

Steven D. Lavine –
Failure Is What It's All About



Jörn Jacob Rohwer

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A Life Devoted
to Leadership in the Arts

ESSAYS AND CONVERSATIONS

DEUTSCHER KUNSTVERLAG

My father always used to say the best thing you could do was to be a doctor: “You get to do good, you get paid decently, and you get the respect of your community.” He wanted my siblings to be doctors. He wanted all my friends to be doctors. He just thought it was the ideal occupation.

When I decided to become a literature professor, it was for related reasons: introducing people to the community of shared suffering that makes you a human being. I used to feel very strongly about it. I couldn’t think of another choice that felt as valuable and I carried this with me while teaching.

Working endlessly, I became a really good teacher, a good lecturer especially, winning awards. But I didn’t have the certainty that independent scholarship demands—my second-guessing of everything made it very difficult for me. Besides I hated inefficient committees, a core aspect of regular universities. On some deep level I knew I wasn’t cut out for what I was doing. By the end of it I was pretty desperate—in fact, I was even panicking. But I didn’t know what else to do.

Steven D. Lavine in conversation with Jörn Jacob Rohwer

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UNDER THE SHINING ARMOR

UNRAVELLING STEVEN D. LAVINE

Janet

She walked down the stairs that led to the lobby. Moving slowly, almost hesitantly, she spotted me there waiting, waving in her direction. We hadn't yet met.

As I got up from the bench to reach out and welcome her, she looked at me, then paused for a second, then exhaled unexpectedly: "I think I've known you for all of my life!" What a statement. Had anyone, and even more a stranger, ever embraced me with such disarming sympathy? While stepping further down, she suddenly lost her equilibrium. Without even touching the freshly polished ground, she slipped, and came to a fall before my feet.

This is how I first met Janet Sternburg, the wife of Steven Lavine, some fifteen years ago in Berlin. Introducing you to her is also a way of presenting a fuller image of him, even more so when reflecting on who she is in the above-described moment: self-assured about her instincts, spontaneously expressing her thoughts, words, and deeds—and then, occasionally, being so involved with her own complexity that it overwhelms her, at times even knocks her off her feet. Without telling you something about Janet, the woman married to Steven for more than thirty-five years, there would be less an understanding of the man he is. Besides, the foundations of my friendship with him go back to her. Without Janet, even this book would not exist.

Initially a mutual friend had the good inkling to point me to Janet's writings and photographic art and suggest that we should meet. Taken by what I read and saw of her works, though without knowing the artist personally, I sat down to write an essay, trying to understand what makes her manner so unique: Janet has will power. She is not very tall but seems to physically grow when you are with her. Her vibrant spiritual presence is shaped by life experience, learnedness and, the many places she has travelled or lived, among them Boston, New York, and Los Angeles. Janet exudes a glimmering beauty, accentuated by fine garments in complementary colors and extravagant jewelry.

Being a worldly American, Janet has an air—a melodramatic, self-assured sense of being Janet. She doesn't enter a room, she seizes it. She doesn't just engage in a conversation, her mind is ahead of it. Whatever category you'll try to put her in, she'll resist it. Janet will always be the independent spirit she already was in the early 1960s, when she left home with nothing but a suitcase to take the bus to New York City: volatile, determined, ready to conquer her universe—as a filmmaker and producer, as a writer and photographic artist. It is her very own, shrewd vision of the world that makes her so inimitable: her way of detecting and unraveling layers that generates an optic, spiritual, or emotional nerve and, by doing so, reaches deeper than any scientist or therapist could.

Born and raised as the offspring of a family descended from Russian Jews, surrounded by ambitious neighbors, melancholic aunts, and a mentally challenged uncle, she lived with her parents in bourgeois confinement, under the spell of the McCarthy era and far removed from the American Dream. Early in her childhood, it was a symbolic act for Janet to close doors behind her so that she could be in solitude—her only way to find access to her “own world,” as she remembers, “beginning to speak, through writing.”

