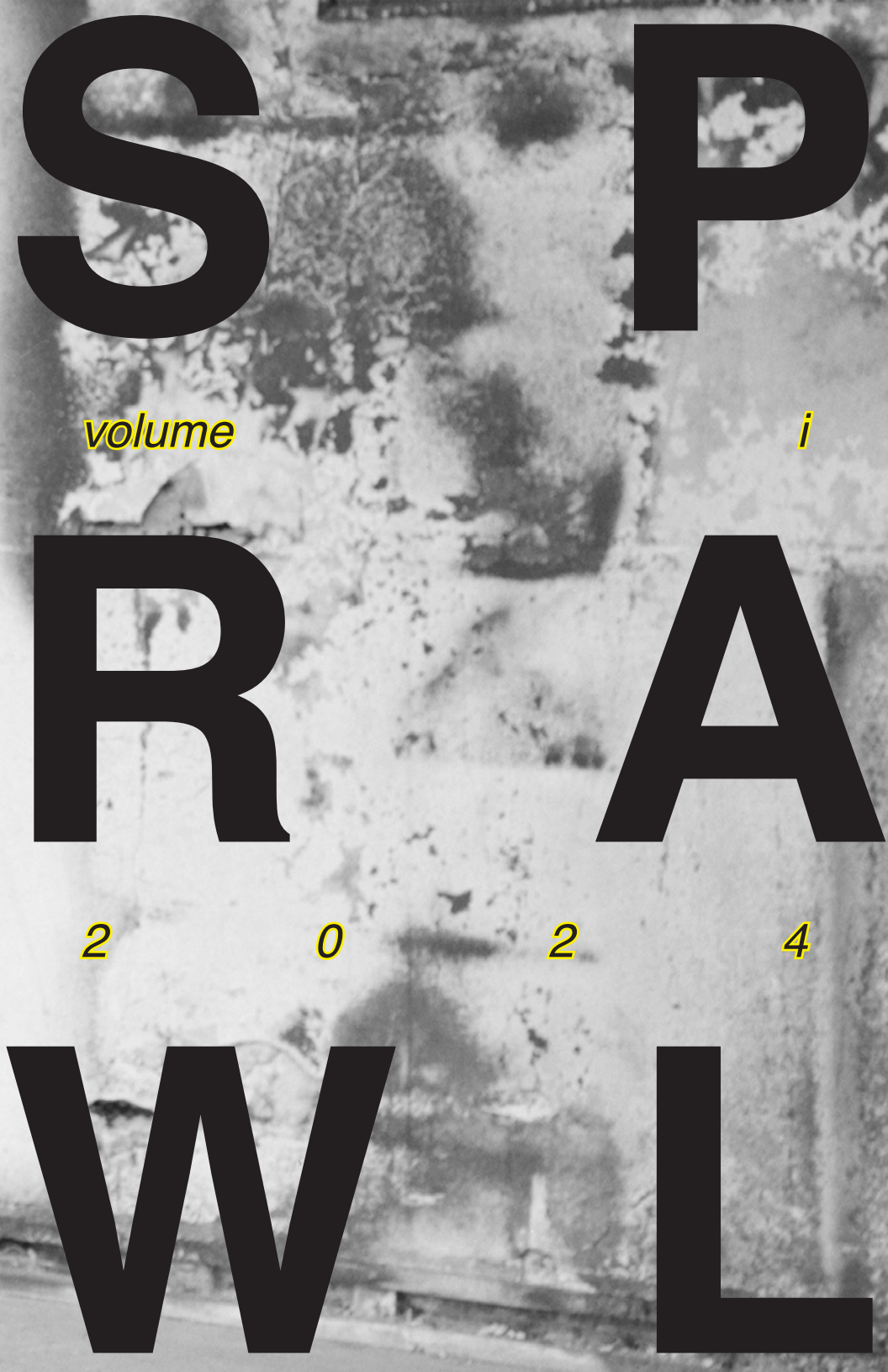
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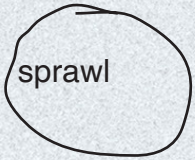

SPRAWL Volume I
SPRAWL Publishing, 2024
edited and designed by Ashla Chavez-Razzano and Max Gordy

s p r a w l

volume i

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manifesto

SPRAWL is a point of engagement with the organism of the City, a study of space and our performance within it.

SPRAWL recognizes the modern metropolis as an entity that is continually speaking to us but seldom receives a response. We seek to attend to the organic nature of the city by studying the traces of our collective migration through it. This process involves the cartography, curation, documentation of the everyday. Above all, this work is a monument to the space we inhabit, an initiation of a dialogue with the invisible.

SPRAWL will examine spaces that lie "in-between," the unnamed sanctuaries that emerge in the crevices of unyielding urban expansion. We intend to reveal invisible borerlines, discover form in the shadows, and to ask: where do we live and what lies between us?

To catalyze real change in the modern city, one must take to the street — engage with the structures themselves, their infrastructural underpinnings, and their interaction with everyday life. One's performance of citizenship constitutes an implicit correspondence with the city, which must be contended with if we are to become agents of our own intention. SPRAWL aims to provide a counterpoint to speculative real estate publications, private art magazines, galleries, and other profit-maximizing pictures of the urban landscape.

Through an ongoing series of vignettes, SPRAWL will situate the urban landscape in multi-dimensional space. With enough perspectives incorporated, the city may become an object that can be rotated, unveiled as a whole, and shown to consist of many interwoven infrastructures and communities. SPRAWL and its readers will examine and evaluate these systems through a collaborative exploration of the city and its poetics.


volume i
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city

C R A C K S in  the CONCRETE

Todd Lerew in conversation with Max Gordy on Southern California's Museum Landscape

Todd Lerew is an artist, composer, and Director of Special Projects for the Library Foundation of Los Angeles. He is the author of Specific Museums of Greater Los Angeles, was the producer of the @ museumaday campaign on Instagram promoting 178 small museums in the LA area, and has lectured on the historical museum-scape of Southern California. He holds an MFA in Experimental Sound Composition from the California Institute of the Arts, has invented musical instruments such as the Quartz Cantabile which converts heat into sound, and was winner of the 2014 American Composers Forum National Composition Contest. Our conversation explores his quest to visit every museum in the Greater Los Angeles area, the proliferation of museums in the region, and the cultural and spatial forces behind their existence.

