they don't involve theory usually, right?

TOMASELLI: No, they don't involve theory. They actually involve the decorative. It's a funny thing because towards the end of modernism, the dec-

orative is another of the bad things that you're not supposed to do, another taboo. I love the vividness of folk art, the fervency of belief behind it.

TAAFFE: It's also about reaffirming some lost tribal identity.

TOMASELLI: There's also a wonderful friction that it can have when it's conversing with modernism. I love throwing enemy-isms into one place and letting them fight it out, letting those frictions occur, letting those juxtapositions create new meaning. I love the vivid un-self-conscious quality of folk art and I love how that can simultaneously inhabit the space of something that's very self-conscious. It sets off new kinds of sparks. One can be inspired simultaneously by quilts and by Frank Stella.

FOYE: Folk art is visually very emblematic.

TOMASELLI: It's also very embellished and worked over. I'm talking very generally now. You can find very simple folk art and patterns but there is usually the tendency to embellish the hell out of things. If you look at the obsessive dotting in Aboriginal folk art for example, you tend to see this embellishment of form. It's almost like you're petting or stroking this object with obsessive-compulsive marks. It gives the object more value, more worth, more resonance and more magic somehow. It's almost like you're loving this object a little more just by over handling it. I feel that same thing can happen in contemporary art. You can stroke and love an object with your hands and give it a little more meaning.

TAAFFE: I have always seen certain abstract paintings as tribal fetishes, in a way, or as having talismanic power. At that time in the mid-eighties when I wanted to reflect upon these other paintings that I felt close to, I decided that rather than making some influenced variant of these works, in the school of so-and-so, I would make my own representative version of a specific abstract work. In an effort to find my way, I wanted to see if I could produce a convincing version of a previous abstract painting by making it on the same scale and in the same way, not slavishly, but lovingly, as a tribal recapitulation or as a form of liturgical re-enactment. TOMASELLI: It's a really wonderful thing to inject collective consciousness into art that has been very individualistically defined, right? It's the rugged individual making their vision manifest in the world. To take the collective and to wed it to the individual is again, an interesting friction.

FOYE: And it's very much at the root of the tribal.

TOMASELLI: And very much not about modernism, not in the way that I understand it at least.

TAAFFE: Somehow in any given folk art language one can always feel the essence of a people. There's some essence of the joy of that particular place in history, which has coalesced or crystalizes in the folk form. That's what gives it its richness and that's what makes it very particular and embrace-able. When I quote lesser known motifs in my work it is usually with the idea of recognizing previous art historical or architectural ideas and bringing them into a contemporary reality. Similarly, with folk elements, it's an attempt to bring various cultural traditions together, to see what they might have to say to one another. It is a search for ways of healing rather than continuing the process of modernist rupture.

FOYE: I think that's the main reason why Harry's *Anthology of American Folk Music* has had such an enduring place in American music for so many years. It's more popular today than ever. Because it's about roots, and what you refer to as cultural binding. That music is also weird beyond belief.

TOMASELLI: It dissolves any distinction between traditional or avant-garde. I think it was Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band that really opened my world to just how far music could go and still relate to a past. It was extremely avant-garde, hybridizing with free jazz and rock yet rooted in delta blues and a love of nature. The first concert I ever attended was a Beefheart show and I saw him every chance I could until he stopped performing.

TAAFFE: I don't believe that one must entirely accept the culture that one is in. If you are an artist, part of your job is to change that culture, to create alternative cultural possibilities. At a certain point in my development as a painter, I simply had to leave New York. I moved to Naples for almost four years. I didn't really know what I was becoming part of, but I knew I needed some fresh cultural sources for my work. It was a really tough period for me to make my work and to live, and I needed to be elsewhere. I needed to change my cultural surroundings because I was starting to become more interested in working with motifs and stories from other parts of the world, and I wanted to actually relocate myself to another geographical place. It was about desire. That move represented the beginnings of the a desire for

deeper cultural experiences so that my work could begin to take more into consideration.

