

Los Angeles: A Zone Beyond Time
a personal perspective on 1975-1982



(fig. 1)

Relocating to Southern California in 1975 was an adjustment to Pacific Standard Time and to the persistence of shifting sands. That's the year I landed in Los Angeles, specifically at the California Institute for the Arts (CalArts), after a half-year residency in New York's Soho, across the street from the art bookstore Jaap Reitman, and five years studying in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

My knowledge of and connection to artists from LA dated to a few years before 1975, when I was a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), where I met Michael Asher, with whom I worked to record memories of his undocumented early installations for a forthcoming book published by Kasper Koenig of the NSCAD Press; John Baldessari, who I witnessed writing on a blackboard 100 times, "I will not make boring art;" and Simone Forti, also there for the publication of her book *Handbook in Motion*, 1974, by NSCAD Press, who, to my amazement, performed slow animal movements on the ground. I also participated in a Women's Consciousness Raising

seminar in the summer of 1974 by artist Miriam Schapiro who was a founder of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts as well as of the exhibition, *WomanHouse*, Los Angeles.

The majority of the art I was introduced to as a student was a crossbreed between conceptualism, minimalism, Fluxus, video, and performance, largely via New York, California, Canada, and Western Europe. Visiting artists routinely crisscrossed between Halifax, New York, and L.A., so when I did land in L.A., although the cultural geography was foreign, the art was not. Studying for an MFA at CalArts, 1975-1977, was not very different from studying in Halifax; in fact, my chief mentors at CalArts were Michael Asher and John Baldessari. All this is to say that regional concerns specific to Los Angeles were not made a priority. It was only a few years after graduating from CalArts that I became familiar with the L.A. regional aesthetic of Finish Fetish and Light and Space. To me the concept of *Pacific Standard Time* simply meant Los Angeles was three hours earlier than New York and four hours earlier than Halifax.

I reveal this to make transparent an aspect of the Los Angeles art scene that in the mid 1970s was beyond its provincialism. My experience at the California Institute for the Arts was enriched by frequent visits by national and international artists invited to teach by John Baldessari. The Feminist Art Program was gone, and I never understood its demise, as it was never spoken about. The faculty was predominantly male, but the visiting artists that I recall most strikingly were women. Rebecca Horn, Ulrika Rosenbach, and Katarina Sieverding from Germany, all modeled provocative work that crossed the genres of sculpture, performance, and media, as did Laurie Anderson with her early experiments with mechanically altered human voices and musical instruments.

John was very generous with his invitations to local artists as well; focusing on those whose work questioned and deconstructed traditional usage of textual, photographic, and film representations. Alexis Smith and Bill Leavitt were powerful examples. At the same time, it was not unusual to meet other local and international artists—Lawrence Weiner, David Lamellas, David Askevold, Robert Barry, Jon Borofsky—at John’s studio in Santa Monica, which was always open and frequented by his students.

Although painting and sculpture were taught and practiced, by far the strongest aspects of the program were influenced by conceptual and minimalist art, fueled by the theoretical texts we were reading mostly by French and German philosophers of post-structuralism, deconstruction, and new feminism. Conceptual artist Doug Huebler was dean of the art department; Michael Asher held class discourses that lasted six-plus hours; and all hybrid art production fell under the rubric of “Post Studio.” This laid the foundation for how I and many other students who remained in L.A. were to understand Los Angeles as beyond its time zone.

What was regional about Los Angeles in the mid 1970s was how artists and art students tended to move in tribal packs, depending on the school they taught or studied at. Rarely did the tribes connect or exchange, except at art exhibitions at the few and far between venues. At the Otis Art Gallery by MacArthur Park, directed by Hall Glicksman, I saw the brilliantly simple conceptual paintings on marking time of On Kawara. At Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), I recall the exhibition, curated by Tom Jimmerson, *Michael Asher, David Askevold, and Richard Long*, where the stream of consciousness singing emanating from the Askevold video mixed strangely with Long’s formal and meditative floor pattern made of sticks that he had collected from a timed desert walk; meanwhile, a group of young artists, including me, assigned by Asher to meet hourly at the gallery, sat on chairs and talked about art. Peripheral but strong were the public lectures presented by Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in Santa Monica, which sponsored international architects—e.g. Bernard Tsumi, whose work was deeply involved in cultural critique.