Fragile and ailing at a young age, she had to stay in bed for a whole year, guarded by her mother and educated by a private tutor. She was a talented child, transient and bright at the same time, who would later recall everything adults sought to hide from her: “As in bodies, the wounds of history have layers, extending through generational strata,” Janet writes in one of her essays, many years after she had left home and moved to Manhattan, where she studied philosophy, wrote articles and poems, establishing herself socially and professionally. When her first marriage broke apart and she was diagnosed with cancer, her life changed. “No one survives intact,” says Janet. “No one is exempt. In that democracy of sorrow lies our consolation.”

Janet's literary descriptions are free from tearful sentimentality, penetrated with hope and filled with a need to comfort others, which is the function of her art as she sees it. The motif of memory that dominates her work as a writer also appears in her photography—those optical puzzles consisting of arrangements in multiple layers and interiors, which seem coincidental and yet are consciously set in scene, always referring back to the artist and her lyrical view. Her images can be understood as both a school of seeing and an iconography of memory. With her vigilant, highly sensitive outlook, Janet, like so many US



Steven D. Lavine and his wife, Janet Sternburg, Los Angeles, 2015

artists and intellectuals, embodies the other America: a continent of multiplicity and richness of those voices, colors, and thoughts shaping a universal consciousness, and standing in opposition to the dominant “culture” of denial. Janet knows exactly what reality is like, even if she manages to display it in different ways through the words of her writing and through changing lights in her photography. What she sees and describes is present and true. How she sees and describes it, however is lyrical, performative, extremely specific and in a rare, completed way, free. Janet in a way is so different from Steven, it’s funny, fascinating, and revealing. To me the two of them seem like batteries of different voltages with one another, constantly emptying and recharging.

As you’ll learn from this book’s conversations, it wasn’t Steven but Janet who led the way when it came to deciding about leaving New York and moving to Los Angeles, where CalArts would hire Steven as its new president. Janet, for the good cause, inspired, advised, and supported him in more or less any substantial decision to be made in the subsequent thirty years. And yet, not every-

one was “happy” with that. Ask her about the reality of empowerment and she’ll teach you a lesson on other women of her generation, trying to talk her down as being “the wife”—not even considering the possibility of a reversed reality. But Janet has fought her way through: being heard by giving her own speeches, being read by writing her own books, and being seen by exhibiting her own photography. She has taken her own stand without ever leaving Steven’s side. That to me is true empowerment, paired with strength and loyalty.

If you have the chance to read Janet’s most recent book, *White Matter* (which took her years to write), about an America and an unsung family history, you will get a feel for who she is. The same is true if you take a look at *Overspilling World*, her latest book of photography. In a way, Janet is an unsung person, too. It takes someone extraordinary, someone very bright, knowing, and understanding to counter and sustain her abundance and her brilliancy. That someone is Steven.

Steven

It strikes me that, as opposed to Janet, I cannot recall when I first met him. Was it at a dinner party or at the opening of a show of Janet’s works in Berlin? I’m usually better in remembering a person than a place, a situation, or chronology. What I do remember is that initially I had a hard time figuring out Steven’s physiognomy. His facial expressions changed quickly and seemed somewhat hard to unravel to me. Having conducted at-length conversations for thirty years, I consider myself rather well versed in deciphering my counterparts’ mannerisms. Not so with Steven. Was he looking away or actually looking at me? Was he hiding behind a fence despite being warm and engaging in his demeanor? Perhaps, I thought, I had met a person who, while sparkling with knowledge, interest, even enthusiasm, was nice, but after all “just being very American,” as people in Europe might say when uncertain about the true nature of someone from the United States. I was in my late thirties then, about to publish my first book but hard to pin down both as a person and as a writer with a rare professional focus. Perhaps Steven, too, had a hard time figuring me out and thus remained kind of restrained.

Unlike Janet, Steven can be quite hesitant when it comes to making friends or decisions. He’s much less lead by his intuition but more so by a process of

careful, thorough thinking. It's only over time and when a special bond or kinship develops that he might open up or eventually call someone a friend. He may be sociable in public, treat others courteously, even gently but still remain a fairly exclusive human being. To my understanding his exclusiveness, as is often the case with outstanding people, is rooted in a profound melancholia—and not without reason: What does it imply if being alone in a nightly nursery, unavailingly crying for someone to attend to you, is one of your earliest memories? If your childhood was shaped by a mother who, after failing to succeed as a concert pianist, struggled with depression and fatigue? If art seemed the only place for you worth being because the town you grew up in had nothing more to offer than a few forgotten streets?