FOYE: Harry was fascinated by patterns as indicators of deeper structures that humans employ in all sorts of activities. If there's one anecdote that sums up Harry for me, it's the story of his discovering that Sara Carter, one of the founders of country music in America, was living in a small town in California. He went to visit her high on peyote in 1945, and he tried to involve her in a discussion about the relationship between her quilt designs and her music. It sounds like some aspect of the Unified Theory of Everything.

TOMASELLI: Yeah, well, whatever that theory is, I believe it. Because one does start to see these archetypes repeated over and over again in different cultures at different times. I've been very inspired by quilts and have channeled my love for them in a variety of works. I love the fact that a quilt is made out of these otherwise useless scraps of material that form this thing that keeps you warm. Not a bad idea. In 1989, for instance, I made a sleeping bag out of quilted together sex fantasy hotline matchbooks; It was entitled "Comforter". I imagined a lonely guy getting into it and feeling ... less lonely. The "Dermal Delivery" piece I mentioned earlier was based on the quilt design. I made a sheet of "blotter acid" in 1991 that was composed of mandalas made out of youth culture rebellion logos on a perforated paper grid—another kind of quilt.

FOYE: Harry was certainly out of step with the art world, or it was out of step with him. He seems to have always been doing the right thing at the wrong time. We used to go to gallery openings together—he was genuinely interested and aware of what was going on in the art world. He was very open and always looked carefully at things. For me it was a very sad situation, although he had long ago come to accept that he did not have any place whatsoever in the art world. He was out of fashion in every way at the time. I always thought of him as more of medieval scribe, or someone from another time who was just visiting.

TOMASELLI: These outsiders create their own place in art history, it just takes a bit longer. The dialogue in art in the 1970s was very stripped down, very minimalist and conceptual and that was considered the vanguard, the edge. And then there were these odd-balls like Harry, who were max-

imalists. They put a lot of things into their work. It's about the opposite of formal reduction. It's about inclusion, it's about piling information on. A lot of those artists didn't make it into the cannon initially, because of the ideologies and the manifestos of the time. Picabia was unjustly neglected for years and one could make the case that he's really one of the first Post-Modernists, he's really just playing with history and in a very witty way.

TAAFFE: At this distance in time we can talk about Harry Smith and Minimalism in the same breath and see the essential differences as well as the parallels. There's a telescoping that happens with the passing of a generation which allows us to see artistic moments and personalities in closer proximity to one another. I've always thought that the strongest examples of the minimalist aesthetic, in spite of their seeming austerity, managed to project a radical materiality in a deeply personal way. The fact that Carl Andre worked as a Pennsylvania Railroad brakeman for sometime in the brakeyards outside of Newark, New Jersey—near where I grew up—was always particularly significant to me. I felt a strong emotional connection to that rail yard romance, and saw the poetry of that very closely in his work. I think the best minimal art does have a fullness, an experiential completeness.

TOMASELLI: I agree, Minimal art can be extremely full. I love Donald Judd's work, although at the time he was exhibiting I was very skeptical about how much he threw away in the process of purifying those objects. I've come to realise that Judd was far more irrational in his pursuit of the rational that I'd initially thought. His boxes seem to contain the fanatically repressed. I like artists who communicate the vividness of their inner worlds. It could be commands from space aliens, crucifying yourself to a Volkswagen, or rants against the New World Order—it doesn't matter—as long as it's fully realized. I'm a huge fan of the Shaker "gift" drawings, which are visual manifestations of spiritual possession. One "spiritual abstractionist" who I especially like is Hilma af Klint.

FOYE: Harry always said that the very first non-objective paintings were from C.W. Leadbeater's "Thought Forms" published in London in 1902. Leadbeater made all sorts of fascinating paintings illustrating various mental and spiritual states. That book also had paintings based on the music of Bach, Mozart, Scriabin, it was very influential on people like Kandinsky

and Kupka and Mondrian, all of whom were Theosophists. How would you characterize these early spiritual abstractions, because they represent such a complete break with the past?