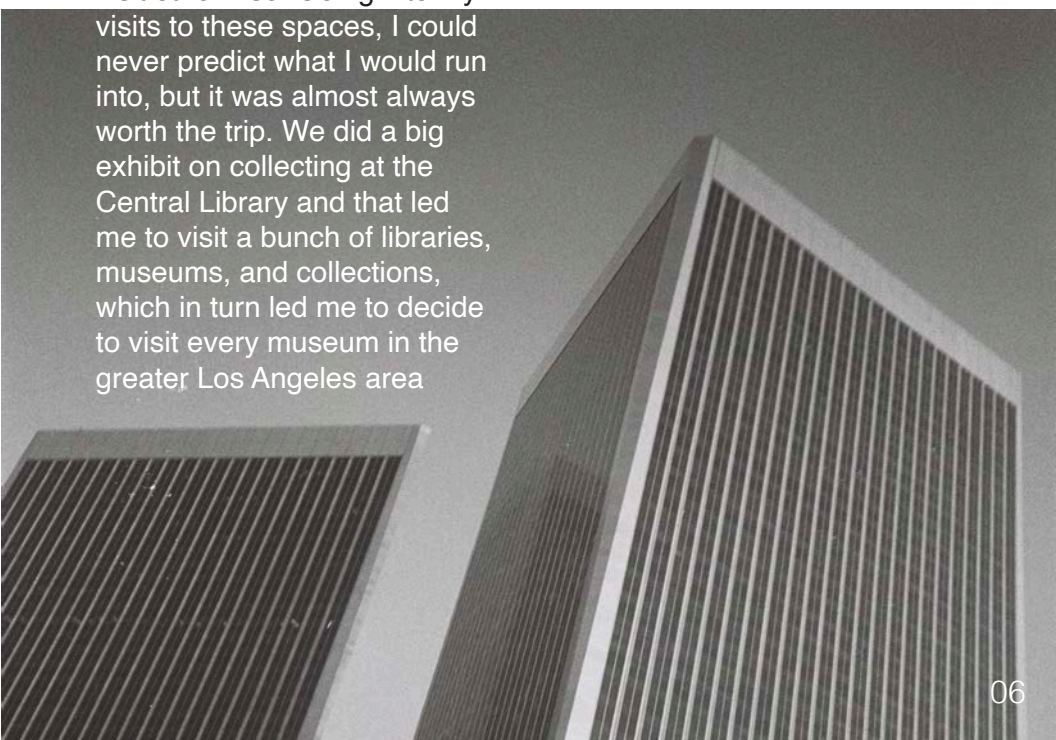
MG: So, how did all these projects around museums in Southern California get started?

TL: I came to LA for grad school at CalArts for Experimental Music Composition (building instruments, composing, performing), so I've always been interested in extreme expressions of creativity, in particular within folk-art environments.

I slowly came to realize that there are all these historical society museums that have unique collections, or interesting spaces, or are in a strange corner of the city that I never would have had the chance to visit otherwise. Going into my visits to these spaces, I could never predict what I would run into, but it was almost always worth the trip. We did a big exhibit on collecting at the Central Library and that led me to visit a bunch of libraries, museums, and collections, which in turn led me to decide to visit every museum in the greater Los Angeles area

MG: This is a gargantuan undertaking; I sort of see you as someone who collects collectors and collections, so to speak.

TL: I mean [collecting] is definitely an obsessive impulse, I feel comfortable saying. I didn't have any curatorial experience, but I was spending all my spare time aggressively exploring and going to 8 or 10 museums every weekend and that led my boss to put me in charge of this exhibition about collections and museums. It's been great for me creatively and professionally, I've loved working for the library and all of the incredible resources it provides.



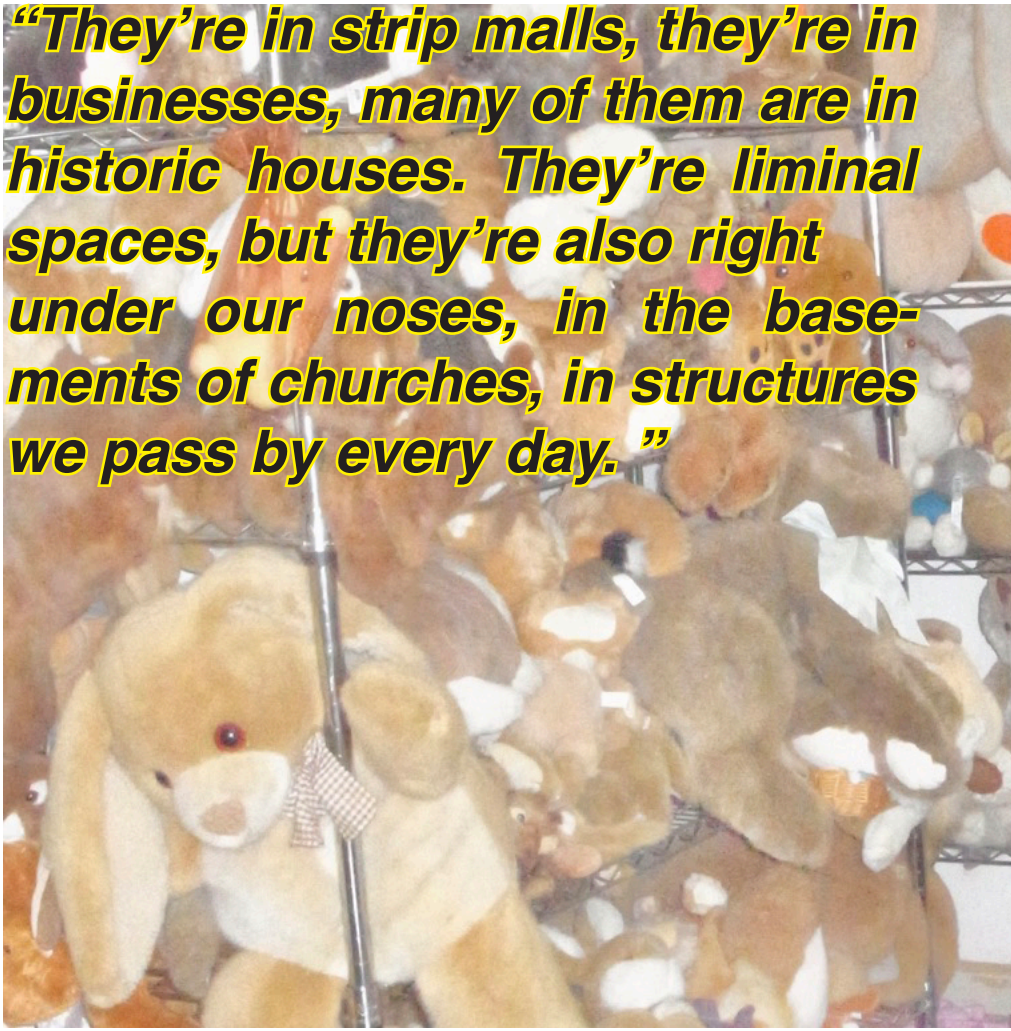
MG: What can you tell me about this impulse to collect? As you're saying, you've experienced it yourself and clearly you've seen countless manifestations of this phenomenon in your work. How do these spaces centered around collections arise, and why do people share what they've collected, particularly when there's not a financial incentive to do so?