Strong performative exhibitions took place at a handful of small galleries. The Claire Copley Gallery bravely showed the conceptual work of Bill Leavitt, Bas Jan Ader, and most memorably a performative, sculptural project by Michael Asher where he simply took down the gallery wall that normally concealed the office behind the exhibition space, removing the separation between art and business. The Morgan Thomas Gallery, where I worked part time as a graduate student, often exhibited poetic performative works including record albums by Jack Goldstein, text and sculpture by Al Ruppensburg and Raoul Guerrero, huge wall drawings by Jon Borofsky, conceptual photo work by Doug

Huebler, ephemeral objects and performance by James Lee Byars, and sculptural film by John Baldessari.

The Rosamund Felsen Gallery, in 1979, presented Chris Burden's *The Big Wheel* on the sidewalk outside the gallery pointing towards its storefront window. Essentially, a motorcycle was tethered to a gigantic stone or cement wheel, which framed it like a hamster wheel. I recall Burden getting on the motorcycle, revving its engine to the point of a potential danger of the wheel snapping off its frame like a slingshot aimed at the gallery. Two years later, Chris would stage a "kidnapping" of Ericka Beckman (filmmaker) and myself at gunpoint, drive us out to Topanga late at night, and fire his gun at passing airplanes, mimicking his earlier performance *Shoot*.

At the same time, there was a growing movement of female performance artists in Los Angeles, notably Susanne Lacy, Barbara T. Smith, and The Waitresses, as well as artists working in other cultural contexts coming from sensibilities that were more social and identity-based. To those of us who came from an aesthetic tradition more philosophically based, there was a gulf to bridge. Aesthetic and cultural differences were also evident between arts organizations, as each worked almost exclusively within their own racial and gender contexts. Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) focused on Chicano sociopolitical issues; Self-Help Graphics & Art worked primarily with Latino and Chicano artists; the Woman's Building included only feminist women artists. Watts Community Arts Center was mostly African-American; there was an Asian-American film collective and Korean art groups, but there was barely any interaction between them. Meanwhile LAICA, Los Angeles Contemporary Art Exhibitions (LACE), (although initiated by diverse artists, including Chicano artists), Beyond Baroque, and Foundation for Art Resources (FAR) were essentially white. Gender, sexuality, and race were often segregated reflecting the dominant cultural context of the time.

A more public approach to art practice was certainly percolating. What stirred me most was a growing realization of the privatization and institutionalization of art and art practice by art schools, galleries, collectors, and museums. In 1976 I wrote a paper titled "I Am Not Only Lonely," questioning the collusion of artists with these forms of institutionalization, which I submitted to that year's College Art Association panel "The

Education of the Artist.” It was rejected. In an ironic twist, John Baldessari, who was scheduled to speak, chose to read my paper as his participation on the panel.

In 1978, LAICA hosted a conference on Alternative Artist Spaces, a growing movement of nonprofit arts organizations that promised more support for experimentation than was available from commercial galleries and museums. I became suspicious when I noticed that only one independent artist, Lawrence Weiner, was included amongst the invited national speakers. How was it possible to discuss alternative support for art and artists with minimal inclusion of artists in the dialogue? This blindly patronizing platform provoked me to mail a postcard with the question, “*Do you think you are a part of this?*” to one hundred local artists. Sixty of them showed up to a meeting where we decided to ask the conference leaders for time to address participants. When we received their rejection, we conceived a plan to show up at the inaugural dinner at the Santa Monica Biltmore Hotel, and sit on folding chairs, surrounding the dining participants.

Be careful what you ask for. It was the National Endowment for the Arts director who broke the ice at the inaugural evening, acknowledging our presence and inviting us to take the mic at the podium. Guess who was pushed forward to speak? It was my first time speaking before a public; I froze solid. Not a squeak passed through my vocal cords. Morgan Fisher, one of the sixty artists sitting on the folding chairs, came to my rescue, took the mic, and fulfilled our mission by asking why artists were left out of the dialogue. Personally, I felt that I had failed, but collectively we succeeded. After the dinner Lawrence Wiener caught up with me to say, “Nice work Dorit, but your problem is that you are overly socialized.” It took at least another two decades to understand that he was referring to an affect of internalized oppression.