TOMASELLI: They manifest the invisible. I don't know how to talk about that sort of thing, since I'm a secular person. Maybe there's some deep genetic encoding inside of us that is in fact what we call spiritual, like some kind of Jungian, primordial symbolic archetype. Nevertheless, I don't know what that is.

FOYE: The collage aesthetic was certainly central to Harry's work as a filmmaker. How do you think about the collage aesthetic? Obviously, collage is a large part of the work that both of you do.

TAAFFE: I think collage is the most important artistic invention of the twentieth century. Of course, it wasn't "invented" in the twentieth century—gluing images together as a method of pictorial application goes way back, but as a deliberate artistic tool, collage has been put to unprecedented uses by painters and filmmakers for only about a hundred years now. My own approach, and I think there are similarities to what Fred does here, is to blur the boundaries between what is painted and what is collaged. I build up my paintings in a constant back and forth play between these two possibilities. For me, it's kind of extreme in that I will actually produce a vast array of printed collage material which is made specifically to be applied toward the situation of a single painting. Every painting has a distinct image vocabulary with a distinct scale, and this vocabulary is intended to be used architectonically as collage, that is, with the same structural intentions as a painted line. So for me, this idea of being able to freely substitute an already defined image on paper for a painted mark is a predominant factor in my work.

TOMASELLI: When I talk about my work as hybrids, it's another way of talking about a collage aesthetic but it's also not necessarily collage in the purest sense of the word. I try to keep the viewer a little bit off balance as to the nature of the reality of the things they're seeing. The paintings are composed out of a combination of real things, photos and paint and it's hard to tell the difference between them at a glance. You have to really look at my work to know what you're seeing. I'm also creating a kind of hybrid art form, not just in terms of its materiality but in terms of the ideologies and

pictorial traditions that are coming together. I'm trying to use the collage/hybrid aesthetic to talk about the modern predicament of perception.

FOYE: How would you characterize that predicament?

TOMASELLI: I would say that the dislocation of reality is in fact the basic condition of modern man in a technological, globalized economy. That it is actually the story of our perceptions right now, and there has never been a more endlessly diverse menu of reality scramblings available in the history of the world. One is entirely unsure of what the authentic is at this particular point in time. Our society has been reduced to a vast mall-culture theme park, cyber-reality cut-and-paste photo-shopped world. One no longer knows the nature of reality. I think that is one of the dominant issues surrounding images today.

FOYE: Recently there's been a lot of scientific research concerning a possible chemical basis for the spiritual experience.

TOMASELLI: It's interesting when you take God and reduce Him to chemistry.

FOYE: What does that mean?

TOMASELLI: Terrence McKenna often spoke about that phenomenon, and you can dismiss him as a cranky visionary, but a few of the things he's written have made sense to me, such as the idea that the origin of religion actually arises from man's experiences with natural hallucinogens. McKenna made a fairly good argument in favor of that. And one increasingly finds the availability of hallucinogens in or around the areas where major religions started.

FOYE: Have you ever analyzed what is the source of the power of the image?

TAAFFE: I've never felt the need for analysis in this department. Although I should say that if bitter theological wars can be waged over this very subject, then it's probably a question that has still never been completely resolved, and may never will...

TOMASELLI: I'm not sure exactly what you mean by the power of the image, but possibly in painting it's about the idea of fixing the ephemeral. The idea that you can look at or gaze at a thing that's generally not accessible to you and that there's something incredibly magnetic about that experience. It's concretising the things that are so slippery that we really can't ever touch them in ordinary life...just getting them to stop long enough to gaze at them.

FOYE: And if you can fix them with the right degree of precision, it elevates the experience to another level. That is an important factor operative in all of Harry's paintings and films: extreme precision. It's very much about an extremely precise placement of something in relation to something else. What is that? Is it just the mechanics of making an image? Is it the art, is it the craft?