TL: It's a big question: why do people collect? I think people in general want to have a way to share their story. There's a feeling that you can outlive yourself through these objects, and people want to be a part of a larger history or memory by investing in the stories that people tell. I see this especially in the smaller historic societies and museums that are run by volunteers, usually in spaces that are almost, or entirely, free. If you speak with the people there, they'll often lament that younger people are not interested in history, but it's more that once people reach an older age, they become more nostalgic. They have more time on their hands, and these historical societies have always been worried about dying out, but there are always more people retiring and keeping these small museum spaces alive.

STUDY:

ny Museum

CASE



“They’re in strip malls, they’re in businesses, many of them are in historic houses. They’re liminal spaces, but they’re also right under our noses, in the basements of churches, in structures we pass by every day. ”

The Bunny

STUDY:

TL: On the other hand, spaces that are created as an individual or very small group's passion project tend to be less stable and are unlikely to survive them. The Bunny Museum is a great example of this: some day Steve and Candice won't be around and I'll be shocked if the collection isn't sold off or dispersed in some way. Not because it's not worth saving, but because it's the product of an incredible individual effort on their parts.

I find it inspiring to see people with a dream put whatever they have into it, regardless of whether their end goal is achievable, but are just driven by a particular passion. We featured a woman who lives out in La Verne who has the Candy Wrapper Museum. It's all stored in organized tupperware containers in her room, but it's well organized ephemera that encapsulates all kinds of social and political trends in American society that would have otherwise been forgotten. When you turn your attention to something, no matter how ubiquitous or seemingly frivolous it may be, you end up finding that there's a much larger story to tell, just by focusing your attention on it.

Museum

MG: One thing I wanted to talk to you about is the spaces where these museums emerge. Have you found any commonalities between where they are located?

TL: They appear everywhere. That's what makes it possible for there to be more than 700 museums in greater Los Angeles. They're in strip malls, they're in businesses, many of them are in historic houses. They're liminal spaces, but they're also right under our noses, in the basements of churches, in structures we pass by every day.

MG: Why is there still a drive for there to be a physical space for these museums, as opposed to the digital spaces where you can access more people and more niche communities?

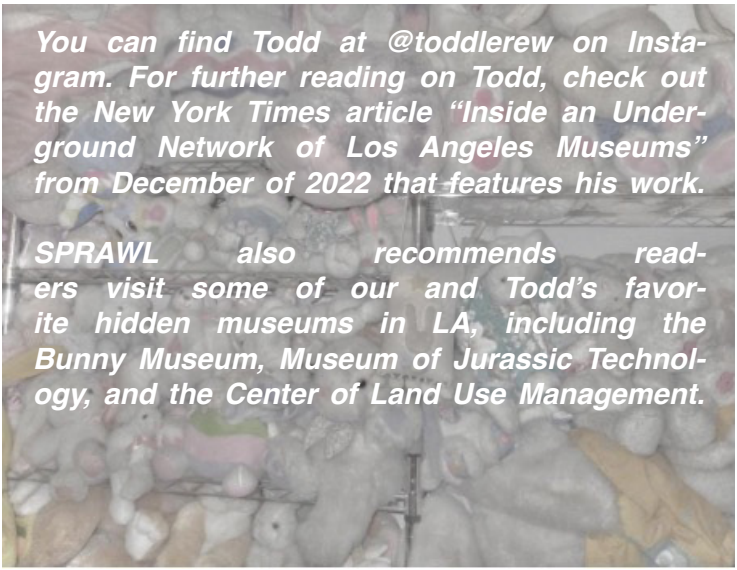
TL: Well first, a lot of these people are not tech savvy enough to set up a website. Second, if it's related to objects, it's just not the same if you're not in the space. Also, many of these museums are tied to the spaces, where the place that they are located is an important part of the museum, and to get the full value of the museum, you'd need to be in that space.

MG: A lot of these places seem unique to Southern California in a particular way, what do you think these specific museums say about the region?

TL: The profusion of these museums is a testament to the culture and geography of Southern California, in the sense that I think people are generally open-minded here. Historically, because of the extreme sprawl of this area, people have just had more space than in other denser urban cities. You've got all of these different kinds of people and their cultures and their stuff, and in Southern California they might have access to an inexpensive storefront where they can display it. In the sprawl, there's more holes that open up for these alternative arts spaces to spring out of. I grew up in the punk scene in Sioux Falls, and in every city, those scenes are always popping up in the cracks. It's like, what house has the right situation where there won't be issues with neighbors, parents, cops, or anyone else. These museums are a different sort of subculture, but it's the same kind of expression of a culture that is not subsidized or sanctioned in any officially meaningful way.

Still, people believe in it and see value in it, and they're going to make it happen. Some of these museums are not punk, but I would argue that some of them are.

There's something about the willpower behind these museums to exist where no one asked for them or in some cases, were told not to exist. I think that's the main unifying factor behind all these places, if there is one.



You can find Todd at @toddlerew on Instagram. For further reading on Todd, check out the New York Times article "Inside an Underground Network of Los Angeles Museums" from December of 2022 that features his work.

SPRAWL also recommends readers visit some of our and Todd's favorite hidden museums in LA, including the Bunny Museum, Museum of Jurassic Technology, and the Center of Land Use Management.

C L O W N S and [redacted] the TRANSCENDENCE of [redacted] TIME

Wolf Woodcock and Gene Clayhouse in conversation with Ashla C.R.

[redacted]

Ever since I was a teenager playing in local DIY bands, I've been intrigued by the ways Los Angeles' youth cultures re-define margins of space in the city. A baseball field becomes a stage, its bleachers a storefront for independent zines. An abandoned button warehouse might be the breeding grounds for DJs pioneering new subgenres of electronic music, between hallways etched with graffiti hit-ups and love notes. In a city as sprawling as LA, its vastness lends to a great exploration of an "in-between" as host for experimentation in the arts.

In late April of 2023 I spoke with Wolf Woodcock and Gene Clayhouse, the musical duo behind the Woodcock '99 residency which took place at The Goldfish Highland Park two months prior.

Woodcock '99 hosted a grand prix of Los Angeles' best acts: local math-rock three-piece Annie Jets; the historic Bob Baker Marionettes; Griffith Park-based, traditional French clown ensemble Clown Zoo; theatrical rock band Roger Holloway; electronic sets curated by DJ Umbra Abra, and more.