It is interesting to note that Howard Singerman, a friend, peer, and art historian who was also at the inaugural dinner that night, wrote and published the book *Art Subject: Making Artists in the American University* (1999), where he brilliantly charts the last one hundred years of the institutionalized “making” of an artist, from atelier activity all the way to theory and performance. And just today I received a Happy New Year e-mail from Bettina Korek of *ForYourArt*, which included the following quote by Michelangelo Pistoletto: “Above all, artists must not be only in art galleries or museums—they must be present in

all possible activities. The artist must be the sponsor of thought in whatever endeavor people take on, at every level.” (1)

In 1977, three L.A. gallerists, Morgan Thomas, Claire Copley and Connie Lewallen, inspired by Morgan Thomas, collectively created the nonprofit *Foundation for Art Resources* (FAR), to go beyond the gallery presentation structure and assist artists in the production and presentation of new art and ideas. During this time *Some Serious Business* (SSB), also run by three women, produced and presented art events at various urban settings, with a vision that was more geared towards entertainment than experimental ideas.

FAR aimed beyond entertainment and in its first year produced a short film by John Baldessari, *Six Colorful Inside Jobs*, where every day for one week, with a different color for each day, John painted himself into the corner of a small room. The following year FAR produced the performative work and book by James Lee Byars, *Open America*, where the 50th floors of two high-rise buildings, one east in New York City and one west in Los Angeles, were opened to the public, symbolically framing America. In hindsight, I would argue that of the many artists that Morgan worked with and supported, James Lee was closest to her heart, mind, and soul.

A new gallery, *JancarKullenschmidt*, came on the scene around this time, directed by artists Tom Jancar and Richard Kullenschmidt who had recently graduated from the art department at UC Irvine, and had studied with David Askevold their last year there. Through them, many early-career New York and L.A. artists were presented for the first time in L.A., including Sherrie Levine, Alan McCollum, Mitchell Syrop, and Jane Reynolds— all artists who explored questions of authorship and representation. Ironically, the gallery *JancarKullenschmidt*, housed in the historic Mission Revival Los Altos Building on Wilshire Boulevard, was like a simulacrum of a gallery, very small, with all the self-conscious details of a mature gallery built in miniature, as if it was mimicking being a gallery.

FAR continued, but in 1979 only Morgan Thomas was left from the original three, and she too wanted to step out from the role of director/producer. When Morgan came to me and

asked if I wanted to take over the responsibility of directing FAR, I may as well have been asked to take responsibility for an abandoned baby. I did not have a clue about running an arts organization, but I went for it. I invited Christina Ritchie, then married to David Askevold, and with whom I had been a student at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design several years before, to come on board with me as co-director. Morgan had already programmed our first year and rented a space at 814 S. Spring Street, where the programs were to be presented.

Flying by the seat of our pants, amongst the projects we first curated were *The Jump*, a film projection by Jack Goldstein; *Baby Icky*, a performance by Michael Smith; an installation and a performative hypnotism by Mat Mullican; and *The Poltergeist*, an installation, video and performance by Mike Kelly and David Askevold. We got good at curating but felt hampered by managing a space. Our first mission in the second year of programming was to get rid of the space and function from a telephone. Kim Gordon, who was soon to leave L.A. for N.Y.C. to co-found the rock band *Sonic Youth*, made one of my favorite gestures created by an artist for FAR. Kim astutely designed an etched metal phone cover to commemorate FAR's new identity.

From then on, FAR was nomadic. Christina and I bravely and brazenly networked across Los Angeles to partner with dozens of public, private, and educational institutions, situating art, discourse, and artists within the public sphere. We invited several folks to join us on the Board of Directors, including Mitchell Syrop, Paul Tzanetopoulos, Victor Henderson and Lee Kaplan, and changed the by-laws to read that board members would be the working members of the organization, shifting the traditional position of a Board of Directors from the administrative head to a working body.

Now without a formal exhibition space we were drawn to produce very different art events. We supported *Seeing What They Send*, by Gary Lloyd, a fax/satellite participatory transmission between a location in New York and one in L.A. This initiative was in collaboration with Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz of *Electronic Café International* (E.C.I.). Shocking to recall what an epiphany this virtual connection was then and how mundane it seems today!

FAR was now completely dependent on partnerships and collaborations for places, spaces, contexts, audiences, and a sharing of resources. Christina and I were challenged to make calls to strangers from all walks of life, and to introduce ourselves as serious art partners. Included were businesses, libraries, theaters, adult cinemas, universities, hotels, as well as other arts organizations and independent artists. This social skill was certainly new for both of us and we had no models to follow.