TOMASELLI: People seem to be transfixed by things that they can't imagine doing themselves. My work is the result of a lot of little moves guided by a combination of detached cerebralism and intuition. It starts out as a blank thing, a piece of wood, and through thousands and thousands of tiny little micro-moves, this thing builds itself up like an organism out of cells. Hopefully when you see them you're not thinking about all the work — you're just apprehending them as an effortless experience. That's the state I'd like the viewer to be in when standing in front of those pieces. I just want them to be in the work, to be lost in the work. My desire, is for it to become a transportive vehicle to take the viewer somewhere else. They can think about what it means later.

FOYE: Would you say there is a gambling instinct operative in making a picture?

TOMASELLI: More and more there is, for me. The longer I'm an artist the more intuition and spontaneity play a greater and greater role. I think initially when I started on my project, I was firmly rooted in the conceptual tradition where I had an idea and, like Sol Lewit, I thought of my brain as the primary executioner of the art and that I then fabricate the object with my hands. Now I really feel like I don't know what the object is going to look like until I make it, and even then, I have to intuit my way, with more or less spontaneous moves to find my way to finishing the thing. In other words, I never know where a picture is going to go when I start, or how

it's going to look when it's finished, and I now allow myself a lot more play and a lot more openness to changing my mind and changing directions. The works don't show their struggle because I take a lot of care in cleaning them up but it's there. I used to consider myself a person who assembled pictures but now I guess I've evolved into a painter.

TAAFFE: On one level, making a painting is always an extraordinary gamble, and it should be. I think the more an artist risks in terms of constantly moving forward into unknown territory, and the more one takes into consideration along the way, the better the art will be—theoretically at least. And this is a profound issue, because there is a big difference between what is potentially envisioned and that which is fully realized or becomes knowledge. An artist cannot do everything, so the choices he or she makes and the parameters that are set up for the work will clearly effect the result. On the other hand, I see it as a basic given that an artist's primary responsibility is to experiment, to try things out that don't always work out, and to do the practical research necessary to expand their point of view and to broaden their range of subject matter. So "gambling," from the standpoint of praxis, is all in a day's work, so to speak.

FOYE: There's something that Picasso once mentioned, about having to learn to do consciously what one previously did unconsciously. At a certain point as an artist, one has to confront one's self-awareness of what one is doing, and that can be quite an obstacle.

TOMASELLI: That's funny, I think with me it's just the opposite.

FOYE: That seems to be what you were saying earlier.

TOMASELLI: I started out very self-conscious about making art and have recently found my way back to, or maybe for the first time, to a more unconscious way of working. When I first began attending college, there was still a Modernist discourse, with new developments happening every day, and it was the same in the counterculture. It seemed like there was this incredible endless momentum into the future. Then somewhere in the middle of my education it all crashed and burned into disco and postmodernism. Both of these things happened at the same time, and it created a genuine crisis. People responded to this crisis in different ways, many of which were very cynical, so there was a lot of cynical art that was

being done in response to that condition. I responded initially by involving myself very intensely in the Punk scene and I think it saved my life. On the other hand, I knew I still wanted to be an artist, I just didn't quite know how. So when I first started making these images there was a strong sense of self-consciousness about the activity. As if to say, maybe this is all over, maybe this is wrong but I'm going to do it anyway. A lot of the questions I was asking about myself as an artist and about art were being addressed in the work: How does art function? What does art mean? Now my work doesn't have as much to do with those questions. I never did answer those questions, I just set them aside and replaced them with new ones. FOYE: So there was an act of faith involved at the start, which was not borne out by the state of things in the world at large?

TOMASELLI: Yeah, there was, and still is, a lot of doubt in my work. I mean, making art was one of the few healthy things I got pleasure from, and yet I was being told by the culture and by teachers and fellow artists that it was all over. I disregarded the conventional wisdom of nihilism and did it anyway, even though it felt a little hopeless.