A distillation of experimentation in sound and performance art, each act dramatically ranged in style and intensity. From screeching vocalists to soft-spoken magicians, Woodcock '99 utilized these juxtapositions to reconsider conventions of traditional showcases in the city. Deterred from the simplicity of a four-band lineup, they instead throw us into an evening of shocking, comedic, earnest expression. Woodcock and Clayhouse demonstrate an ethos of community-focused happenings, both interrogating audiences and begging for their participation.

The Goldfish is the revived shell of the Hi-Hat, a punk venue that had cropped up in Highland Park decades prior. My friend, a longtime punk scene veteran, commented when I arrived: "This place used to be so shitty," noting the refurbished red leather couches, clean pool tables, fragrant mango sticky rice dishes, and sleek natural-wine menu. While performers were nearly entirely born-and-raised Angelenos whose successful, yet still budding careers span a decade at most, it's clear that the turnover of DIY venues is quick. Arts spaces rise and fall, replaced, in part, with popular tastes and trends necessary to hold modern attention. The crowd, representative of the city's youth culture, color the new space with authentic theatrics to create a new choreography within it.

The residency gestured towards these short-lived legacies of the city: in lieu of an institution, of a civic style, there are puppets and punk bands and a trendy Thai food restaurant. What I saw that night of Woodcock '99 was a reflection of Los Angeles: small vignettes of a city still writing its origin story.

Wolf Woodcock and Gene Clayhouse found their beginnings in Los Angeles' urban cacophony. For the past decade, they've imprinted onto the local music scene with an eclectic mix of tongue-and-cheek wit, auto-tuned vocal runs, and classic guitar solos, effectively creating the city's legacy through their practice.

WW: The first performance I ever did was play a Steampunk Willy Wonka in a YMCA. Right after that, I moved into punk bands starting at 13 and playing all the classic and/or infamous places you could play as a 13 or 14 year-old.

GC: Our friend Campbell's house, our friend Ryan's house…

WW: Yeah. I didn't get into "real deal" venues until I was about 18 or 19. Since then we've been doing whatever we could in different spaces. We performed on college campuses, more traditional venues, even some houses still.

GC: I never played in bands, I was a DJ. I came from the beat-making side of things and I had some friends in high school and we would throw DJ shows. We threw a show at MCAU on Glendale Blvd. a million years ago, we had our own little beat collective. I had friends in bands but I never could really get it together to understand how a band was supposed to work so I was more so on the computer music side of things.

ACR: What kind of spaces were you playing in during that time? Were they mostly houses?

GC: It was really wonky. You can't really get a lot of spaces as a high schooler and people wouldn't really let their spaces out for us very often, unless it was a party or you could market it as a "rager" for high school clout. A lot of what we would play were clothing stores. MCAU was an art space, we would rent out photography studios, there was one place on Fairfax that was a production studio. We'd go online and rent out studios as if we were doing a photoshoot and then sell tickets to it as a show, and it never worked. It was a really messed up model. But as a high schooler you're just making stuff up.

ACR: You both have similar, yet very different backgrounds which makes sense for the Goldfish residency.

It's not every day that you see a puppet show from a historic theater open up for a two-piece hyperpop band in a Thai restaurant with a disco ball. It was striking how immersive and eclectic the space was. I want to know more about the planning and execution of your residency at the Goldfish and how your respective origins have informed the way you approach performing together?

WW: We didn't have a choice in terms of the Thai restaurant. It was offered to us. Our ethos and mindset was, well, we'd been to a million residencies that had four bands, and every night you're just getting pounded over the head with music. We were wondering, at our core, what we could do to keep us interested. Essentially the thought was, "I can't be one of four bands in a row," so we tried to hit something else. We looked at things that peaked our interest. Speaking of childhoods, we thought of the Bob Baker Marionettes.

GC: The Bob Baker Marionettes were the first show I ever saw, they played at my preschool.

WW: I've been really obsessed with clowns so I had to have them. I went to the Magic Castle and I realized magic is real, so I knew I had to have them at the Goldfish. I love clowns. I love *love*. Same thing with the Marionettes, we had a hard time booking them with our budget but it was worth it.

GC: Worth every penny.

WW: I remember having this deep, spiritual conundrum. Like, this is exactly what I want for the show, and this is a heavy price to swallow. Then I remember I went to Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale on the day we had to decide, and that day they were having a museum exhibition about the Bob Baker Marionettes and had them dancing with, like, Elvis and Lil Nas X. I knew I had to be a part of that legacy. There's no price tag when it comes to marionettes.

GC: We had a lot of ideas we didn't even get to have fail. There was a lot more we wanted to try. We kind of approached this as a temptation with disaster, since this is something neither of us had done all at once.

ACR: I was interested in what you were saying about the Bob Baker Theatre and the Magic Castle. Do you think you're trying to engage with histories specific to LA? These are really seminal, yet really bizarre, spaces that define the city. It seems to merge past and present.

GC: I think anachronism is a recurring thing we get fascinated by. Just putting things next to each other and seeing if it'll make sense. When we were making *Pretty Boys Never Die*, I was listening to a bunch of Vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley shit. That guy who did… not *Pet Sounds*, but the other one?

WW: Dick Van Dyke?

GC: Van Dyke Parks! What we make and what we draw from is just gonzo. And that's LA: a garish, poorly executed mix of things as a city. It's built into this place.

ACR: I think that's part of the reason why I've been interested in space in the city, it's so haphazard in so many ways, it's interesting to see what grows out of that fantasy.

WW: It's a city that likes to rest on its very old morals. You know, like Classic Hollywood or the Sunset Strip. The idea of the place still "exists" by the fact that there is a history that occurred there, but I don't think it really had much to do with the space itself – it was just a place to congregate. It leads a fucked up mix of things to have old dudes who were at the Sunset Strip back then, still at the Sunset Strip now – like 60 year olds still trying to dress the part. Same thing with Hollywood people.

GC: It's haunted.

"What we make and what we draw from is just gonzo. And that's LA: a garish, poorly executed mix of things as a city. It's built into this place."

WW: Exactly, it is. It's cool. I love it.

ACR: I think it has a tired feeling in a lot of ways, as if it's been overused. But it's important to appreciate.

WW: Well, it's sort of a perverse obsession. It's so creepy it's awesome. But not the marionettes, they're just beautiful. To dig a little deeper about clowns, I've been really obsessed with that being a form of entertainment that totally transcends time. The thing that is making me laugh could have made someone in the 1600's laugh because it's physical, dumb comedy. There's something kind of spiritual about that, laughing about the same dumb thing over hundreds of years, ya know? That's been a lot of my obsession. To have something that is so purely comical, pure to its core.