Born into a family of second-generation immigrants from Eastern Europe, growing up in Wisconsin in the 1950s, a high point of conservatism, Steven turned into a quiet boy, books being his outstanding fervor—a world full of stories giving him comfort and refuge. Trying to overcome his shyness and discover what his destiny was going to be must have been both a fright and a temptation. Popular magazines and television shows, or trips to larger cities had a certain impact on him in his early years. Then scholarships, good teachers, and Bob Dylan's lyrics helped him to come of age. But the work he had to do himself—and most of the time there was nothing but work for him. The expertise that came with it over fifty years was what most people would appreciate, while only few would look behind the fence or “the shining armor” as Steven would call it.

When he agreed to talk about himself for this book, it challenged and encouraged me to evoke in him his most significant reflections and memories. Because, interestingly, men of his rank are honored for their professional merits quite frequently but are often overlooked as personalities. It's the acclaimed artists who take their seat in the front row when it comes to public acclaim, but much less so those who have facilitated their careers in education.

It may not come as a surprise that Steven is a humble fellow, his voice being rather soft-spoken, his demeanor quietly observant. He never dresses up but comes in gray suits, a pair of fancy eyeglasses or an elegant tie being what one could call the peak of his allure. I always wondered what it was that attracted him to a career in the arts field. Because it didn't seem obvious and to my knowledge no one had ever asked him about it. Having worked for a

prestigious foundation and being designated to run an arts school were to be sufficient reasons. Therefore, from my professional perspective, it seemed self-evident to approach him through his biography.

Among others things I learned that his mother's misery had left its mark on him, but that creating better opportunity for those choosing art as a profession helped him cope with feelings of self-neglect and insecurity. An even greater challenge—in fact an earthquake—helped him realize he owned the will, strength, and stability to act accordingly, when Steven lead CalArts from plight to prosperity. Being a moral person, Steven seeks to turn the world into a better place. Resembling his father, a medical doctor, who often worked long hours and treated indigent patients free of charge, Steven, for the longest time, burdened himself with work to serve the lives of others. It made him happy to see them grow and flourish. Yet to a certain degree it also left him unaware of himself—and lonely.

Initially I didn't regard this as an obstacle to our sittings. Anything I had prepared was tailor-made to set his mind in motion. All he needed to do was show up and be himself. But then I realized that in a way this was the problem: If focusing on others has been the primary obligation for most of your life, then what is there for you to say about yourself? Where to begin, what is right or wrong and what is important? As much as it had already been hard for Steven to mark our appointments as mandatory in his calendar, he seemed to have a hard time allowing himself to be the center of attention. Eventually, I assume, he quietly resolved to get past the uneasy questions in order to move onto subjects that seemed to him more suitable for conversation. But I didn't let him get away with it.

Sycamore Avenue

I arrived in Los Angeles barely two weeks after my mother's funeral. My father had been laid to rest six months before. Taking off from Berlin, rising up into the sky and gliding through the clouds seemed somewhat unreal to me—like being in the middle of nowhere, between hope and grief, ending and beginning. Losing a mother causes a state of uprootedness—comparable to a sense of grounding or trust in this world that all of a sudden and ultimately disappears. What occurs instead is the profound realization that henceforth anything in life will be lived differently. Without yet clearly knowing, my life was at a turn-

ing point, about to change significantly. What I felt most at this point of time was uncertainty.

LA was a very strange place to arrive in in such a state of being. I would have preferred entering a peaceful island. Instead I found myself defensively shuffling through darkness and across hellraiser highways until I finally reached Sycamore Avenue in West Hollywood, where I moved into the apartment of a friend who was away teaching a term in London and Paris. That night, closing doors behind me, was a huge relief. It ended the next morning when I found a ticket on my vehicle's windshield and learned about the local rules of weekly street cleaning, according to which parking your car can be either allowed or temporarily prohibited.