FOYE: One aspect that I find consistent throughout Harry's work is a formal or structural rigor beneath the lushness. The works are poised between lushness and rigor. Do you feel these are two poles where you can go towards one but are inevitably being pulled back toward the other?

TOMASELLI: I think each one is a healthy corrective to the other. My project has been informed by a variety of disparate "isms." It seems that by alternating between geometrically-based abstraction and representation, I can keep both fairly fresh for me. By switching channels like that. By making a figurative work immediately after an abstract work it seems like I'm cleaning the palette. I don't feel like I'm just cranking out a product. I'm keeping the product very interesting to myself.

FOYE: Have you ever felt the need to define yourself as either an abstract or a realist painter?

TOMASELLI: No, I don't feel like I have to make those kind of definitions. In a funny way everything I do is sort of realistic because there are real things in there. Like in this piece here, which is very abstract, it may look like a bunch of dots and dashes and so on, but there are real leaves there at

the basis of it. So there are always little bits of reality, or bits of pop culture that are contaminating the purity. It can never be entirely non-objective abstraction because there's always something real at the basis of it. There's always realism at the very core of it. So I don't feel like those categories really apply to me.

TAAFFE: I did think of myself as an abstract artist when I started out, but in recent years I've been trying to come to terms with representation—I feel a certain responsibility to come to terms with it, as an artist, but I want to find my own way of approaching it. My involvement with nature imagery was the start of that tendency, or desire. But still, the general process I'm involved with in painting is very abstract, in the sense that I plan a series of initial gestures that go on fairly rapidly, and then the length of time it takes me to sort out the implications of this first phase is disproportionately longer. Maybe it's literally an abstract condition in the sense that the process is “drawn out” in this way. It takes me an hour to begin a painting and six months to finish it.

FOYE: Do you feel that by now the various polemical bases for non-objective art is no longer relevant?

TOMASELLI: Not for me. I feel that one of the things that went out the window with the end of Modernism was the end of manifesto-ism. Modernism and all of its manifestos. Yes, there are certain things that I believe in strongly, but I'm not involved in an Oedipal game to destroy the last “ism” by making this very strong argument for my own view. I'm not trying to knock the last guy off the historical totem pole so I can climb up on top until somebody knocks me off. I just don't think that history is playing itself out in that way any more, if it ever did play itself out like that, which I doubt, actually. I certainly don't see it that way now. I see it as more horizontal than vertical. Things are happening simultaneously, and we live in a simultaneity of histories. I don't feel compelled to keep saying, “No, no, no, this is the only thing I believe.” Again, I'm very open and very catholic about my tastes.

TAAFFE: Those fundamental critical arguments remain an important part of our artistic heritage, and we continue to benefit from them even if they seem so out of step with the demands we are presently facing. I think we can assume they tell a large part of the truth about how those pictures came

into existence and about the intellectual atmosphere that propelled them. And this is not only all quite fascinating, but these modernist tropes represent the philosophical foundation out of which we are operating today—however liberated we may feel from them. I would say if we can learn from these modernist formulations, and think of them as working tropes, then we will just have a lot more to bring to what we're doing. My feeling is that real freedom can come from some of these ideas rather than dismissing them as so much water under the bridge.

FOYE: It's more a matter of pushing painting to a place that it hasn't gone rather than trying to refine some aesthetic that is in some way previously codified?

TOMASELLI: Well, nobody works in a vacuum and we always inherit codes as painters, as anybody in the arts would. You work with the past and you try to make something new out of that. You're playing around with somebody's Modernist tropes which are all about a kind of purity, and you infect them with these viruses of their antithesis. And you create a new form out of combining these two enemies. That's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to make something new out of all those histories. Within these hybrids I hope something new is being created. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. But whenever you deal directly with history, hopefully you're dealing with people that you respect, who you know and love and want to expand upon their project. Because that makes for the best art in my opinion.

[end]