ACR: We've been talking a lot about space in a tangible sense, but also there is also a big emphasis on the internet and technology as a way of creating community either amongst yourselves or with other people. Which is more central to your work? Do you feel more connected to one over the other?

GC: It's really hard to separate the two. I was talking to Wolf about this, how a lot of our primary sources come from things we learned on the internet. It would be really hard to build anything from real life nowadays, we all live in different places across the world and the only way we can synchronize is through the drippings of the internet.

WW: Conversely, though, I think that one of our goals is how to synchronize. We wanted people to be present in the show, whether it was being horrified all together or laughing all together. These unifying moments which are accessed solely through the space, solely here.

GC: Absolutely, I definitely don't think it's a good thing the internet is such a source. It's an unfortunate reality. How often do you go to see stand-up comedy and they're just referencing stuff you know from the internet? Let's unify us based on this experience that begins and ends here. That's why clowns are better comedians: they understand that, and it's built into the premise.

You can find Wolf Woodcock and Gene Clayhouse on the Internet at truemirth.com. Purchase their latest album "Pretty Boys Never Die" at wolfwoodcock.bandcamp.com. Stay tuned for upcoming projects, in which Gene Clayhouse attempts to "revitalize the athletic spirit" through a series of basketball games. In 2024, Wolf launched his debut talk show "Gettin' It with Wolf Woodcock" which is taped in front of a live studio audience.


How do yo

u perform?

THE Production AND Maintenance OF Difference IN THE Modern City

by Max Gordy

Not only was I touched by that family of eyes, but I felt a little ashamed of our glasses and our carafes, much larger than our thirst. I turned my gaze toward yours, dear love, to read my thoughts there; I was plunging into your eyes, so beautiful and so oddly gentle, into your green eyes, inhabited by Caprice and inspired by the Moon, when you said to me: 'Those people there are insufferable with their eyes open like carriage gates! Could you not ask the maître d' to send them away from here?'

How difficult it is to understand each other, my dear angel, and how much thought is incommunicable, even between people who love each other!

Charles Baudelaire, "The Eyes of the Poor "

The spatial construction of the modern city is rooted in the maintenance of difference. In this construction, there is a splitting of rich from poor, colonizer from colonized. Borders must exist and be perpetually reconstituted in order to ensure the successful continued definition of the other. These divisions and subordinations are constantly contested as they are continually reinforced. Drawing on historical examples, we can identify the conception of these processes in their colonial context and their continuation into the contemporary metropolis.

As Marshall Berman writes in "All That is Solid Melts Into Air," many modern struggles can be reduced to a contestation for space and place.[1] Berman refers to Charles Baudelaire's poem "The Eyes of The Poor" to illustrate the "primal scene" that was revealed by Georges Eugène Hausmann's renovation of Paris at the direction of Napoleon III from 1853 to 1870. Hausmann's grand boulevards opened up the city, but their construction also displaced vast numbers of the urban poor as a result of mass neighborhood demolition. In Baudelaire's poem, a bourgeois couple sits down at a café on the corner of a "new boulevard, still covered in rubble but already showing gloriously its unfinished splendors." The couple encounters one such displaced poor family that is entranced by the grandeur of the newly modernized urban space. A rift between the speaker and his lover emerges due to their differing instinctive reactions to seeing a family adrift in a city which has no place for them within it. Modern society now had to reckon with the cognitive dissonance generated by the opening up of city spaces and the visual contradictions of inequality within them.

Baudelaire was one of many Parisians struggling to contend with these arising ethical questions in Paris, the first spatially modernized European city. The writings of Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian-born philosopher who fled to France in the 1930s to escape Nazi persecution of Jews, provide a useful framework for understanding these ethical

1 Berman, Marshall. All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity. Verso, 1983.

concerns as they developed throughout the 20th century.

Levinas conceived of ethics as being rooted in the face to face encounter with the 'Other' (another person). Through these encounters, which occur on a daily basis in the modern city, we experience the "beyondness" of other people.[2] When we feel that pull towards the faces of others, a certain uncanny feeling arises as we catch glimpses of a world of thoughts and emotions that exists beyond our individual selves. For Levinas, this encounter with the 'beyondness' of another puts an ethical demand on us to be responsible to that which is outside of ourselves. The event that Baudelaire describes is a key example of the form of ethics that Levinas describes emerging in modern cities. In this encounter, it is within the 'eyes of the poor' the narrator discovers the reality of this responsibility to the 'Other'.

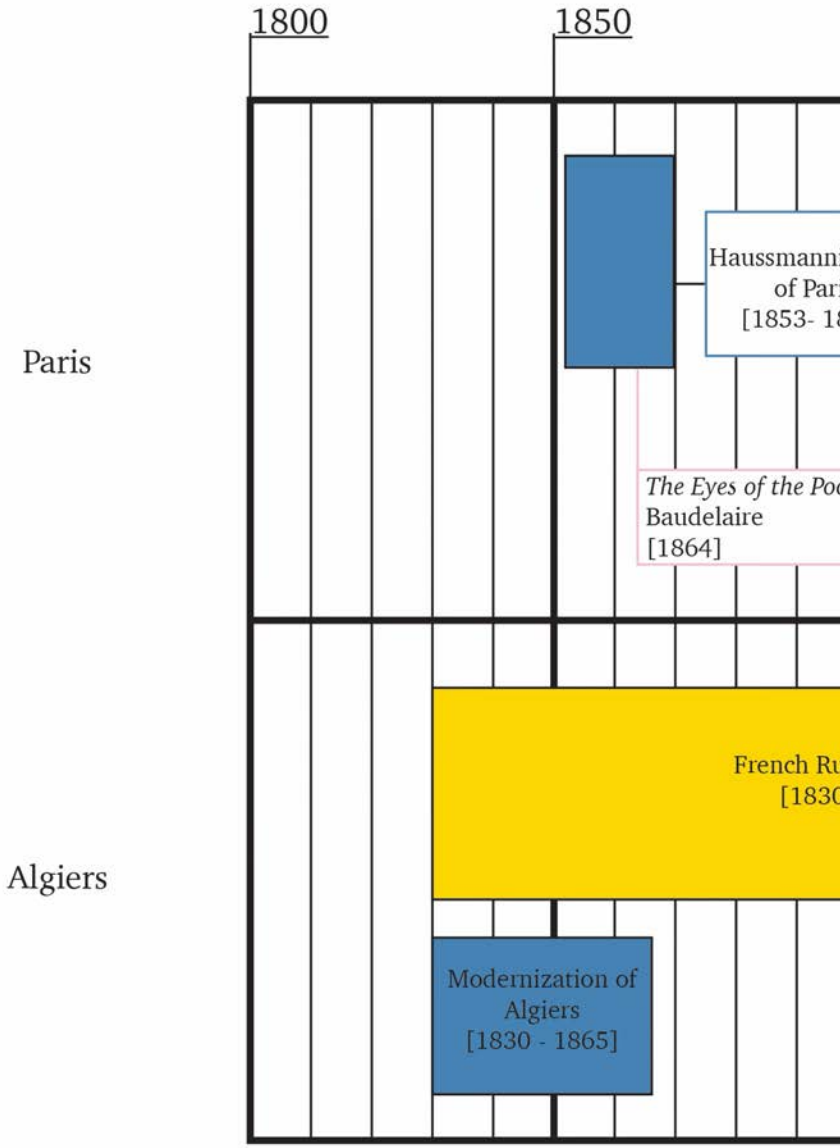
In the newly revealed modern scene, the poor are able to claim the right to dignity simply by being visible in public space. Their presence in that ostentatious environment demonstrates the contradictions of modern life without any extra action on their part. This visible contradiction and the implied contestation of space would be suppressed by the continued modernization of Paris by the French government; the spatial alienation of classes would be reproduced in the 20th century by the creation of banlieues. These suburban areas ring the wealthier inner city of Paris and were the site of large-scale housing production in the postwar period as part of an HLM (low-cost housing) program. This housing was largely in the form of cheaply built high-rise apartments called cités and in the 1970s, came to house immigrant and impoverished households forced out of slums that had been leveled by the French government in large structures that were frequently abandoned and demolished. From the 1980s to today, reaching