A few days after settling in, the conversations with Steven were to begin. Coming from the Arts district, he had already squeezed himself through traffic for about an hour or so upon arriving at my place. He would ring the doorbell, salute me with the friendliest of smiles, walk in and take a seat by the dining table, where drinks and little snacks were held ready. Steven on one end, me on the other, the tape recorder between us, was how we started around 10:30 in the morning. We usually worked into the late-afternoon hours, interrupted by a lunch break, during which we walked to one of the cafés or restaurants nearby on La Brea.

With each day he came to see me Steven seemed more relaxed and relieved. Was it because he finally got in touch with himself, gave way to his memories and shared them unrestrictedly? At some point, I think, he even started to enjoy my questions and our conversations, notwithstanding their length or complexity.

There were moments in which his mind seemed to drift far into the past, searching for a hint of truth or, perhaps, a moment of epiphany. Contemplating his mother, I could almost feel him yearning to reach out to her, his feelings ranging somewhere between love, gratitude and grief. Given their emotional complexity these recollections nearly overwhelmed him. Steven would start to speak, then pause, retry, continue and finally either change the subject or start all over again. Either way, I had plenty of notes ready to help him refocus and go back in the direction we had initially started to take.

Some of Steven's notions keep ringing in my ear. Such as the fact that he never thought he fit in socially. I wonder if that is an unusual or rather typical thing for a successful man to say. Isn't any kind of individual success based on making a difference? On overcoming one's own self, standing out and solely competing against the majority? The kind of misfit or failure Steven addresses in our conversations seems to me one he only touches upon instead of speaking about it consciously. This neither relates to his professional success nor to his intellectual achievements but to personal choices—moments in life, when he decided to ignore his inner voice and listen to reason. Such as bearing the silence of his family and taking refuge in alienation. Such as flirting with being a beatnik or yearning to become a writer and then preventing himself from doing so. Loyalty to his father and fear of his mother's fate kept him from being fully self-confident and exploring his own limits. However, at the same time this deficiency lead and enabled him to admire and support a world he would never allow himself to seize professionally: the world of art and autonomy artists generate by leading nonconformist lives and making radical decisions. Serving and enriching this world by founding CAP (CalArts Community Arts Partnership), Steven has managed to provide opportunity in the arts for innumerable youth. And, what's more, by guiding CalArts through almost three decades he has helped thousands of prospective artists to facilitate, improve, and establish their careers.

Besides, CalArts—at one time basically a traditional, white, middle-class institution—is now one of the most economically, ethnically, and gender-diverse arts school in America with 40–60% students of color, 20% international students, and a high percentage of LGBTI students and alumni, of whom many have become widely acclaimed professionals. Giving opportunity to the truly gifted regardless of their background and thus turning the school into a place of somewhat universal freedom is what can be called Steven's proudest achievement.

He may not have had the strength to be true to himself in his younger years. Perhaps that is what Steven, when looking back, identifies as his failure, for it has shaped his early biography. However, more importantly, is that Steven aims to reflect and reveal this and perhaps, by doing so, becomes more at one with who he is. He might also be regarded as being more authentic by others, particularly artists, demonstrating that, like them, he is one-of-a-kind but in the very first place: a human being.



Student graffiti. CalArts hallway, Los Angeles, 2017

Failure is a paradox. On one hand it is something we deliberately try to hide, with shame being the emotion likely to best reflect it: Shame about wasted time and missed opportunities. Shame about people we may have treated disrespectfully. Shame about who we are or how we feel. On the other hand, failure has its own potential. As a gay man I know it takes courage to get out of your shell—but that eventually being true to one's self is empowering. Steven has allowed us to see the world through his eyes by opening up in these conversations. He has given us the chance to look at him closely, even intimately. Most men in power positions try to keep up an image of infallibility, even though we all know it is too good to be true. With Janet standing by his side Steven has managed to take off the shining armor, display a multitude of personal and intellectual layers and open up to change. It makes his light shine even brighter. That to me is what failure is all about. At least eventually.

Jörn Jacob Rohwer
Berlin, Summer 2020