Projects that stay in my mind include *A Movie Without the Picture*, by Louise Lawler in partnership with SBB and the Aero Theater in Santa Monica. The marquee outside the cinema announced the title as a film. The audience entered the theater, took their seats, and waited for the “film” to begin. The lights faded to black, the curtain opened across the screen and the audio track of the film began; however the image intentionally never appeared as the projector bulb was never turned on. Louise cleverly chose the Hollywood classic *The Misfits* for this project, betting that an L.A. audience would recognize the voices of the film’s stars, Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable, and “see” the film through the audio. She was correct. The audience remained seated facing the blank screen for the entire film.

Pleasure/Function, was a collaboration between New York artists Colen Fitzgibbon, Peter Fend, Jenny Holzer, Peter Nadin, Richard Prince, and Robin Winters that FAR arranged to present at the downtown studio/loft of L.A. artist David Amico, who in 1979 was amongst the first artists to brave living in the heart of the warehouse district. *Pleasure/Function* intended to invite L.A. artists to dialogue about art having value both as pleasure and function in the wider culture. Unexpectedly, the group of L.A. artists that showed up at David’s studio interpreted this challenge as a power play by New York artists to frame the dialogue by L.A. artists. Being the more provincial city, Los Angeles suffered from an inferiority complex towards New York. We took serious note of this exchange, and after further inquisition recognized several variables. Obviously the art market was in New York and careers were made there first; but more interestingly, we recognized that many of L.A.’s artists were readers of art discourse, while much of the critical writing on contemporary art was coming out of New York. In short, L.A. was consuming the information that New York was producing.

Other challenging projects that required us to partner with other public and private venues included Dan Graham's *Clinic for a Suburban Site* that we situated as a reading area at the L.A. Central Library in downtown; Vivien Flynn's *A Natural Extension* was installed at a site in Elysian Park; George Kuchar and Gordon Stevenson's independent films were screened in a downtown adult theater by Steve Beeson, who FAR members coached as producer; Glen Branca's *13 Electric Guitars* was presented in collaboration with LACE and CalArts; and *Transitional Use*, site specific works by local artists, curated by Candace Lewis, were installed in vacant lots around the Crenshaw area.

To stimulate and challenge dialogue across and between the fragmented L.A. art communities, FAR created the series *Art Talk Art*, 1980. We invited national and local art critics, historians, and artists to present their work with the intention of stimulating dialogue around some of the most engaging aesthetic and cultural issues of the day. To succeed we needed a venue that had the capacity to attract artists and writers out of their hermetic habitats and mix with each other socially—a rare occurrence in L.A. We thought big and got the newly constructed Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood to offer us their auditorium.

During its first two years *Art Talk Art* speakers included Craig Owens (*The Role of Artists in the 1980s*), Thomas Lawson (*Spectacle as Art, Art as Spectacle*), Douglas Crimp (*The End of Painting*), Howard Singerman (*The Artist as Teenager as Enfant Terrible*), as well as Richard Armstrong, Ann Rorimer, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolf, Ingrid Sischy, Christopher Knight, Benjamin Buchloh, and many more. It was not unusual to have audiences of over 200 engaged and thinking and speaking with each other. *Art Talk Art* continued successfully for many years. I believe that this forum was instrumental in helping to develop a more cohesive, critical, and discursively engaged Los Angeles art community.

There are infinite stories in the history of Los Angeles' art scene. These are some of mine. Ultimately, during the years 1975-1980 it was FAR with its vision of cultivating partnerships across public and private institutions, guiding artists to engage the public domain and developing an open dialogue among artists, writers, historians and curators that most inspired my experience of Los Angeles, a zone beyond time.

Dorit Cypis uses performative strategies and social sculpture to explore identity as psychophysical and political. Her work has been presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, International Center of Photography, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Walker Art Center, Musee d'Art Contemporain/Montreal, Musee des Beaux Arts/Bruxelles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Orange County Museum of Art. Cypis has taught on identity and social relations across the USA, Canada, Holland, France, Switzerland and Israel. Cypis holds a BFA and BA of Education, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975, an MFA, California Institute for the Arts, 1977, and an MDR, Masters of Dispute Resolution, Pepperdine University, 2005. She has received numerous awards including from the National Endowment for the Arts, Japan Foundation, Bush, McKnight, Jerome, Ordway and Durfee Foundations, City of Los Angeles Cultural Arts, and Fellows of Contemporary Art.

(CYPIS Essay Figure List)

Fig. 1

A Movie Without the Picture, Santa Monica, CA (1979)

A project by Louise Lawler, produced by Foundation for Art Resources (FAR) in partnership with Some Serious Business (SBB) and the Aero Theater.

1. Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Art's Responsibility – Artists as Sponsor of Thought*
<http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/414.html?page=2>