2 Levinas, Emmanuel. *Humanism of the Other.* University of Illinois Press, 2003.

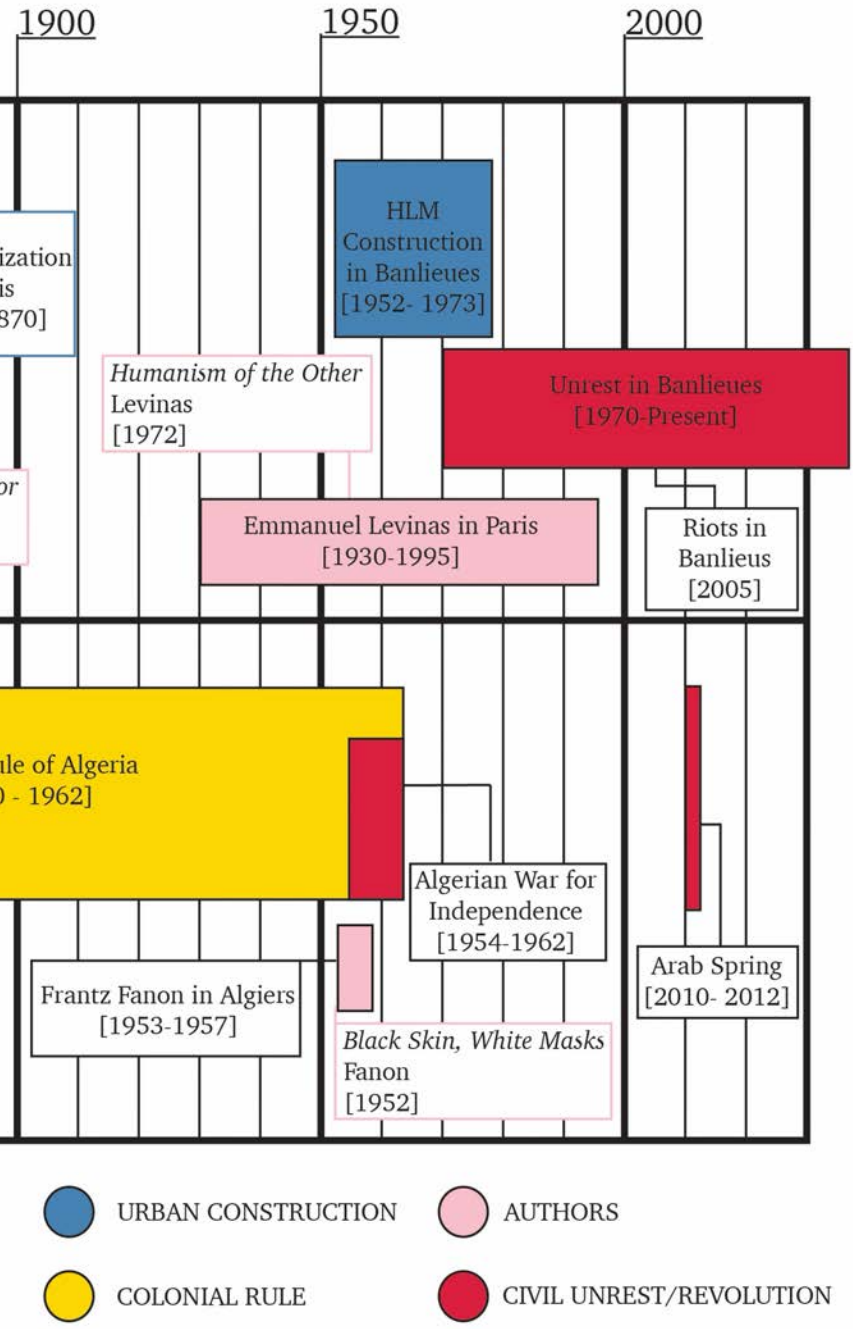
its peak in widespread riots in 2005 following the deaths of two young men after fleeing from police, the banlieues have experienced continual unrest as a result of the spatial alienation of their residents.

The new visual signs of wealth that were defining urban features of Baudelaire's Paris were the products of the French colonial extraction in Algeria. To maintain that extractive system, and the wealthy Paris that it supported, a new spatial infrastructure was required. In Algiers, the capital of French Algeria, we see the origin of the modern city and the realization of its fundamental goal: the maintenance of difference. The modernization of Algiers by the occupying French military from 1830-1865 was the first large-scale construction of socio-spatial barriers at a metropolitan scale. In order to fund the Hausmannian Paris that Baudelaire discusses, the French military seized land and restructured the urban fabric of Algiers in order to optimize it for resource extraction and transfer.

Low income housing project in a banlieue outside Paris



TIMELINE OF EVENTS


1900
1950
2000
HLM Construction in Banlieues [1952- 1973]
Humanism of the Other
Levinas
[1972]
Unrest in Banlieues [1970-Present]
Emmanuel Levinas in Paris [1930-1995]
Riots in Banlieus [2005]
Algerian War for Independence [1954-1962]
Frantz Fanon in Algiers [1953-1957]
Black Skin, White Masks
Fanon
[1952]
Arab Spring [2010- 2012]
URBAN CONSTRUCTION
AUTHORS
COLONIAL RULE
CIVIL UNREST/REVOLUTION

As a result, we see the initial creation of the modern dual city. A cordon sanitaire,[3] or division between the civilized Europeans and "backwards" Algerians, was created in order to keep the two sections different and unequal. In "Fanon and Space," Stefan Kipfer examines Frantz Fanon's depiction of the spatial divisions between colonizer and colonized that existed in French Algeria.[4] Kipfer points to James Baldwin and Fanon's similar depictions of spatial alienation to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of these divisions in modern cities. Baldwin remarks that he feels fixed in place in America by the "bleak boundaries of his blackness," while Fanon remarks that men in Algiers are "sealed" in their whiteness and blackness.[5] These spatial divisions that were first enforced upon the city of Algiers are now a common plague on all modernized cities.

The question of how to combat these divisions returns us to North Africa and the Arab Spring. In Asef Bayat's "Plebians of the Arab Spring," he describes a process of "quiet encroachment of the ordinary," or the extralegal advancement of people into public spaces and areas controlled by property-owners in Egypt and Tunisia as a precursor to the large-scale revolutions that took place in those countries.[6] Quiet encroachment is an example of "social non-movement," or the "collective action of noncollective actors." This advancement is not the product of an organized or cohesive claim to space, but instead arises out of individuals contesting the spatial boundaries of the modern city on their own for their own means (for example, unlawfully building a shelter on public land). By claiming the use of public space for private actions, individuals can quietly reassert their right to dignity. Often, this is not even necessarily the intention of

3 "Sanitary boundary," originally a line around quarantine zones.

4 Kipfer, Stefan. "Fanon and space: Colonization, urbanization, and liberation from the colonial to the global city." Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 25, no. 4 (2007): 701-726.

5 Fanon, Frantz. "Black Skin, White Masks." In Social Theory Re-Wired, pp. 394-401. Routledge, 2016.

6 Bayat, Asef. "Plebeians of the Arab spring." Current Anthropology 56, no. S11 (2015): S33-S43.

these individuals, but as Bayat argues, this is the process by which the desire for shelter can evolve into a right to shelter. This quiet or unintentional assertion of dignity in the modern city echoes Baudelaire's description of Haussmannien Paris, suggesting a congruence of similar struggles for space across the globe. The Arab Spring was the result of the alignment of various economic, demographic, technological, and political factors, but Bayat argues that this process of quiet encroachment became a part of the Arab uprisings of 2011 that united the urban lower classes.

Revolution is a loud collective demand for recognition that can arise from these smaller, individual expressions of dignity and contested ownership of exclusionary spaces. This is why modern cities must continually maintain and reproduce the boundaries of difference, because even minimal individual incursions can become a threat to the larger system of subjugation. While this explains the rationale and ruthlessness behind anti-homeless ordinances and other militant spatial enforcement in present-day LA and other modern cities[7], it also presents a possible first step for challenging the spatial infrastructures that surround and divide us. The political outcomes of the Arab Spring aside, as a mechanism for usurping ingrained structures of power, it provides a crucial proof of concept. Moreover, the similarities and interconnected nature of these patterns of spatial hegemony and contestation reveal the global and continuous nature of a common struggle for urban space.

7 Davis, Mike. "Fortress LA." In *The city reader*, pp. 246-251. Routledge, 2015.


Who drew


the lines?

Water of the River, Paint on the Brush:

The Function of Los Angeles' Contemporary Art Galleries

by Ashla C.R.

What is the role of the gallery within the city?

Traditionally, the private gallery served as a "middleman of the art industry:" a translator and match-maker between artists and patrons who frequented arts spaces to participate in current aesthetic or social trends. It was the primary place of interaction between the public and the artist. The gallery institution had the power to facilitate dialogue between audience members while dictating the validation of artists as they emerged into, or were left behind by, the art market. With the advent of social media and the newfound ease with which artists can share, promote, and sell their work, this traditional role of the gallery has become increasingly obsolete.[1]

Culturally, however, the role of the gallery remains complex. Within a city as uncentered as modern-day Los Angeles, which exists as a contemporary manifestation of Indigenous, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo-American history, galleries have a responsibility to represent this multitudinous heritage.

Is the function of a contemporary gallery to distill an urban center with multiple origins into a cohesive narrative? How might one essentialize a city as diverse as Los Angeles?

Perhaps the new role of galleries is to act as a conduit of cultural and social exchange between these distinct parts of the city, rather than to parade as the sole proprietor of insider fine art knowledge for an elite few. The recent democratization of the art economy calls galleries to exist in a space beyond sales and within the lives of audience members as they participate in a contemporary exchange of information.

1 Benjamin Murphy and Nick JS Thompson, Navigating the Art World: Professional Practice for the Early Career Artist, 44-45.

Galleries also have the capacity to invest in counter-spectacles. French Marxist philosopher Guy Debord first put forth this concept in his book *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 in response to rapidly commercializing Western society in the post-war period. Within Debord's conception of the society of the spectacle, the individual becomes a passive subject in their environment, with hyperfixation on commodities and appearances ruling the lives of the individual as consumer.[2]

In his 2005 essay "Performing the City," professor of drama, performance, and design Paul Makeham elaborates on Debord's theory, discussing the civic responsibility of the urbanite within the modern city.[3] He discusses the recent emergence of the "experience economy," as a system that is driven by the contemporary citizen's consumerist lifestyle and recognizes retail as the only true form of entertainment and culture. Makeham cites urban planner Charles Landry's 2001 essay "Tapping the Potential of Neighborhoods: the Power of Culture and Creativity," which calls for action in the form of public performance art to disturb a passive and "spectating" culture and provide a language for citizens to challenge institutional structures.[4] In Landry's conception, performance becomes a method of reevaluating public space and the everyday, allowing the public to assert their needs within public space and contest the influence of capital.

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2 Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Unredacted Word, 2021.

3 Makeham, Paul. "Performing the city." Theatre Research International 30, no. 2 (2005): 150-160.

4 Charles Landry, 'Tapping the Potential of Neighbourhoods: The Power of Culture and Creativity', paper presented at the International Conference on Revitalizing Urban Neighbourhoods, Copenhagen, 5–7 September 2001 at http://www.byforny.dk/conference/charles landry.htm.


BE-CLEAN!
掃除中

In 1964, with the Tokyo Olympic games imminent, Japanese artist collective Hi Red Center staged a notable performance that confronted Japan's Western-orientation in the postwar era, titled "Movement to Promote the Cleanup of the Metropolitan Area (Be Clean!)." The absurdist happening was performed at midday in the Tokyo district of Ginza. Adorned with sanitation masks, white uniforms, holding small brooms and toothbrushes, the group spent several hours painstakingly cleaning Ginza's downtown during the international telecast of the Olympic Games, "satirizing the behaviors then promoted by the Japanese state as part of its push for a 'face-lift' for Tokyo's streets and surfaces."[5] Landry's call to action for artists challenging conventional forms of civic participation was answered here, 50 years prior to his published work.

New York-based artist Diane Borsato's performance series, *Touching 100 People* from 2003, can also be understood as a response to this call to action. "I read a study that suggested that when people are subtly touched, it can affect their behavior and well-being," she said of the artwork. "For a month I went out of my way to delicately bump, rub past, and tap 100 strangers in the city. I touched commuters, shoppers, cashiers and taxi cab drivers on the street, on the metro, in shops and in museums. The exercise was like a minimalist performance. I was exploring the smallest possible gesture, and how it could create an effect in public."[6] Borsato urges us to consider our personal performances of the everyday in the city and the interactions we experience with our neighbors.

5 "Be Clean, Rio." The Avery Review, n.d. https://averyreview.com/issues/17/be-clean-rio.

6 Diane Borsato, "Touching 100 People," https://www.dianeborsato.net/touching-1000-people/iyh6ux23zle2lorbaeual87mr65dj6

While these performances typically take place in public spaces that are less common in Los Angeles, there is still a movement towards questioning systems of living in the city that we can learn from. Both Hi Red Center and Borsato unavoidably demonstrate and contest the destructive role of capitalism on community and the self, as we are alienated from our cultures, histories, and neighbors.

So, how might Los Angeles' contemporary galleries fit into this history of critical public performance art?

The artists who define Los Angeles hail from a wide array of backgrounds, representative of the city's diverse heritage as a modern metropolis. The influence of the region comes through in the unique aesthetics of its offspring, in both form and content, and pushes forth a city-wide discourse on what it means to be an Angeleno. Among its sweeping vistas and gridded strip-malls, between the cold ocean and the paved moat of the Los Angeles River, the dual nature of the region is a palpable struggle between the land and human intervention. Contemporary artists such as Chris Veloz, EJ Hill, and Lauren Halsey illustrate this give and take beautifully, but the most transparent symbol of Los Angeles might lie in the work of an artist who utilizes the land of Southern California itself to create his three-dimensional paintings.

Rafa Esparza's 2021 exhibition *verde* at Commonwealth and Council gallery for Art Basel utilizes mud from the Los Angeles River to create adobe brick structures, upon which he illustrates scenes of everyday life in East Los Angeles. As a powerful and potent symbol of the land of a region fraught with a history of colonization and industrialization, Esparza meditates on the indigenous practice that has survived millennia, from Mexico to Alta California.

Esparza says: “When I was thinking of working with adobe, I was thinking of working with a material that was inherently brown that could be used to build a space and reflect the color of bodies not usually represented in traditional art spaces. It’s a material that can speak to local geographies of the West and Mexico, and also layered with personal history of labor.”[7] With his father leading the production of the adobe, and the local sourcing of the materials, there is a strong connection to genealogy and site-specificity. Grounded in the manual labor of material sourcing, brick building, and assembly, the artist merges with the land. He returns its natural resources to its inhabitants, urging them to look inward, to see this city, and to explore the social dynamics within its roots.

Situationist International, a group of artists founded by Guy Debord in 1957, defined performances as actively created moments characterized by “a sense of self-consciousness of existence within a particular environment or ambience.” The emphasis on space is key here, as performances are oriented towards awareness of oneself not just individually, but as an individual existing in a space. Galleries are agents of self-reflection and discourse, providing an alternative dimension of public and private space through their architectural and conceptual style. In essence, they are spaces ripe for both curated and naturally occurring performance.

Removed from the visual context of everyday life, galleries seem to exist in a vacuum of stark, white walls and finished concrete floors. While the “blank canvas” of these spaces might inspire experimentation in artwork and performance (as conventions of public spaces no longer exist nor apply), there also exists a drawback from real participation with public discourse as a result of this alienation from society.

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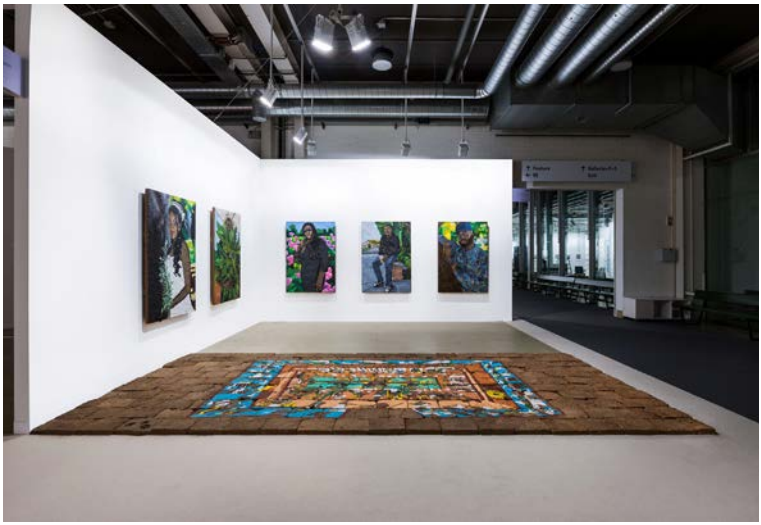
7 Tewksbury, Drew. 2019. “Performance Artist Rafa Esparza Is Fighting Invisibility, One Brick at a Time.” https://drewtewksbury.com/new-blog/2018/7/23/performance-artist-rafa-esparza-is-fighting-invisibility-one-brick-at-a-time.

The gallery space provides an unadorned, unadvertised oasis from the relentless stream of images of the 'spectacle,' and is therefore a wellspring of potential energy for resistance. Yet, this capacity of gallery space is underutilized by owners and curators focused on appealing to their ultra-wealthy clientele. If galleries seek to redeem themselves as meaningful cultural institutions in an art world that is increasingly surrounded by "spectacles," they must meet their potential as incubators for performance art and civic action.



Above: Installation view, Art Basel 2021.
Right: *Bonampak: Structure | Bird's-eye View*, 2021. Acrylic on adobe.


Where ca


n we go?

Reading List

Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 1982.

Charles Baudelaire, *The Eyes of The Poor*, 1869.

Simon Ford, *The Situationist International: A User's Guide*, 1950.

Diane Borsato, "Touching 100 People" (2003).

Benjamin Murphy and Nick JS Thompson, *Navigating the Art World: Professional Practice for the Early Career Artist*, 2020.

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